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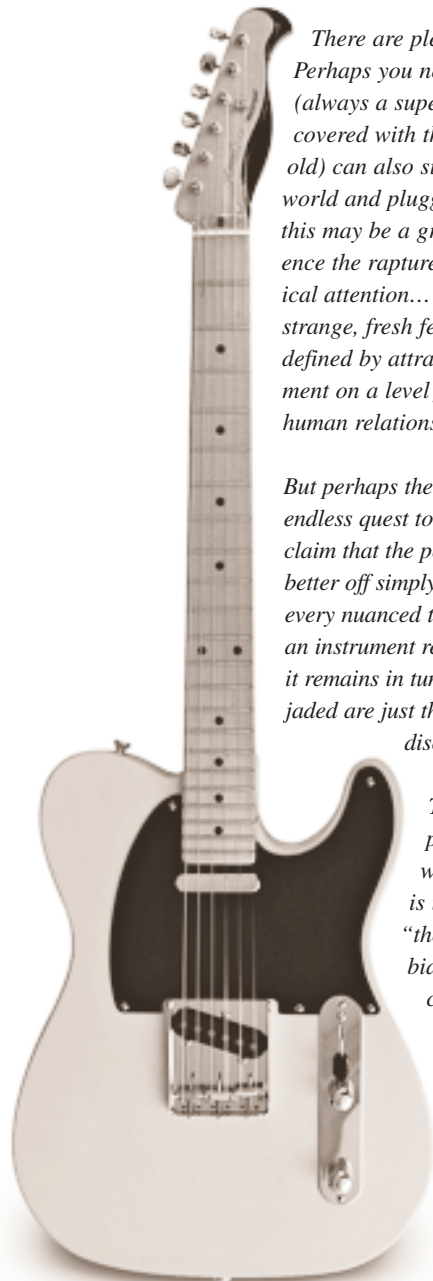
The Big Dickerson

# the ToneQuest Report™

*The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone*

\$10.00 US, May 2006/VOL.7 NO.7

## The Perfect Guitar



There are plenty of perfectly good reasons to buy a new guitar. Perhaps you need to fill a void in your essential palette of tones (always a superb excuse, even if you may technically have them all covered with the instruments you already own). A new guitar (new or old) can also simply provide renewed enthusiasm for turning off the world and plugging in often and longer. We're being sold the idea that this may be a growing problem for modern man, but should you experience the rapture for more than four hours, please seek immediate medical attention... Well, the act of finding, acquiring and exploring the strange, fresh feel of a new instrument is a romantic courtship of sorts, defined by attraction, flirtation, giddy infatuation, bonding and commitment on a level far less complicated and often more lasting than many human relationships.

But perhaps the strongest motivation for acquiring new guitars is the endless quest to discover the perfect guitar. The jaded among us may claim that the perfect guitar has yet to be built – that we would all be better off simply playing an instrument rather than dumbly analyzing every nuanced tone, the feel of the neck and fretboard, the way in which an instrument responds to touch, whether it feels heavy or light, how well it remains in tune, and if the sheer look of it says, "play me." Well, the jaded are just that – too weary of innocence lost to experience the joy of discovery, and that's a hard sentence better left unserved.

The perfect guitar exists in as many forms as there are players capable of creating them in the mind's eye, which is to say that everyone's idea of the perfect guitar is unique. Whenever someone proclaims a guitar to be "the best" it is done within the limitations of their personal biases and preferences, and if the award is bestowed by a committee of "expert" reviewers, it should not be assumed that the group's numerical clout has produced a verdict any less subjective. Guitarists have the right to maintain their personal views about what constitutes the perfect guitar, independent of anyone's opinion but their own.

One thing most of us can agree on, however, is that we all recognize an exceptional instrument when we



*see and hear it, and in the real world, visual and tonal attributes are not always co-dependent. Cheap old “beaters” can produce amazing*

*tones, and costly new guitars with exceptional cosmetic appointments created with painstaking detail can be otherwise unremarkable and uninspiring. The price of a guitar – new or old – is no guarantee of stunning tone, “pretty” guitars don’t necessarily sound as good as they look, and the depth of your attachment to an instrument is based on mysterious things that can’t always be easily seen or explained. If this were not true, someone long ago would have tapped into the essence of the guitarist’s universal ‘id’ and produced one perfect guitar for the ages. Just as Xerox became the default descriptive term for copiers, we would all be playing “The Bloomfield.” “Dad, I’m bored with the Steinway... I’m ready for a Bloomfield...” and that would be the end of that. What kind of Marshall do you play? A Fender, thanks.*



*At this very moment, there are men at work producing instruments of near perfection when viewed against the landscape of commercial manufacturing at every level, including “custom built,” “masterbuilt,” and “private stock reserved for the few who can afford it.”*

*They build not from a carefully conceived business plan, corporate charter, or the desire to accumulate wealth, but from an involuntary, instinctive drive to fulfill their destiny, leaving a legacy in wood. Many of their names are familiar – Suhr, Benedetto, Stevens, Anderson, and Collings, to name a few... And as you have come to expect, we are here to reveal those that may not be so familiar, but all the more worthy of your consideration. If we wished to dream up a custom-built, Fender-esque guitar created by a builder whose hands personally shape every aspect of the instrument right down to the threads on the truss rod, we would call Fred Stuart. Enjoy...*

**TQR:** How and when did you first begin working on guitars?

I started out by doing my own work. I had a guitar that need-

ed a fret job and I took it to a couple of places and discovered it would cost a hundred bucks. And I thought, “A hundred bucks? Well, I can do that.” So after I ruined a couple of guitars, I thought maybe I ought to seek some guidance. Just down the street from where I was living in Riverside was a little repair shop called Barth Guitars. Paul Barth and George Beecham put together the very first electric guitar with a magnetic pickup ever known to man at Rickenbacker. Paul was also president of the National String Instrument Company for a while, and one of the founders of Rickenbacker. He was also a cousin of the Dopera brothers (founders of Dobro instruments).

