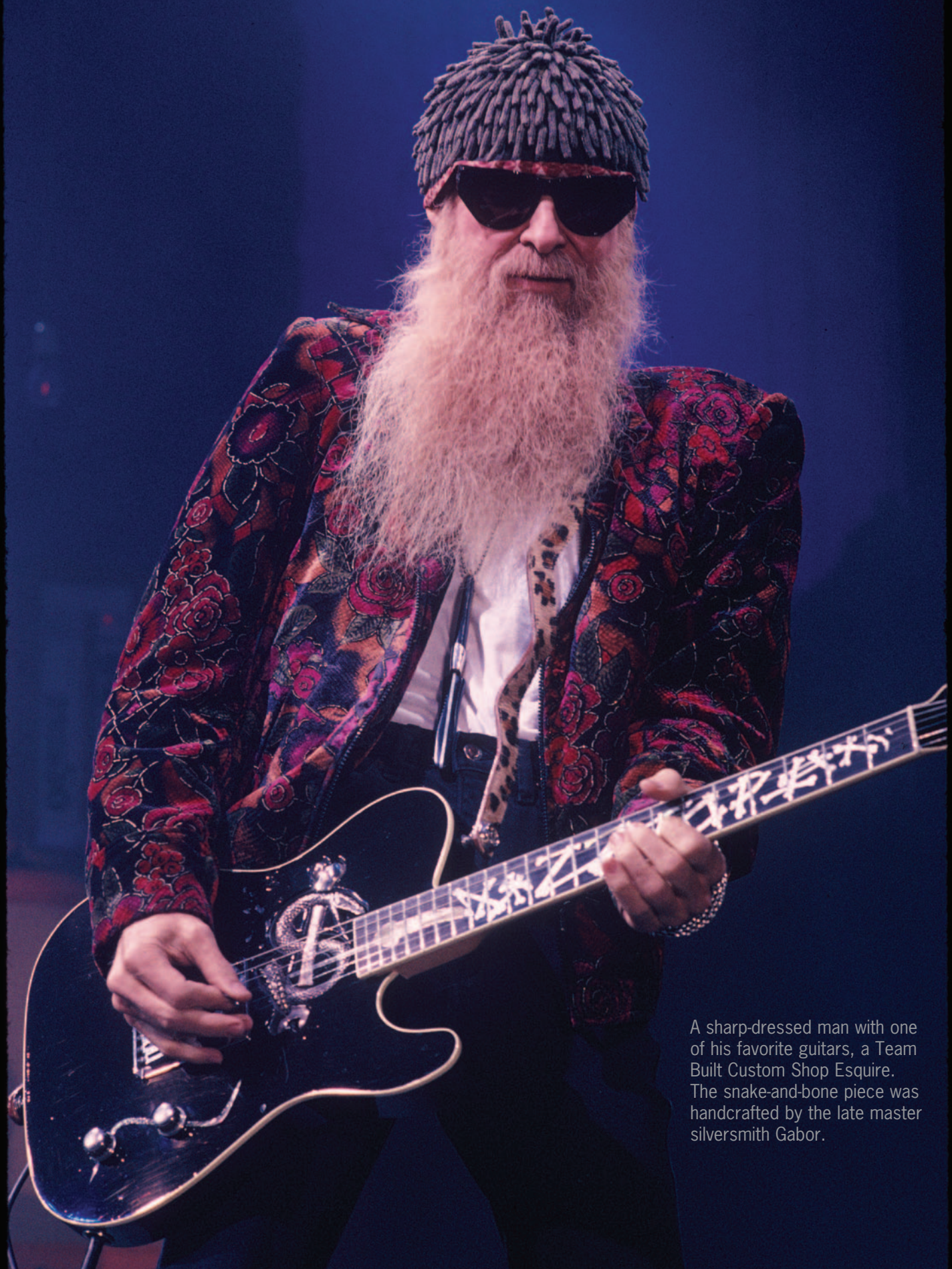


# THE DREAM FACTORY



BY TOM WHEELER    FOREWORD BY BILLY F GIBBONS





A sharp-dressed man with one of his favorite guitars, a Team Built Custom Shop Esquire. The snake-and-bone piece was handcrafted by the late master silversmith Gabor.



## F O R E W O R D

## Phoenix Rising

by Billy F Gibbons

Let's turn back the pages for a moment. There was a time, not so long ago, when very few players could order a guitar with specific requests for some "this's and that's," with "non-catalog" specs and parts. And, for a period of some years there, the guitars coming from the great marques required perhaps some "spiffing up" to shake out the bugs and get them in good working order. Presently, it's good news ... Good news! In recent years, I see Fender in particular as Phoenix rising. They hold the aim of "we will deliver for you," and the Custom Shop is at the forefront of making it happen.

For many years, if a guy tried out a new guitar and said, no, I want it that way, the goliaths of the industry just wouldn't have it. It's not that Fender didn't want to do it, but they were trying to stay one step ahead of the hounds and survive in the business, and truth is, there was little time to engage in the luxury of veering off the production-line standard. There were some exceptions. Every time you think you've seen it all, go to a guitar show gathering and there's some one-of-a-kind Fender, with a custom paint job or whatever it might be and, of course, there is no record of it. But such things are few and far between.

The good news is, the sweet pie has gotten sweeter, and today we have a legion of dedicated professionals who understand the value of so many different elements that go into making a great guitar on Monday for the Monday customer, and then maybe something completely different with the guitar they make for the Tuesday customer or the Wednesday customer.

One of the things the Fender Custom Shop did was develop a great allegiance between companies and players.

Presently, we are in the sweet spot of time, knowing that the shop is tending to the most finite of details, tiny things that were long overlooked or treated in some laissez-faire, cavalier manner. The demands for the guitars' particulars are coming from the right place, the place they deserve to come from — the street, and the guys and gals who play 'em. For this connection we owe much to Fender's Master Builders.

In the early days of the shop, Michael Stevens, Larry Brooks, John Page and the other guys cherished and relished an American treasure, the history and lore of Fender. Page and Stevens were stridently focused, although they were flying blind in one sense. They knew resurrecting an entire company brand and image with guitar-building perfection required passionate people, loads of time, and lots of dedicated effort. And they could think of nothing better!

It's a tricky story we are telling here. It's like Howlin' Wolf said about the blues — *"What do you mean, we're bringing it back? It ain't never left!"* And in a certain way, that resonates with me when I think of Fender. The love and respect for Fender's original vision never went away, at least among the players out there who used those instruments every day, and it came alive in the Custom Shop.

The shop had humble beginnings. They had very little in the way of resources. What they did have was energy ... a fierce pride. Stevens and Page assumed the reins of custodianship, to preserve and maintain the tradition. It required a bit of wrangling to get things into proper place, so that the instruments, as Leo Fender had envisioned them, could once again fall into the hands of the unsus-

pecting. Slowly but surely, the impetus that was so humbly kicked into motion in the late 1980s brought about a familial thing, a true Custom Shop family with a commitment to creating top-drawer gear.

Mike Eldred, the real Fender “in house” ace, maintains a respect for the past and drives the shop from “doors open” ’til the time doors close every day. Everyone involved enjoys picking up the torch, picking up the pace. Fender builders are focused on perfecting the best of the best. Eldred and all of the Fender team — I love ’em. Eccentric, serious players, and a bonus to have a Fender in hand! “El Dred” and his compadres in the shop and Fender marketing are artistically “on it” and totally committed to maintaining the ultimate of the Fender legacies. This is Fender at its finest.

And dig ... the Master Builders are not afraid to step out and try something different — it’s as simple as maintaining that “Leo” tradition. Have you seen La Cabronita Especial? I am totally all about that guitar. Simple, simple, simple. It doesn’t even have Leo’s infamous “hot dog” control plate. Sometimes the shop will take a step into the unknown, but at no point do we find that Leo’s visionary creation has been compromised.

Here’s an example that goes way back. I dropped by the shop one time with a few boxes of Krispy Kremes for the guys and saw a hardtail Strat that Chris Fleming had made. This sparked a discussion that resulted in three “El Cabron” guitars — a soft-V Tele neck on a white blonde Strat body, one pickup, a gold aluminum pickguard. I still have those guitars in stock. Now, this touches upon a key point. If someone went in and said, “OK, make me a Vox Phantom teardrop with a Strat neck,” well, that ain’t gonna happen. Everything goes back to square one, upholding the legacy ... and the custodians of Leo’s vision are strident in maintaining it. The Master Builders don’t step out of bounds. Back in the day, Fender never made a one-pickup Strat with a Tele neck, but when you see this thing, you might say, “I never knew Fender made something like this” ... but you won’t have to ask, “What is it?” You’ll know exactly what it is: This could only be a Fender.

Even if what the Custom Shop customer wants is a wall hanging, it is still a true taste of Fender. Take something like the red Bonecaster, a serious work of art in every sense where the drama of the artistic expression is unleashed.

And, the instrument maker’s vision is wide open as well. That guitar would sit comfortably in a gallery of fine contemporary art, but let me tell you, it doesn’t cross the line. There is no disturbance of playability. It feels great and sounds great. The shop would never let a guitar out the door if it didn’t pass the Fender firing line of quality control and function.

I’ll give you another example. I was studying silver-smithing for a time, and a gang of us were understudies of a guy from Hungary who went by one name, Gabor. He passed away some years ago, and I am at a loss for words to explain what a character and artist this man was. He made me a snake-and-bone piece like one I had admired on his leather jacket. I thought maybe I could get the Custom Shop guys to humor me and make a guitar around it. Gabor, god rest his soul, knew I liked to have a backup, so he cast two of ’em. I brought them to the shop, and this is when I realized how serious they were — not just about the standard Teles and Strats but everything they do. I wanted that thing under the strings, but they wanted to make sure that this big, heavy piece in no way impeded the functionality, so they figured out a way to actually rout a channel so the piece would lay flush for total playability.

These benefits of the Custom Shop identify the shop’s “in house” guitars. They maintain the true Fender line. They influence an entire industry, really. Some of the techniques and standards pioneered or resurrected in the shop are now production-line essentials. Check out the Mexican-factory Esquire, with that crazy, milky, see-through finish, one pickup, a maple neck. The finish is accurate, the frets are set correctly, the intonation is right. Take it out on the bandstand for a couple of months; go ahead. Simply ain’t gonna be an issue! Well, so much of this goes back to Stevens and Page and now Fender’s Master Builders and everything they have — the knowledge, the tradition, the discoveries.

Bottom line: In order to make vintage for tomorrow, you got to make it good today. The Fender Custom Shop has seen fit to ensure that what reaches your hands is certain to satisfy. Now, learn to play what you want to hear... Rock on...!



Created for Billy Gibbons, the Bonecaster Esquire brims with righteous mojo. (The volume knob evokes Billy's Nudu hat, a ceremonial item with distinctive "fringes" worn by the Bamileke tribe of Western Cameroon.) Bonecaster details: Chap. 25.









# I N T R O D U C T I O N

## The Third Guy

"Three guys, side by side, digging ditches. Ask them, 'What are you making?' First guy says, 'I'm making a ditch.' Second guy, 'I'm making five-fifty an hour.' The third guy says, 'I'm making a cathedral to God.' At the Fender Custom Shop, we're the third guy. I don't care if it sounds corny or whatever. That's who we are."

The speaker is Mike Eldred, Director of Sales and Marketing for Fender's Custom Shop, a place where commitment to a guitar's function, practicality, and commercial potential is fused with a passion for craft and attaining the highest artistic standards. "This isn't just about making money or selling instruments," Mike explains. "We could go to a lot less trouble and still sell guitars and make money. This is something else. This is about expressing yourself, about developing your craft to the highest level, and advancing that craft for the whole industry. It's about working one on one with a particular player to make his dreams come true, whether it's Eric Clapton or the guy down the street playing in his living room."