**TQR:** And this was the first guy you ever went to for a fret job?

Yeah, but I didn’t know who he was... To me, he was just an old guy who worked on guitars down the road. He had all these weird old instruments hanging in his shop for repair, and he also designed and built some instruments called Bar-Tel guitars, and he was involved in building an instrument called the Black Widow bass.

**TQR:** At that time there weren’t a lot of books on building and repair...



No, there weren’t. I don’t know why, but even though Paul was a bit of a curmudgeon and didn’t have a lot of patience, he took some measure of pity on me and curtly gave me clues about what I should do. I finally got to a point where I could do fret jobs and I got into aftermarket mods like installing humbucking pickups in the neck position of Telecasters – that kind of thing. Then I got a job work-

ing at a local music store called Lier’s as a repairman. Alan Hamill worked there, and several people from Lier’s wound up working at Fender, including Alan, and also a guy named Kelly McGuire who now runs a studio at the Fender Museum and also happens to be Glen Frey’s cousin.

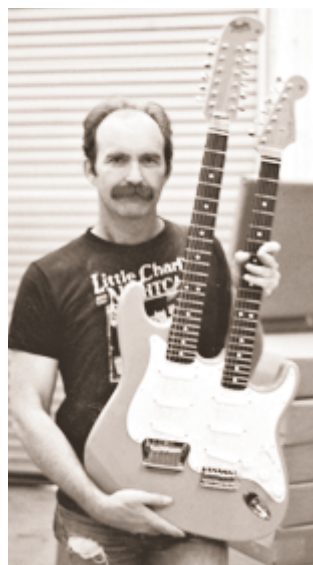
**TQR:** (Laughing) Will the circle be unbroken...

Yeah, it’s a small world but don’t ask me to paint it. I worked at Lier’s for about a year when somebody came in and told me they had been working at Fender in Corona. *Fender in Corona?* To me that was a sign from God, and I was determined to get a job there. I drove out to Corona and finally

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found a building in an industrial park with a stack of alder outside, so I got out of my truck and walked over and sure enough it was all the scrap left over from guitar bodies having been made. I found the front entrance and told the receptionist that I wanted to apply for a job, and she said they weren't really hiring. I told her that I was going to keep coming back until I was hired, and I was going to go to work for them sooner or later. She gave me an application and when the next opening came up, they called and I was hired.

**TQR:** How much did you know by then?



*I thought* I knew a lot more than I did. I had built a few guitars, although at that time I hadn't built any necks. Wayne Charvel had a shop out in Redlands and he had some old Fender necks. I bought some of those from him, built the bodies and routed them and assembled a few that way.

When I went to work at Fender my experience wasn't really that broad, and ironically, I thought I was really going to learn a lot about building guitars. But after I got there I realized that I knew a lot more than people that had been

working there for years, because in a production environment everybody does just one job. The guy that puts frets in – that's all he does. There weren't that many guitar lovers there, and the ones that were there worked on the line in tuning and testing, where the guitars had already been built. I knew more about building than anyone else there, but at the same time, I knew a lot less than I thought I did. I'll tell you a funny story... I had been playing a nylon string guitar when I got my first electric, and I wanted nylon strings on it, too, so I put them on and of course, it didn't work. My father had been a broadcast engineer all of his life, and he came over and looked down at the guitar I had on this little bench I had set up and he said, "Well, of course it doesn't work, dummy. Those are electromagnetic pickups – you have to use steel strings for it to work." (laughing)

**TQR:** I'm still trying to figure out how you tied nylon strings on your electric guitar... Well, don't feel bad. The first time I broke a string I called my guitar teacher to ask him if I needed to keep the little brass barrel on the end. How did your career at Fender progress?

I was working in tune/testing, and I noticed that they were doing a lot of re-working on guitars that didn't need to be re-



worked – little things like paint chips in the polyurethane finish that could be super-glued back on and buffed over to look fine instead of refinishing the entire guitar. They

didn't even have a bottle of super glue. The "repair" area was just a Mexican girl at a bench who would disassemble finished guitars to be sent back to the factory to be re-worked. So I brought in a couple of bottles of super glue and a few little items and I started saving guitars from being refinished. That got me noticed right away. They were also having trouble with the string ferrules on the '52 reissue Telecasters. The paint builds up on the body and when they put the ferrules in they would chip the paint and you'd have all kinds of nightmare problems. Well, I knew exactly how to get those ferrules in. They were literally losing 50% of their Telecasters because of the paint chips, and they would see them coming down the line and just quake with dread. They were pressing the ferrules in by hand, the paint would chip and they would refinish the bodies. So I sat down at the bench and put the ferrule into the hole, heated it up with a soldering iron and it melted the lacquer and went right in. They just about gave each other skull fractures slapping their foreheads in disbelief. When there was an opening in the Custom Shop, I was able to move there.

**TQR:** How many people were working in the factory at that time?

When I went to work on the line they had hired two of us and there were already four guys on the tune/tester line, and when I left there were maybe 16. They literally went from making 4-5 guitars a day to 40 a day.

**TQR:** It sounds as if their understanding of how to build guitars had completely evaporated over time...

It seems like it almost always does, and not just in the guitar business. It's part of the human experience, isn't it?

**TQR:** Company 'A' buys Company 'B' with the arrogant notion that if they can run one business well they can run anything well. The founder of Company 'B' may hang around for a year or two to get their payout, and when they leave there's no one left that knows how to do anything but "manage." So you moved to the Custom Shop...

When I came to the Custom Shop the very first guitar I

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remember seeing was one for Yngwie Malmsteen, and there were some personal guitars for Clapton that Michael Stevens was working on. The Clapton Signature was already out, and I remember Mike Stevens working

on an electric 5-string banjo for someone he knew down in Texas. So at that point we were building artist guitars and really crazy custom stuff. I remember a 7-string guitar... Mike Stevens is one of the coolest guys in the business as far as I'm concerned, but he had a more artistic view, while John Page was also tremendously artistic, but he had a more pragmatic idea about how we were going to make money. We were still trying to figure out what the Custom Shop was. I remember John Page convincing Manny's Music or Sam Ash in New York that we would make like ten guitars for them, all with matching pegheads – something the line wasn't capable of doing, and we also did some Custom Shop Clapton models for Jimmy Wallace in Texas. John Page was putting pressure on the whole thing to make money. That's why I was hired, because they needed someone with production sensibilities to do the grunt work of making sure everything was going smoothly. I can remember having to make the templates for the active electronics circuit in the Clapton Strat.

**TQR:** And you must have been rapidly gaining an understanding of how to really build complete guitars at this point...



That was an absolute necessity. After about two days of being in the Custom Shop, I thought I was in completely over my head. John gave me something to do

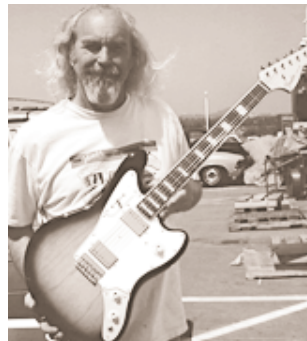
and I had to use a pin router – this huge green monster with a 5 horsepower motor, when the only thing I had ever used was a little Sears router. A lot of it was all about watching others and imitating what they were doing. At one point, Fender contracted with Phil Kubicki for a headless bass he had been building. Phil had a shop in Santa Barbara and they sent me and Art



Shop. I think there were three at that time – John Page, Mike Stevens and Jay Black.

**TQR:** What types of projects were you working on?

By this time we were taking one-off orders. If someone wanted a stock, vintage Telecaster, we would hand-pick the best body and neck we could find in the main factory and take it from there. If someone wanted something unusual, like a left-handed Telecaster with a right-handed bridge, (and I remember doing more than one of those), I would pick out the wood, create the templates and build it. I built a reproduction of a Marauder working from photographs and drawings. Since then, I have actually seen a Marauder and I realized



that I didn't get everything exactly right on it, but I did the best I could with what I had. I also worked on the original pine prototype Telecaster with the two-sided peghead, and I actually got to sit down with the original instrument, take photos, measurements, and play it.

**TQR:** We listed a curious "Pinecaster" on eBay for a friend last year. The pickups were not Fender as far as we could tell, it had an old tone cap and red primer under a black finish along with a stamped Custom Shop neck with no truss rod, and an Esquire decal. All the Fender "experts" came out of the woodwork to assure us that this was not and could not be a "legitimate" Fender guitar. Since we couldn't verify exactly *what* it was, someone locally got a great deal on a phenomenal guitar, but you'd have thought we had built it ourselves out of scrap. There are a lot of "one-offs" that haven't been documented, but the funny thing about "experts" is that they are usually incapable of challenging their own flawed assumptions.

Yeah... People have wanted me to verify or authenticate

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things and you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. Half the world thinks you're an idiot and the other half thinks you're a genius. All I will verify is that, "I built this guitar."

**TQR:** Which among the guitars you built at Fender are most memorable for you?



One of my personal favorites (and I managed not by coincidence to have an extra left over) was a resonator-style Telecaster. We made a total of eight and I've got one of them. I had made a square neck version and a doctor in Louisiana wanted a round neck, and it turned out that this doctor was the personal physician for James Burton. We decided that in order to justify tooling up to build one, we ought to see if we couldn't sell a few more, which we did. I sent one that was kind of a prototype to the doctor and we found out that it eventually made its way to James Burton. It hasn't been seen since (laughing).

**TQR:** Well, James Burton has probably sold a few Telecasters over the years... So you were at Fender from the late '80s to 2001 and then what?

Alan Hamill and I left at the same time and we started our own company and guitar shop, which ultimately didn't work out.

**TQR:** This must have been before the Alan Hamill pickups appeared...

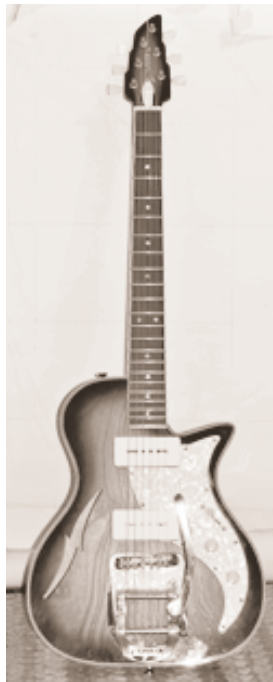
Yes, shortly after that. Alan and I were both making pickups together in the shop and when we parted company he began to more actively pursue pickups. I make the same pickups myself.

**TQR:** Well, as you know, there was a big buzz about Alan Hamill's pickups fueled by the Web and a few fortunate players who were able to get them two or three years ago, and then suddenly you couldn't get them at all. So, of course, once they became unobtainable, the mystique deepened even more. But you make them, too...

I'm more than willing to sell pickups, and I have, but I'm really not trying to create a mystique. They can be ordered through Jason Allen at Virtual Vintage Guitars.

**TQR:** When did you begin building guitars with your name on them?

About two years ago. Alan and I had actually built some "A&F" guitars that were my design called the Rockit Tone that I had first conceived at Fender. We made a couple of prototypes and sent them to marketing, and they passed on it. In the meantime, I had started developing artist interest in it, most notably with Richard Bennett, who has been on the last two or three Mark Knopfler solo albums and has toured with



him as well. Richard has also played with Emmy Lou Harris, Rodney Crowell, and he was Neil Diamond's musical director. I ended up making a Fender Rockit Tone for Richard, and he sent me a picture of Keith Urban playing one. How he got one I don't know – maybe it was one of the two prototypes we had built and it had been sitting somewhere in Scottsdale or it was sent to Bruce Bolin in Nashville, but that's a guitar I'm in the process of building. Most of my personal guitars are kind of "beaters" – those that I can't sell – but I just put a Bigsby on my personal Rockit Tone and it sounds like a hybrid between a Fender and a Gretsch.