## The ultimate question

*What if?* When it comes to sparking the imagination, it's the ultimate question. What if man could fly? What if man could walk on the moon? What if man could have a surf green Stratocaster with a Tele neck and lipstick pickups and jumbo frets and a moto pickguard? *What if?*

Probably every player has at one time or another dreamed up his or her ideal guitar — perhaps sketching the thing on college-ruled paper during history class or on a bottle-ringed napkin at a pizza-joint gig. It might have been some classic model that hasn't been made for decades, or a never-before-seen instrument with a unique combo of features. Fender's Custom Shop, aptly nicknamed the Dream Factory, was founded to make those dreams come true. And if your ideal guitar is just some murky vision whose details have yet to come into focus, you can find co-dreamers in the shop who will guide you through the process.

Like many of us, the shop's early bosses and builders asked the same, what-if question. What if instead of limiting ourselves to selling one unique guitar at a time we designed our own models, distinguished them from the factory's guitars, and sold *hundreds* of them? What if we partnered with graphic designers, inlay specialists, jewelers, smiths, leatherworkers and others to create art objects that doubled as musical instruments? What if the processes we perfected in the shop could migrate over to the factory and even to our affiliates in Mexico and Japan, raising the quality of all Fender instruments and enhancing the reputation of Fender's entire global enterprise? *What if?*

The Custom Shop collaborates with Fender departments, Fender dealers, and Fender players all over the world to bring these lofty imaginings down to earth. The result: a collection of instruments not only manifesting the highest standards of quality but also appealing to every taste and style, from Nudie suits to nipple rings.

## Expanding visions

The Custom Shop opened in early 1987 as a two-man specialty operation. Before the year was out, it was overwhelmed with orders for unique one-offs and for more or less authentic repros of vintage Fenders. The first customers were previous clients of the shop's inaugural builders, Michael Stevens and John Page, but requests soon flooded in from artists, avid amateurs and professionals, collectors, retail chains, individual stores, distributors, and Fender marketing.

As demand increased, it became increasingly clear that the shop must not only expand its workforce and floor space but also reconsider its very mission. A victim of its own success, it grew so rapidly that its builders and Fender in general could hardly keep up. In one respect, the tale of the shop's first several years is one of a guitar-building enterprise desperately playing catch-up to its own rapidly evolving vision.

Left, a study in gold leaf, the 2005 Master Salute Stratocaster

what if?

### The bigger picture

The Custom Shop is often portrayed as a semi-freestanding facility within the Fender organization, and the characterization is reasonably accurate as far as it goes. Certainly, the shop's guitars do indeed have their own standards, tolerances, and high levels of handwork. But the shop's public image, official functions, and jawdropper one-off instruments tell only a part of the story, and not necessarily the most interesting part. In 1985, the company's new owners acquired little more than the Fender name, patents, production equipment, and a small store of leftover instruments. For years the working atmosphere was frenzied, as Fender set up a new factory, rebuilt its work force, and struggled to regain its once-envied reputation.

The Custom Shop was born into this high-stakes, pressure-cooker environment. Not surprisingly, corporate niceties such as organizational charts and job descriptions were ignored as employees collaborated across departmental lines and worked overtime to get the guitars out the door. The interplay among the shop and other departments was constant and complex; official boundaries were at times virtually nonexistent. (R&D people were even pictured as members of the Custom Shop crew.) As R&D guru George Blanda puts it, "The cross-pollination went every which way."

So the Custom Shop is hardly a mere adjunct to Fender. It's a cornerstone, supporting any number of activities. Its builders have designed guitars that are then built not only in the shop but also in the main California factory, in Mexico, and in Japan. Some of the artists whose signature Fenders are built in the main factory have their personal guitars crafted in the Custom Shop. Some models were initially offered through the shop and migrated to the factory; others were first issued from the factory and then reborn in upgraded forms in the Custom Shop. Time and again, production techniques perfected in the shop filtered over to the main facility, helping to boost the quality of all Fender instruments.

Custom Shop people both taught and learned from their colleagues on the main line. Many Custom Shop instruments, particularly in the early years, were assembled in part from factory components. For some guitars, certain

production stages were completed in the shop, others in the factory. Until the shop finally received its own paint facility, most or all Custom Shop guitars were painted in the factory. As J. Black says in these pages, "The shop wasn't a separate institution. It was a moving, flowing process, never in stone . . . We worked with the factory people all the time, and they helped us all the time as well. Don't kid yourself — if it weren't for manufacturing, we could not have built one-offs."

There's more. When the shop introduces a new model, it doesn't do so in a vacuum. How does its '54 Strat differ from the factory's version? What about quality control in the shop vs. the factory? Is the \$2,500 Telecaster really better than the \$800 Tele? Well, yes, but how so? To what extent do the prices and marketing of Custom Shop guitars and factory guitars affect each other? These issues are constantly addressed internally, and one goal of this book is to explore the ways in which the shop's builders and products are indeed separate

from those of the factory, as well as the ways in which the shop and other departments are inextricably entwined.

Accounts of the Custom Shop that fail to consider the larger story of the post-buyout Fender are necessarily fragmentary and incomplete. The late William Schultz, rightly credited as the man who saved Fender, set the wheels in motion. This author sees the story of the Custom Shop as being inseparable from the tale of Fender's Third Age, the era of Bill Schultz and his corporate heirs. It was Schultz who insisted that Fender look beyond its traditional instruments, who chafed at seeing competitors sell custom-built guitars for thousands of dollars, and who refused to accept the limitations of Fender's role as the builder of durable tools for working musicians. He told videographer Dennis Baxter: "People laughed when I said I was going to open a custom shop . . . but a Fender is a top-of-the-line product. It can be used anywhere. It can be a collectible. It can be used with a top artist." It was in the Custom Shop where this vision would be realized in wood and wire, metal and plastic.

The hands of a Master Builder: John Cruz tests the action on his prototype of the Yngwie Malmsteen Tribute Strat, with Yngwie's original guitar in the background.







As we will see, the efforts of Custom Shop builders were also essential in reconnecting Fender to its roots in the First Age, the Leo Fender era. During a period when the factory was incapable of rendering authentic, detailed reissues of Fender's classic guitars and basses, Custom Shop workers brought with them an abiding respect for pre-CBS instruments. As employees who vociferously championed the vintage cause within the organization, they saw themselves as true keepers of the Fender flame.