**TQR:** Are you making the pickups?

Yes, and a lot of people think they are P90's when they first see them, but they are really highly modified Jazzmaster pickups.

**TQR:** Let's stay with pickups for a minute... There are lots of custom pickup builders now, and we have a theory that commercially manufactured pickups wound in the most efficient, high-speed, economical fashion sound that way – somewhat sterile, lacking character and harmonic content. On the other hand, custom wound pickups that are scatter wound with perhaps more carefully selected materials and skill have a unique sound that we prefer. Would you agree?

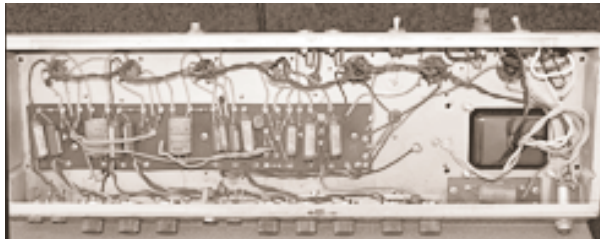
Yes, and I have an explanation. It's an electronic thing – what an engineer would call *coupling*. As I said, my father was an engineer, and I'm not. I have a very clear memory as a child

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of riding in the car with my father and asking him why, after every third or

fourth pole, the big, high-tension power lines that that ran parallel to the road would cross over one another, and he said that was to minimize *coupling*. He said that if you run wires parallel to one another over a long distance, you get resistance in the line and you'll lose energy along the power line. In a pickup, when you wind those wires parallel to one another we all know that the first thing you lose are the highs. When you hand-wind a pickup, I don't care how meticulous you are, it's almost impossible to get all the wire to line up parallel to one another, but a machine can wind a coil with a huge number of parallel lines and it's brutally precise. It will follow exactly the same path. When you look at the old Fender pickups you'll see these bumpy, lumpy, wound coils and that was not an accident. Leo was an electronics guy with a radio repair shop initially, and he knew electronics. Another little thing that I do on my instruments is something I originally observed from old Fenders. Look at an old Fender guitar or lap steel and you'll notice that the wires



coming from the pickups and going to the output jack were twisted in a barber pole fashion. Same thing. You're wrapping the ground wire around the hot and giving it some degree of shielding. The same thing was done in old radios and amplifiers. It's *functional*. It wasn't done just to make it look pretty. And obviously, some of those old Fender pickup coils weren't very pretty, but they also weren't intended to be looked at – they were under covers.

**TQR:** So when Leo hired and trained those Hispanic women to wind pickups and wire amp chassis, they were *trained* to work that way – it wasn't by accident.

No, and the old-time electronics guys knew that. I learned most of what I know about pickups from working at Fender, and when I was learning about making pickups, I remember that as being part of the discussions we had. I'm not trying to badmouth anyone, but when you have a large enough company, pretty soon the people with the original vision no longer have the power. Accountants have more power than engineers, so they get their way. We can make fifty cents more on

each guitar if we have a machine that winds those pickups faster, so we're doing it. They can argue until they're blue in the face, and the accountant can listen to two different guitars and they'll say they don't hear the difference. Ship it.

**TQR:** There have been periods in guitar manufacturing where this has happened repeatedly – where corporate “memory” disappears. It's an immovable law. But it does create a market for people like you.

Well, I'm not out to criticize anyone, but there are also a lot of people who are perfectly happy with whatever they get. When I was young I didn't get it either, so in that regard, the accountants are right. I'm not putting anybody down, but people like me aren't meant to work for people like that, and that's why I don't work there anymore.

**TQR:** Well, it's interesting to hear you confirm that rather than all of this having been one happy accident, much of it was done by design.

Yes, there was a method to the madness, although I'm sure Leo was not adverse to increasing productivity, either. Afterall, as long as people are buying your products, you're doing something right.

**TQR:** What – me worry? There is no problem, and that was the tune with the Norlin executives running Gibson in the '70s.

Fender went through that, too. I've seen '80s Stratocasters that are non-functional. I've seen '57 Gretsch guitars that were non-functional. So, everybody that ever did this on a production basis can get caught up in the same thing. At the



Custom Shop, John Page was relentless about the attention to detail. People are paying extra money for this to

be a special instrument – you don't just bolt something together and ship it. We would go to the factory in the early days and get bodies and necks but we would *select* them. We didn't just take whatever was at the top of the stack.

**TQR:** You were also there during the early period of the Relics when Vince Cunetto was building them, and those guitars still remain easily identifiable as exceptional today.

Vince's guitars didn't quite look as finished out as those that Fender built afterwards. He personalized them to the point where he would match an aged pickguard with a specific, aged body.

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**TQR:** And many of the necks have a stamp on them from John Cruz, and they are exceptional.



You know, John Cruz started as a factory sander, and when we first started to become more autonomous in the Custom Shop, we went over to the factory

and began to identify the really crack guys that knew the most and had the most potential, and John really stood out as someone who was driven to learn new things. You have to understand that a lot of guys just wanted to work their shift and go home. John has gone further – starting out as a sander and having become a Master Builder. He’s just a great guy and I’m still in contact with them all. He’s a hell of a player, too.

**TQR:** Back to pickups... are the materials you buy today consistent? How carefully do you have to watch what you get as far as magnets are concerned, for example?

Sure. I remember getting a magnet when I was at Fender that wouldn’t hold a charge. I don’t know how familiar you are with how magnets are made, but they don’t just put a bunch of ingredients into a big vat, melt it down, pour it out and cut it into magnets. They heat the material up, magnetize it, cool it down, de-magnetize it, heat it back up... it’s a little bit of a black art. I know there is some very exotic magnet material used for different applications, and Alnico used for guitars is like junk compared to a lot of it. It’s probably a low-priority material in the scheme of things, which may contribute to the inconsistencies that may occur. I use Alnico III and I have Alnico V, but III is more authentic to the bridge pickup of a Telecaster.



There was some fluctuation in the early Telecaster pickups; during the first years at

Fender Leo was experimenting and searching around for the right combination, which I definitely understand. You can’t stop building because you aren’t 100% pleased, and I don’t think anyone is ever completely satisfied.

**TQR:** But you have your formula pretty much set... Are you building both Telecaster and Stratocaster pickups?

I make Strat pickups, but there has been a lot more energy put into Strat pickups than Teles, and I think there is a more startling difference in my Tele pickups. I put more energy into the Telecaster, basically. Most people know that Strats outsell Teles about 12:1, so that’s where you find the juicier plum. The Tele has been left somewhat unaddressed. Seymour Duncan knows all about scatter winding and Alnico II and all that stuff, but at the level he’s at it doesn’t make economic sense to do that, I guess. I had a conversation with someone one time and I asked why they didn’t do things this way versus that way, and they said, “Well, my name is on it but I don’t really run it.” If I were that successful I might not want to fight all of those battles, either.

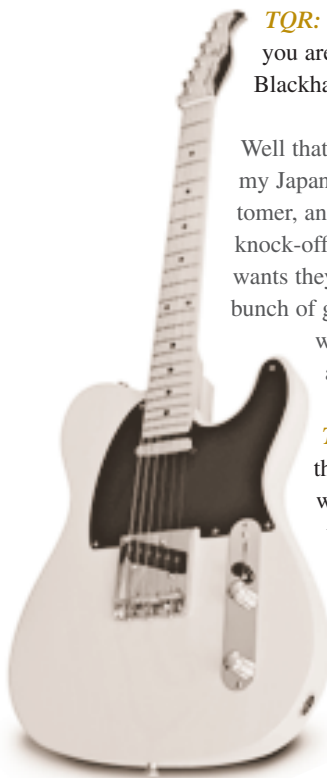
**TQR:** Do you keep pickup sets on hand?

When I have some spare time I’ll sit down and wind a few, but I don’t keep too much of a backlog.

**TQR:** Let’s talk about the guitars you are building today. Is the Blackhawk your flagship model?

Well that’s the *basic* model... Masa, my Japanese guy, is the main customer, and those are basically Fender knock-offs, but whatever a customer wants they can order. I don’t build a bunch of guitars and put them in a warehouse – I wait until I get an order and then I build it.

**TQR:** So if I wanted something like a Thinline-style Tele with a Bigsby, you’ll build that, and you work largely within the backdrop of designs that are Fender influenced.



Yes. The Rockit Tone guitar is its own design, and I’ll either build something that I know intimately, or I’ll create a new design. I built a double-neck Jaguar for a friend who has a rockabilly band in Orange County, and I’m working on a triple-neck Esquire for him right now. For guitars like that, if somebody wants a Fender peghead I’ll make it, but I won’t put a Fender decal on it. Within the last few days I made a template for a P-bass, and my Japanese customers really want me to build that instrument. I also build a guitar I call a Falcon, which is a Strat.

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**TQR:** Some people may wonder why they should consider having you build a guitar rather than simply picking a production Fender off the wall in a store. It seems that some of the most impressive production instruments have been built during periods when specific people like you and Jay Black were working at Fender, and I believe the same thing can be applied to specific eras at Gibson to some extent. There are very specific periods in which exceptional production instruments were built, and not by coincidence.

No matter how you slice it, there is no such thing as a non-handmade guitar, and the people that make it are putting the quality into it. Now, if you get hammered to not take as much time – to do it quicker – it shows.

**TQR:** Do you buy raw necks and bodies from companies like All Parts or USA Custom?



No, I do everything, including cutting the threads on my own truss rods. The last time I bought wood from Tommy at USA Custom I drove up there and bought two

pallets of wood. I like Tommy a lot and he has a great knack for finding really good wood. There is also a guy from the Custom Shop working up there – Bret Faust.

**TQR:** Do you build many *hardtail* Strats?

That's the only Strat worth playing. I have one that I made when I was at the Custom Shop that is a '56 style sunburst, and I wound my own pickups for it. Part of the sound of the Strat that I don't like is that there is too much magnetic pull on the strings, so while this guitar is really a two pickup Strat, I put in a middle pickup that's really just a dummy to make it look normal. The bridge pickup is a flat pole piece Tele bridge pickup design with an elevator plate on it and #43



gauge plain enamel wire that is wound to the exact same specs as the Tele pickup I make. The neck pickup is just a typical '50s Strat pickup. After I

play a few tunes on it, the really hardcore Strat players always want to know what I did to make that guitar sound so great. I usually just tell them it's because it's a hardtail. But the Strat Nazis of the world don't seem to think that there is anything you could possibly do to improve the sound of a Stratocaster.

**TQR:** What type of fret wire do you prefer?

I personally like the vintage wire, and I use wire from Stewart McDonald that is slightly taller and wider than the vintage stuff. But I just built a guitar for a player in Nashville who wanted the big jumbo wire. You can have whatever you want.

**TQR:** What type of nut material do you like to use?



I've been using Micarta, but I'm not entirely happy with it. It works fine, but when I do the setup I don't like the

way it works with a file. It sounds great... On one of the guitars I sent you, a friend of mine just happened to come by with some politically incorrect ivory, and that's what is on that guitar. I don't really think you can hear big differences in the sound of different materials, but durability is important. If I lived in a perfect universe where there wasn't a perceived value difference, I would use a zero fret. I personally don't like the look of it – most people associate it with a cheap guitar – but when you really look at it, a zero fret makes more sense than anything else. All the notes sound the same, the nut is never going to affect the height of your action, and it's out of the game. And it's so easy to screw up with a nut – one or two swipes with a file and you've gone from the right sound to trash. But although I'm one of those people who always flinches when I see a zero fret, if I were going to build the ultimate guitar, that's what it would have.