### **The vanguard**

As Fender responded to shifting trends and evolving markets, time and again it was the Custom Shop at the forefront of these efforts, serving as Fender's first-response unit to many challenges. For the first several years, many people outside the company never drew the sharp distinctions we make today regarding the shop's identity. Former salesman John Grunder: "In the late '80s, a clear picture of the shop had yet to come into focus. When I took Custom Shop guitars to dealers and players, the reactions were not so much a recognition of any sort of separation between the shop and factory. The sentiment was simply, Fender is back; Fender is beginning its slow recovery from the CBS era. People were rabid, just so excited. They hadn't played a great new Fender in a long time. At first, the big news wasn't that these guitars came from a Custom Shop. The big news was that they said *Fender* on the headstock."

### **Rivalries and teamwork**

Whatever the public perceptions might have been, the shop strove to develop an identity distinct from that of its parent corporation. First of all, its craftspeople have always been acknowledged as the best of the best, some even worthy of the title Master Builder; any time a factory worker relocates to the shop, it is rightly considered a promotion, a step up. The shop furthered its culture of autonomy with its own catalogs and trade show displays. The dazzling guitars drew loads of media attention. The operation seemed to be a seat-of-the-pants/hang-loose type of deal, more casual and fun than the atmosphere in a typical factory. The ragtag, happy-go-lucky attitude sometimes entailed a lack of communication with other departments, so while internal relationships were marked by collaboration, they also entailed frequent, sometimes heated, debates.

Still, the frustrations and resentments were small compared to the triumphs. Veterans in all corners of the company — R&D, the factory, the Custom Shop, and Fender marketing — recall the shop's first decade with pride and affection. R&D's Senior Master Builder, Mike Bump, explains: "The way we all helped each other out, that's how everybody got good, I think. We all had our specialties. I might be making Kubicki necks during the first three weeks of the month, but then during that last week I might do assembly, make bridges, dress necks, tune test, or just pack guitars for shipping. This forced all of us to expand our skills beyond our original specialties. Everybody pitched in and helped everybody else, to make sure we got our numbers out, and I really think that's how we all became good builders. We learned a lot of different things, and those were some fun times."

### **Do the Custom Shop shuffle**

Trying to keep track of Custom Shop series names is about as effortless as copying that first Mahavishnu album by ear. Some of the early literature lumped Custom Shop and production instruments in the same group, with inevitably confusing results. Some model names can be misleading; for example, the late-'90s "Relic Jazz Bass" was actually available in all three Time Machine finishes, not just the Relic. In the late '90s, while all guitars in the official "Master Built" series were indeed Master Built instruments, other Master Built instruments were excluded from it. Not all Showmasters were in the Showmaster series. Not all Limited Edition guitars were in the Limited Edition series. Sometimes "Signature" was part of the name of a model that might not have been in the official Signature category. Sometimes guitars were billed as "New!" years after their appearance. Some guitars were shuffled from one series to another. In 2009, the Classic S-1 Telecaster and Classic HBS-1 Stratocaster were listed in both the Time Machines and the Special Editions. Around that same time, the Strat Pro moved from the Custom Classics to the Special Editions, the Bass VI from the Limited Releases to the Special Editions, the Telecaster Thinline from the Time Machines to the Special Editions, and . . .

Here's a suggestion: Let's fix ourselves a tray of piña coladas and forget about such anomalies. It's a certainty that not even a full-time sales employee could recite from memory the lifespan of every Custom Shop series since,



Chris Fleming: "In the mid 2000s, I had the idea to fully wrap a guitar with hand-tooled western saddle leather. I worked with Bill Silverman, of El Dorado Guitar Accessories, in Pasadena. They made the covering and also engraved the metal parts to match the rose motif. It was one of a kind at the time. I subsequently made another for the European market. It's the kind of design you either love or hate. The cowboy/country crowd loved it. By the way, the guitar plays and sounds great."



say, 2000 (let alone since the founding of the shop in 1987), along with the instruments in every series, plus every example of a single instrument's being assigned to more than one series at a time, plus every relocation from one series to another, plus all the other flukes and quirks.

Fender, like its rivals, must constantly adjust to shifts in the marketplace, and given the exhaustive number of feature combinations and the iconic stature of so many Fenders, it's no wonder that some models combine aspects of different series. It is important to grasp the fundamental distinctions — factory vs. Custom Shop, Team Built vs. Master Built, Tributes vs. signature models, Relic vs. N.O.S., Set-Necks vs. bolt-ons, etc. But while this book provides scores if not hundreds of details regarding various series, the author cautions not to expect airtight consistency in Fender nomenclature. Besides, a model's individual specs are more important than its (perhaps temporary) location in this or that series.

### A focus on certain models

The Custom Shop's Master Builders have crafted hundreds of different models over the years. While all are noteworthy in one respect or another, some are more important by virtue of their effect on the shop's operation, or their effect on how the shop was perceived by the public or by Fender itself. Therefore, some guitars are documented here much more extensively than others, particularly if they marked a leap in the shop's evolution or some new strategy. Examples include the Set-Neck models, dozens of the "art" guitars, artist signature models, Relics, Time Machines, Team Builds, Tributes, Limited Editions, etc.

A prime example: The Eric Clapton Signature Stratocaster was designed before the shop was founded. It was intended from the outset to be a factory guitar rather than a Custom Shop product, and yet it is profiled in depth in these pages, for several reasons. Eric Clapton's association with the Custom Shop is long and deep, and the shop's involvement in refining the Signature model was essential. The tale of the Clapton Strat reveals much about the inner workings of the Custom Shop, despite the model's official status as a "factory" guitar. In fact, all of the early "factory" artist guitars were developed and perfected in the Custom Shop, another example of why the story of the shop is very much a story of the entire Fender organization.