**TQR:** How do you feel about weight?

I don't think weight is the determining factor in tone. I have a friend who lives down in Austin – John Anderson, who is a rock & roll veteran who played in a band called Mother Earth – and over the years he collected Strats and Teles when they were obtainable. He said he would turn down a Broadcaster for \$300 because they just weren't worth more than a hundred bucks (laughing). He's got a Broadcaster that is one of the heaviest Fender guitars I have ever played, and it sounds like God. Now, what do I want to stand up there and hold for four hours a night? The ergonomic factor is important, but if

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it's super light and top heavy, I'm not fond of that, and some really light guitars sound too nasally and punky. There is a point that you generally don't want to go beyond when it comes to weight.

**TQR:** How much of the sound and tone of a guitar is simply luck?

It's a crapshoot if you just choose off the shelf materials, but that's one of the things that a builder like myself learns. If you select good, hard, quartersawn maple, it's going to consistently sound better.

**TQR:** Do you find that "boutique" hardware like titanium saddles make a difference over more commonly available parts?

I don't know that it dictates quality, but it dictates *a* quality. It affects the sound, but whether it makes it "better" or "worse" I can't say. But little things are important to me as a builder. I went to the same company that makes screws for Fender and ordered a huge quantity of pickguard screws because I want them to be consistent. If I buy them from some place like All Parts they may change suppliers. I want to be able to reach into a bin and get exactly what I want. As far as tuners, I use the vintage Kluson-style by Gotoh. They are bulletproof and far better than the originals ever were.



The one thing I always go back to when people start nitpicking is Jimi Hendrix. He cared nothing about any of this. He could have played a Gibson, or a Telecaster... The pure, core essence has to come from the player, and I would theorize that had Jimi Hendrix lived, he would have at least gained a sense that "this guitar sounds better than that

one." It really wasn't high on his list of priorities at the time, but I'm sure as he matured... All musicians go through this. The older you get, the fussier you get. Same thing with the car you drive and the food you eat. In retrospect, if someone like Eric Johnson wants to do a cover of a Jimi Hendrix song, he's going to obsess over it. He's going to do that anyway. It's a lot more difficult to *recreate* something than it is to cre-



ate something. Picasso could sit down at a canvas and do whatever he wanted and it was a Picasso. Today, you either have a zillion dollars to buy one or you have to study his technique to create something similar. There is a lot of work involved. If something happened and I had a gig tomorrow and I had to buy a guitar at Guitar Center, I could probably find one that would be really outstanding by playing every damn one of them until I found a standout. I'd be OK.

**TQR:** Let's talk about guitar finishes.



I discovered something during the time we were shooting the early metal flake finish-

es in the Custom Shop – it's unscientific – but either a very thin finish or a heavy one seemed to interfere less with the tone of a guitar. It's the finishes with a medium thickness that seemed to deaden guitars the most. But that's just an observation, and not a scientific fact. I've been using nirocellulose airplane lacquer, because there are some businesses in which wavers have been issued for environmental regulations, such as in airplane restoration.

We got into this at Fender. We did some experiments with airplane lacquer, and then we went to McFadden and asked them if they could supply us with this stuff and they said they could. So that was used for a while, but at some point Fender had to go back to the compliant material.



As a small builder shooting maybe a gallon a month, you go to a paint store and you tell them you want some nitro lacquer, and what they stock might be rated at 220 VOC per gram. Well, the good stuff is 500 VOC (volatile organic compounds). The higher the VOC, the more likely you are to get a better outcome. You can't find any of that in California, although you can get it in Oregon or Nevada. But since I shoot so little and I'm not required to be compliant like a big company is, I found out that I can formulate my own. You can't *buy* the lacquer, but I can buy the stuff I need to bring it up to the level I want, at which point it will be non-compliant. It's kind of crazy. Fender goes through this, too. They spent five million dollars on an elaborate spray booth, and they've had as many headaches as I've

had. The difference is when they have a problem it may affect 400 guitars and I'm only dealing with two or three.

**TQR:** And you shoot all the Fender original colors?

Yes, and I mix all my own colors. I don't want to try to build a reputation as being a vintage color guru... you want Fiesta Red? OK, this looks like a Fiesta Red that could have happened. Thumb through the blackguard Tele book and tell me the color of the finishes were all the same. I do a lot of work for the Guitar Center in Hollywood, and they had about five or six blackguard Telecasters hanging on the wall and none of them looked exactly the same. Part of that is what they've been through, of course, but even when you pulled the pick-guard off of them it was clear that they hadn't all been painted the same exact color. Another factor in the variation in color is the original color of the wood before it is painted, because different pieces of raw wood are shaded differently.

The finishes on some of the early Relics we were doing in California were really spectacular, but as always happens, someone came along and had us change the way we were doing things. One thing I've learned is not to go out and buy a can of lacquer, put it in the gun and shoot a guitar you have



to ship next month. You have to become familiar with different lacquers and how they work.

**TQR:** If I wanted a guitar made with a 100-year old piece of pine, like a "pinecaster," could you do it?

Yeah. Probably one of the things that nearly every guitar builder on the planet does is start collecting wood. When you find it you have to buy it, so it's there when you need it. That's another reason why I began to buy old pianos – to salvage the wood out of them. These are endangered species that you can't even buy anymore, and it really makes me shiver at the thought of old pianos being taken to the dump every day.

**TQR:** Will you also restore and repair vintage instruments?

Sure. I just made a new truss rod for an old Esquire. That's basically what Jay Black is doing now and he sent me the Esquire. He really doesn't want to even deal with individuals anymore – he takes things in through dealers and doesn't deal that much with the public.



**TQR:** Some people just can't be pleased no matter what you do...

Yeah, and I will usually qualify people to make sure that they are reasonable.

**TQR:** Do you shield the cavities on your guitars?

It was always my observation at Fender that when you paint the control cavity with shielding paint you lose

some noise, but you also lose some of the sparkle.