### Into the future

Unlike its sometimes inconsistent and vague efforts of the early period, Fender has endeavored in recent years to draw sharp distinctions between its Custom Shop instruments, U.S. factory instruments, and imports. Internally, however, under the direction of Mike Eldred, Richard McDonald, and their colleagues, Fender's departments are more cooperative and integrated than ever. "My thing is, whatever we're doing in the shop gets translated over to the factory so that everybody benefits," says Mike Eldred. "Everything we do in the Custom Shop should benefit the first-time Fender buyer. That's my opinion, and I think that is the opinion of the majority of the guys in the shop now. They get that."

The little Custom Shop crew of 1987 and 1988 made many one-off guitars; as the shop grew, its managers initiated the custom option approach, followed by the "price sheet" and official catalogs. A more recent shift has been replacing cataloged models with limited collections. Mike Eldred: "You might have to move fast to get one. They are limited either by the number of pieces — maybe 200, maybe only 10 — and sometimes they are limited by the time they're available. They might be available for one year, or even less if they sell out quickly. This makes them even more desirable and collectible, and it gives us a chance to experiment with all sorts of short-term approaches to serve that Custom Shop customer, no matter how picky or discriminating he is."

In the coming years, musical tastes will shift in unpredictable ways, and the global economy will cycle through various trends. Whatever challenges Fender may face, its Custom Shop will continue to harness the talents and passions of some of the world's most creative craftspeople. Somewhere inside the Dream Factory, the spirit of the Third Guy will continue to ponder — *What if?*

Yuriy Shishkov's stunning peacock Tele has a body of aged ash. Yuriy chose rare redwood burl for the top cap because its striking bird's-eye patterns resemble the "eyes" of a peacock's feather. High-grade diamonds, rubies, emeralds, sapphires, and amethysts are mounted in solid gold settings, and the inlays are mother of pearl and gold and blue abalone. Yuriy adds: "The flat sterling silver wire is hammered into a hand-carved channel, a technique used for centuries in decorative firearms embellishments. The wire fits perfectly, without adhesives. The gun-stock varnish was applied, rubbed, and buffed by hand, the finishing process alone taking a full week."







builders competing with us in the mid '80s and also a lot of high-quality Japanese instruments, so we really had a tough struggle. Clapton was a huge help when he went public with his endorsement."

J. Black: "No one has ever had a relationship with Fender like Eric Clapton's. If any other artist had a problem, it was a thing between the builder and the artist, or the artist's tech. If Eric Clapton had a problem, Bill Schultz knew about it. Bill Mendello knew about it. It percolated through upper management."

Dan Smith: "One thing that Bill Schultz had was integrity. We made some mistakes, but we always kept our

integrity. If you worked for Bill, you never lied. If he had a question and you didn't know the answer, you just said you didn't know and you went out and got it. And he surrounded himself with those kinds of people. So our personal integrity and our boss's integrity and the company's integrity were all on the line. Artists felt that, and that is how we got our artists back. Eric Clapton in particular — his involvement was huge."

The most ambitious of the shop's Clapton endeavors was the meticulously reliced Blackie Tribute of 2006 (Chap. 28). Senior Master Builder Todd Krause, shown here inspecting a finished piece, spearheaded the project.





### It's in the way that you use it

*Lee Dickson reflects on Eric Clapton's long association with the Custom Shop*

I get asked a million times, *hey guitar guy, what kind of distortion does Eric use, man, what kind of fuzz?* And I say, 'Nothing, it's just him.' It's in his hands. Occasionally he might have a wah-wah in the signal chain. The other thing is a Leslie ["rotating" speaker]. He's got a control for that. If it's a small club and the Leslie can't fit in, I might put in a chorus if he's going to do "Wonderful Tonight" or "Badge," but the sound is in his hands and the guitar and the amp. That's the way they used to do it, and that's the way Eric still does it. It's like Jeff Beck — you can buy the guitars and the amps and the boxes but you're never going to sound like Jeff Beck. It's the same with an artist like Eric. You have to remember how much of it is in the hands, the fingers, the touch. There's no overdrive in the line, no distortion, no gain switch — you just crank the amp and do it with your hands.

You never know what Eric is going to do, and that's a great thing. He may use the wah-wah on a solo where he's never used it before. Even at this stage of the game, he's still out there playing by the seat of his pants, just feeling it. It's fantastic. To this day I marvel at how lucky I am to be able to work with an artist who still freaks me out every time he goes out onstage. His artistry is mind-blowing to me, even after all these years.

It was enlightening and amazing to go out to the Custom Shop for a few weeks to work alongside guys like John Page, J. Black, Fred Stuart, Alan Hamel, Larry Brooks, the late John English — wonderful guy — Mark Kendrick, Todd Krause, a wonderful guy called Art Esparza, all these great guys. There was John Cruz and a great fellow named George Amicay, who's a master engraver. They're absolutely superb builders and artisans, and I