**TQR:** Beer neon in bars seems to be the biggest problem with a lot of working players.

Yeah, I play in a little club here in Riverside and we just turn the neon signs off.

**TQR:** You're on to something there... I guess what you said about painting control cavities can also be said about noiseless pickups.

Yeah. Afterall, *everything* you hear is noise... you're just eliminating a certain frequency of noise and along with that you're losing the beautiful part of it.

**TQR:** What do you want to do in the future?



I just want to make good guitars. I was really inspired by the movie *The Red Violin* and if I ever take on an apprentice, I'll require

them to explain that movie to me. I've already built instruments that are going to outlive me, so that cat's out of the bag. There is no way to undo what you've done. And while nothing you do can be absolutely perfect, hopefully there will also be nothing that you wouldn't be proud to put your name on. We all get our shot at immortality, and I would just like to think that people will look at what I've done and say, "He built good guitars." **To**

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## New, Vintage, Used or Custom Built

Like us, perhaps you too have considered what really separates extraordinary instruments from the ordinary. We've spent a lot of time observing the differences between ordinary production guitars and those that produce a spontaneous reaction of reverent admiration and a deep and immediate connection that leaves us grasping for a rationale to acquire "just one more guitar."



The value of most rare, vintage guitars is set primarily by the extent to which they have survived in original condition. In the world of vintage guitars (and amps), tone doesn't matter, which is why you'll never see an ad in which the seller states, "100% original and flawless, but tonally not the best we've heard and priced accordingly." And as

much as we hesitate to question the authenticity of anyone's prized vintage collection, you had better understand this: plenty of non-original finishes, mismatched bodies and necks, neck and headstock repairs, filled pickup routs and artfully aged, non-original pickups lurk among guitars that have been anointed as completely original by "expert" appraisers in the vintage guitar business. Given the skill of many restoration and repair experts, verifying the originality of a guitar isn't quite as easy as testing quarter panels on an old Jag with a magnet or matching engine block numbers on a Corvette. We asked renowned guitar builder, veteran repairman and former Fender Custom Shop masterbuilder Michael Stevens for his take on fakes. Listen... "There are definitely guys out there. I'm not going to name any names, but I've been busting them for years. A customer of mine brought in a bunch of guitars from his collection and we were shooting pictures and looking them over when I began to question one in particular. We took it all apart and it wasn't real... and he had bought it from a legitimate, well-known dealer. I've done repairs that would be hard to detect, and I doubt that a lot of collectors would even know what to look for. I've also made replacement necks for original V's and Explorers back in the old days and dealers would buy them for \$40,000 knowing I had made a new neck for it. 'Oh, Stevens put a neck on it? OK.' They'd buy it over the phone sight unseen."

Then there's the story of Joe Glaser coming within an inch of



buying a vintage, "original" Telecaster until he pulled the pickguard and recognized it as a guitar he had refinished and artfully filled an old humbucker rout...

Now, we're not suggesting that you have all your vintage guitars scanned at a medical lab for hidden repairs (although we know a dealer who does). You're

probably better off not knowing, and if a repair is good enough to be visually undetectable, it isn't likely to affect the value of your "original" treasure anyway. But given the fact that vintage prices have doubled and tripled in the past several years, if you're contemplating a future purchase, find a veteran repair and restoration expert – not an "appraiser" – to verify originality.

Even more recent "collectable" instruments are hitting outrageous prices that should give us all pause to consider just what defines a "rare" guitar. Is #523 in a limited run of 1,000 really worth more? If a "custom shop" produces 60 guitars a day – 15,000 a year – are all of these instruments truly "rare?" We think not. Why should you care? Because the public's perception of what is rare and collectable dictates reality in the market.

As far as new instruments are concerned, you *can* get lucky and find a stunner on your first shopping trip, but our experience supports the advantage of playing and handling as many examples of the specific model you want as possible. Start by developing a relationship with a dealer who maintains a larger inventory than the typical megastore.

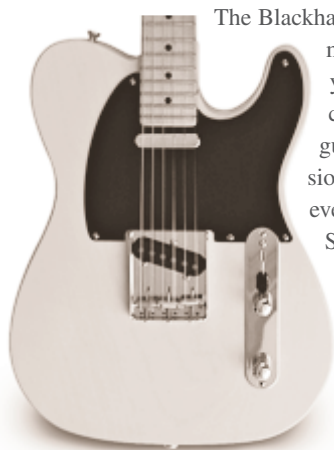


There *is* another way to chase your dreams, however. You can commission your dream guitar to be custom built by an inspired savant like Fred Stuart, who at most will only build several hundred guitars in his lifetime. The advantages of this strategy are clear, since you can literally capture all of the best features you may have found among many different instruments

in one, plus a few that may have completely eluded you, and there will be no question that your custom built guitar is just that – rare, unique and the pinnacle of the builder's art. **To**

## the Stuart Blackhawk

Fred sent us two review guitars – a “Blackhawk” which is his take on a ‘50s blackguard Tele, and one of his personal instruments built from spruce and Brazilian rosewood salvaged from old pianos, which we referred to as the “Martin Tele.” Both are stunners.



The Blackhawk is described as a “basic” model in the Stuart line, as in your basic, perfectly conceived and executed blackguard Tele. Our first impression was formed before we had even lifted it out of the case. Stuart is an artist with uncommon skills and a brilliant eye for working with color and lacquer, and the results are undeniably obvious. The Blackbird’s traditional ‘50s finish is a work of art on wood, reveal-

ing the striking grain in the ash body with a subtle, milky transparency and depth that simply can’t be found in production guitars. And while the “correct” shade for a vintage ‘50s Telecaster may in reality be a moving target, the color of the Blackbird seemed more perfect and pleasing than any we have ever seen. The pigment in the lacquer is neither too yellow or pale, the top coat is neither too glossy or dull, and there is a visual quality present – a rich, almost transparent opacity that trumps all of the finishes we have ever seen on guitars reflecting the ‘50s blackguard era.