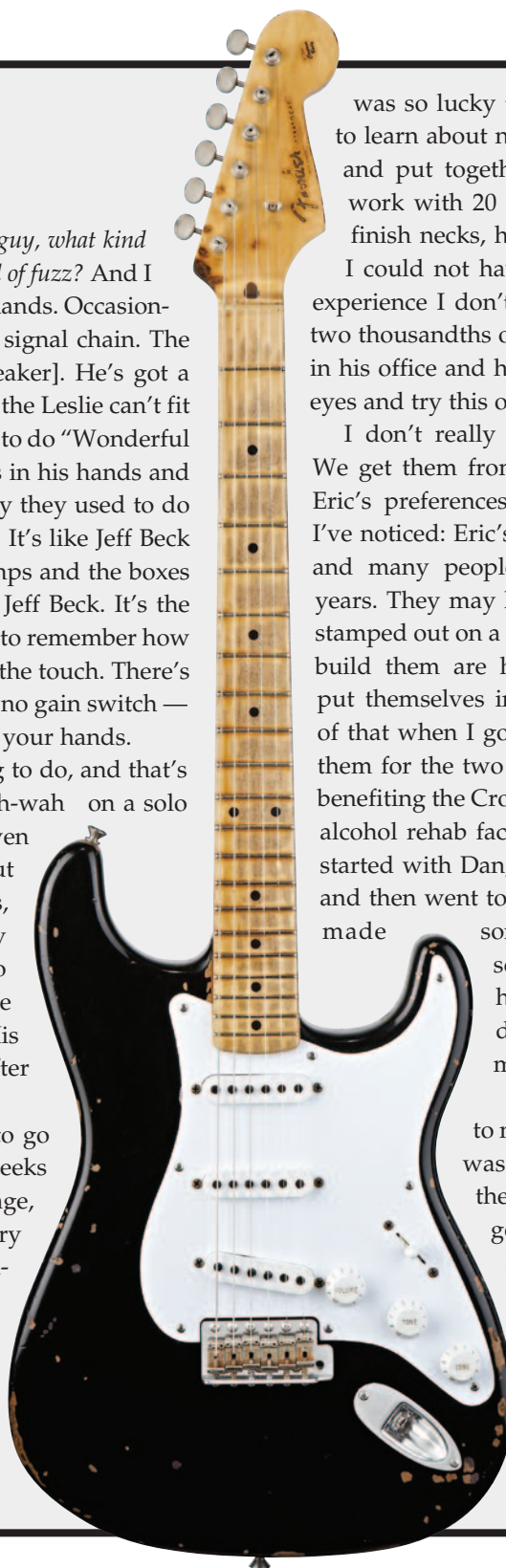
was so lucky to be in the same room as those guys to learn about necks and how the guitars are detailed and put together. They'd sit me down and let me work with 20 different truss rods. I learned how to finish necks, how to refret necks, all sorts of things.

I could not have been in a better place. Before that experience I don't think I could've told a difference of two thousandths of an inch, but John Page would sit me in his office and hand me a guitar and say, "Close your eyes and try this one." And I'd get it.

I don't really have to do anything to the guitars. We get them from Fender, and once I set them up to Eric's preferences they're ready to go, but one thing I've noticed: Eric's had a long relationship with Fender, and many people have built these guitars over the years. They may have the same specs, but they are not stamped out on a mass-production line. The people who build them are highly skilled craftspeople, and they put themselves into each instrument. I was reminded of that when I got all these guitars together to prepare them for the two Christie's auctions [in 1999 and 2004, benefiting the Crossroads Centre in Antigua, a drug and alcohol rehab facility established by Eric Clapton]. We started with Dan, George Blanda, and John Carruthers and then went to John Page and Mike Stevens. J. Black made

some and the great Larry Brooks made some. Larry had terrible problems with his hands and so we went to Mark Kendrick, and then Todd Krause has been making them for the last few years.

So I pick up all these guitars and begin to notice very subtle differences. Each one was ever so slightly different, reflecting the interpretation of each craftsman. A general member of the public might not have felt it, but if you're attuned to it, there's a difference. I would imagine the ones they're doing now are more consistent in those tiny details. They have computer programs with very exacting standards. But even then, there's always the human element in everything the Custom Shop does.











The Playboy guitar, production version. The original "Golden Dreams" photo of Marilyn Monroe was taken on May 27, 1949 and eventually appeared in the premiere issue of Hugh Hefner's new magazine.







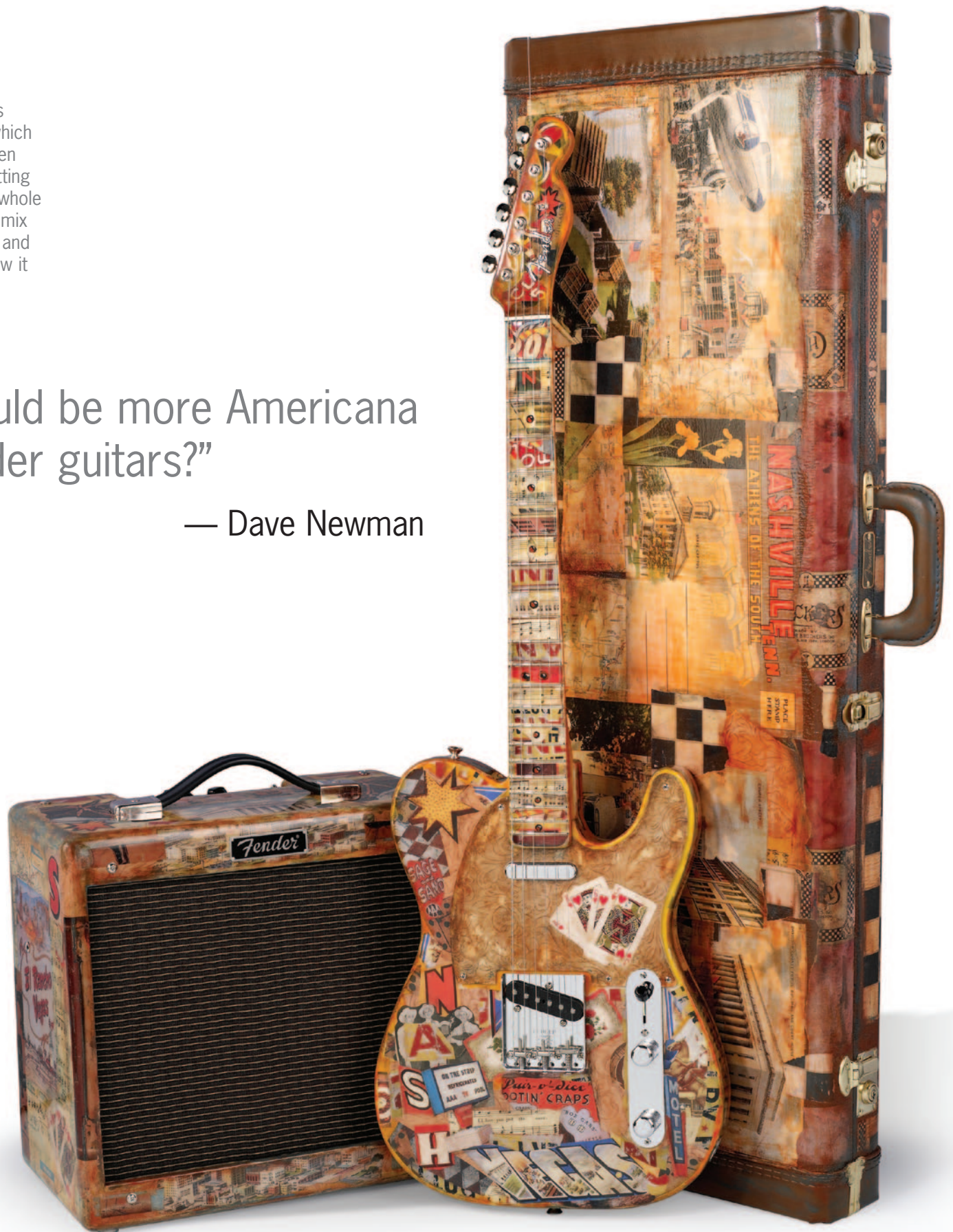
Also called the Art Deco set, the \$15,999 Memorabilia Set is a 1956 Relic Strat built by Chris Fleming and fitted with antique hardware, along with a Pro Jr. amp. Dave Newman covered the pieces in fragments of vintage advertisements and other print memorabilia. "I mixed in some images from the old Fender catalogs they gave me," he says, "but I also worked in some old music ads — those 'learn how to play guitar' things. The arrows and lines came from some old dress patterns, which are very thin paper so they meld right in."



Dave Newman: "This is the Nash Vegas set, which evokes that period when country music was getting a lot more glitzy. The whole Nash Vegas thing is a mix of horses, Las Vegas, and Nashville, and somehow it all fits together."

"What could be more Americana than Fender guitars?"

— Dave Newman





One of the reasons Fender's partnerships with various artists work so seamlessly is that the raucous, rebellious side of rock and roll reflects perfectly the thrillseeker themes and devil-may-care attitudes explored by the artists. Much of the iconography pictured in this chapter evokes the late 1940s and 1950s, a time when American youth culture — and Fender — began to assert itself so powerfully.

Hubba hubba: The \$17,999 Master Built Girls! Girls! Girls! set of 2005 paired a Gretsch 6120 built by Chris Fleming with a Pro Jr. amp. The artwork was rendered by Kirsten Easthope, a widely published artist specializing in '40s and '50s-style Sin City sex kittens, pinup girls in leopardskin pedal pushers, nudie cuties, and the like. Nevena Christie: "Even though we have never met, Kirsten and I are like best buds. I saw some of her work and just called her out of the blue and said, 'You don't know me, but I have to tell you, your art rocks!'"











Chris Fleming on the Anniversary Strat:  
“This is a 1954 guitar, with 1954 parts  
and details, and to the extent that it’s  
humanly possible, we built it the way they  
built them in 1954.”



# NO. 1

Number One: John Cruz prototyped the Stevie Ray Vaughan Tribute Stratocaster by hand. He called the project “probably the highlight of my career.”





The works: Each Custom Shop Blackie was accompanied by a duplicate of the "Duck Bros." road case containing a Certificate of Authenticity signed by Eric Clapton, a leather presentation folder, a Crossroads DVD, and assorted Ericabilia.







### Hello old friend

Todd Krause: "Our relationship with Lee Dickson was already long-standing by the time we started working on the Blackie project. Guitar Center brought it over, and we brought Lee in to talk about the guitar. It was the first time he had seen it in a few years, and you could see him getting visibly choked up to see Blackie again and putting it away for the last time."











“If you could see Todd Krause’s file drawer, it would make you drool. Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Pete Townshend — he builds for all these guys, and that’s a part of the appeal as well. The customer knows, ‘Wow, the Master Builder who builds Eric Clapton’s guitars built my guitar, too!’”

— Richard McDonald



BILLY GIBBONS

W. JAYMAN TTS DALE  
BOB BRITT

MADONNE MTLIED  
ROSCOE BECK

GEDDY LEE

SAM RORA  
KENNY WAYNE  
SHEPPARD

RINDY GUY

EC

COURTNEY LOVE

BOZZ SKAGGS  
JAKE ANDRE

DAVID HOLT

ROGER WATERS

MTL TRAVELER  
STRIP

CLINT BLACK

HAULIN' OATS

MICK MAD  
DALE PETERS

JOHNNY LANG

ROBIN TROWER



**Full shred:****The Yngwie Malmsteen Tribute Stratocaster**

November 2008 marked the official unleashing of the Yngwie Malmsteen “Play Loud” Stratocaster. It’s a meticulous recreation of the Swedish rocker’s well-worn 1971 Olympic White Strat, which he purchased at age 15 in 1978. In 1984, two years after arriving in the United States, Malmsteen reportedly found a sticker in the mastering suite of L.A.’s Record Plant Studios and stuck it on his guitar. It says “Play Loud.” He did, performing his neoclassical/heavy metal sorcery on that Strat until its retirement from grueling roadwork in 1992.

Fender’s relationship with Yngwie goes back to the dawn of the Custom Shop. In 1988, Master Builders put the finishing touches on the first official Malmsteen Strat, which was forwarded to the factory for production (Chap.

10). Over the next two decades several versions appeared, differing in production location (U.S. vs. Japan), headstock size (original ’50s-style vs. larger ’70s-style), pickups, switching (3-way vs. 5-way), trem (American Standard vs. vintage), tone controls (standard vs. TBX), the depth of the fingerboard’s scalloping, etc.

By the mid 2000s, with their increased abilities to analyze every aspect of a heavily used guitar, and having perfected their in-house relicing techniques, Custom Shop craftsmen were ready to raise the bar with a new Malmsteen Strat that was worthy of the Tribute moniker. John Cruz, by now a Senior Master Builder, crafted the prototype and directed the other Master Builders who also worked on the project. All told, one





hundred alder-body, maple-neck Malmsteen Tribute Strats were built.