Stuart’s hand-shaped, quartersawn maple neck is big and round with ample shoulders and a moderate 9.5 fingerboard radius. Tinted to a perfect shade of pilsner, the clear nitro finish on the neck doesn’t feel thick, sticky or tacky. The tall and narrow fret wire wouldn’t be our first choice, but the point is, you *have* a choice, and the Blackbird plays like a dream. The big neck sends earth tremors deep down into the ash body, and you can hear the wood in the pickups.



At just under seven pounds, the Blackhawk possesses the pleasing resonance and sustain that every guitarist craves, and Stuart’s pickups are an extension of the visual

and tactile experience created by the look and feel of his work. The first chord pretty much says it all; by any standard this is no ordinary guitar. Describing tone and the specific sound of pickups can be an unfair compromise when all you have to work with are words... but perhaps you can appreciate the irony in hearing *heavy* high frequencies that hang over the top without becoming shrill or too sharp... mids that can be dynamically pushed forward or diminished with your finger tips, and throaty bass notes that lurk beneath and support a rich chord, gently swell as if plucked from a big wooden box, and growl on tough solos. The neck and bridge pickups in the Blackbird are remarkably similar to the Lollar Special set in our Nash Tele, which is to say, as good as it gets. Knocking down the volume from the guitar produces crystalline clean tones, while wide open will light up the output tubes in a great amp and produce the kind of distortion and dynamic attack that are so unique to a Telecaster. We have always felt that a great Tele-style guitar with exceptional pickups and a 4-way switch that enables the neck and bridge pickups to be combined in series *and* in parallel produces a guitar with one of the most versatile range of tones ever to exist in one instrument – from the quack of a Stratocaster, to the earthy warmth of an ES175, the fat bite of an SG and, of course, the brilliant, unmistakable tone of a Telecaster. That’s a lot of ground to cover with the mere flick of a switch, and the Blackhawk does it all. **To**

## the “Martin” Tele

Fred’s personal Tele was clearly created in the spirit of a classic Martin, and the first question we asked him was, “Is this for sale?” We wouldn’t sell it, either. Hollow in the fashion of a Thinline, Fred’s “Mar-Tele” weighed but five pounds and change, yet it sustained with far more authority than a typical featherweight.



Stuart salvaged priceless boards of spruce and Brazilian rosewood from ancient pianos and married them to an ebony fingerboard with classic snowflake inlays on

a fat maple neck. The top was appropriately framed with heringbone inlay, and the 2-piece back was joined by strip of inlay from top to bottom, true to the classic Martin design. Much more than a “concept” guitar, the tones from Fred’s Tele danced in our head for days, and for every hour logged with the Blackhawk, equal time was demanded by the “Martin.”

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Both of these guitars were so far beyond the level of the commercially-driven, high production guitar business that we will admit to being a little depressed when it was time to pack them up. Thus enlightened, what next? It also occurred to us that there are no doubt dozens of small, hidden details that Fred Stuart builds into every guitar he makes... details known only to him, most of which are technically unnecessary. After all, he could easily buy roughed-out necks and bodies instead of cutting them himself from raw boards... Who would know, and what difference would it make? The answers are in the questions. **To**

## Larry Pogreba



*We have Danny Flowers to thank for turning us on to Larry Pogreba – an original high plains drifter now living in Willow Creek, Montana. Larry builds maybe 25 or 30 guitars a year in addition to collecting old amps and guitars, flying his plane, hunting, fishing and maintaining a righteous stash of Honduran mahogany that he personally cut in Belize. You might also recall that Larry*

*sent us our first “C.F. Martin” DeArmond amp which we ultimately cloned as the TQ Clarksdale.*

*Larry’s guitars are inspired by his obvious appreciation for vintage instruments and amps that were cheap, funky and full of soul. You won’t find intricate inlay or binding on his guitars, and for some, his simple, honest “arts and crafts” construction may seem too crude and unpolished. Fair enough... but plenty of very accomplished players completely get what Larry Pogreba is all about, and now it’s your turn to do the same...*

**TQR:** How did you first get involved in building guitars, Larry?

In 1968 or ‘69 I got out of college when the whole world was comin’ unglued in a real good way, I thought, and I just hit the road and played music for a while. I got interested in how guitars functioned, and at that time there were really no schools or books on guitar construction, so you just got an old guitar, took it apart and put it back together. I’d pick up old, funky guitars and they all had good ideas to be found in

them. You pretty much had to be self-taught, because a lot of builders in those days weren’t willing to share what they knew.

**TQR:** What types of guitars were you attracted to?



When I first began building I was like most builders in those days and I was making Martin copies. I was interested in Kasha’s designs – he had a different idea about how guitars were designed that probably worked better on instruments with nylon strings rather than steel. The first few guitars I built were basically Dreadnoughts – D28’s more or less – and those were the only

Dreadnoughts I ever built. I just felt that they were big, uncomfortable guitars unless you were standing up with it hanging in a strap. Playing a dreadnought always felt like you had a big fat lady sitting on your lap. Around 1975 I quit building for a while – disco hit, the acoustic music scene just about died, and everybody was spending all their money on polyester and cocaine. The last few guitars I built were like double 00 guitars and I was carving ladies’ butts on the backs. Then I started making knives. I was into the marshall arts and attracted to the Japanese discipline of making steel, and I wound up sharing a shop with a Japanese sword maker who had left Japan. He wanted to live over here and be able to hunt and fish and have the freedom that you don’t have in Japan. I learned a lot from him, and I was making knives out of meteorites and all kinds of goofy stuff. I was also saving guitar wood when I’d come across it, and when I saw Danny



Farrington’s book, here was a guy building and selling guitars to all my heroes, and I realized that the world had changed. Guitar players had always been very conservative and things seemed to be changing, so I

got back into building. I’d also been racing motorcycles and I broke my back and my pelvis, separated the cartilage in my sternum and all kinds of crap, so building guitars again made sense given my physical limitations.

By this time I had acquired a lot of metal working skill, but I

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