After John Cruz and Mike Eldred visited the flamboyant metal virtuoso at his home in Miami to spec his well-worn, scratched, bitten, burned and otherwise disfigured guitar, John set to work on the prototype. Yngwie himself had scalloped the original's fingerboard, removing wood so as to leave scooped-out areas between the frets. (Reportedly, he discovered scalloped boards after encountering a 17th-Century lute that crossed his path while he worked in a guitar repair shop.) Master Builder Jason Smith crafted some of the Yngwie Tributes, and he recalls: "Yngwie's Strat was one of the most beat-to-crap guitars I've ever seen in my life. That thing had seen a *lot* of abuse. I had no idea how he did the original scalloping. Some of it was kind of crude, but it was hard to tell because it had been played so much the scalloping had worn in and was smoothed out a bit."

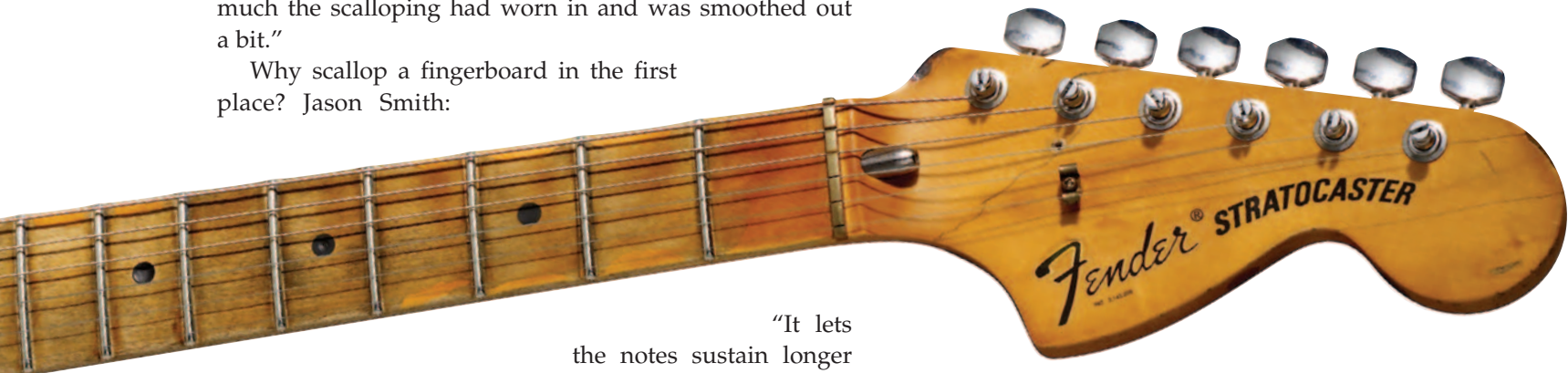
Why scallop a fingerboard in the first place? Jason Smith:

"It lets the notes sustain longer because there's nothing underneath the note. You're basically just holding that string against the fret, not against the board. Scalloped fingerboards are a little strange and take some getting used to, but for the people who play them it's natural and advantageous. You need a light touch. If you're heavy-handed, it's easy to inadvertently bend that string and get some intonation problems."

John Cruz adds: "Some of Fender's earlier production Malmsteen Strats had more of a deeply cut, U-shape flute to the scallops, but on Yngwie's own guitar it was very light, not deep, and it was crude, not too pretty. For the Tribute I copied the exact depth of the original, including all the file marks and scattered sanding that came from his own hand." Jason Smith: "If there are places on that fingerboard where it's uneven and worn, we duplicate it

on the Tribute. We are not trying to make this a perfectly symmetrical fingerboard. That's not what this Tribute is about. It's about duplicating for you, the customer, Yngwie Malmsteen's personal guitar."

Other details of the heavily reliced Tribute include a pair of DiMarzio HS-3 stacked humbuckers, a middle-position Fender Standard Vintage 1970s-type single-coil pickup, a 7.25" fingerboard radius, a brass nut, American Vintage trem, Fender/Schaller *F* style tuners, one master volume knob, and a 3-way switch. Although the model was officially reported to have No-Load pots, in fact it has stock 250k units, which are disconnected, by the way, as on Yngwie's personal guitar. John Cruz adds: "He liked the direct signal from the jack to the pickups, just like Neil Young did [on his 'Old Black' Les Paul]. I did this to one of my own Strats, and I *love* it."



Yngwie's guitar had been converted from a 3-bolt to a 4-bolt neck attachment, and the Tribute duplicates the original's re-drilled, doweled-up holes. John Cruz: "The Oly White finish had yellowed over the years. The biggest challenge was getting the finish to look right, with the color match, the cracks, and all the detailed dings, bite marks, even burns. It was a normal-spec neck, but it had been refretted a number of times and was switched to [Dunlop] 6000 fret wire; recreating the neck's dings and repairs was tough. The Yngwie was by far the most challenging project I have ever been a part of, but it was really satisfying, too. I took my proto to the Musikmesse trade show in Frankfurt to show Yngwie, alongside with the original. He was blown away, and signed off in record time."



# THE DREAM FACTORY



Enjoy this glimpse of the Fall 2011 release of the story of the acclaimed Fender Custom Shop. This third in a series of hardcover books joins the award-winning titles *The Stratocaster Chronicles* and *The Soul of Tone* by author/historian Tom Wheeler. *The Dream Factory* features hundreds of full-color photos of incredibly rare, collectible, and limited edition hand-crafted guitars. In nearly 600 pages, we learn the fascinating tale of the Fender Custom Shop and its illustrious artisans as only Tom Wheeler can tell it.

- Foreword by Billy F Gibbons
- Over 630 images, illustrating the first master builders and their humble beginnings, throughout the many changes up to present day operations. Including many one-of-a-kind custom guitar masterpieces and reproductions of acclaimed guitarists' instruments such as Eric Clapton's "Blackie," Jimi Hendrix's Monterey Strat, Stevie Ray Vaughan's No. 1, and many more. A "must-have" for all guitar enthusiasts!
- Unprecedented view inside one of the music industry's most creative and prolific custom instrument shops. Fascinating interviews and stories from the men and women who set the standard for guitar greatness. Features behind-the-scenes looks at how playable works of art are created.



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