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Donnie's Dream – The Donnie Wade Story



Donnie Wade's life has been steeped in the honest and impassioned tradition of working on and collecting all kinds of acoustic and electric guitars. Call him a pioneer in guitar restoration, repair and manufacturing. Donnie came up in the cotton fields of Texas, and by the time he was six years old he had been bitten hard by the guitar bug, fueled by an encounter with Merle Travis. A persistent obsession with guitars formed in his adolescent mind that he never shook, culminating in a passion for the guitar and fretted instruments that has lasted for well over fifty years. This is Donnie's story. Enjoy...

TQR: Great to speak with you, Donnie. It's been a long, long time. How are you doing?

I appreciate every morning I wake up. I've had my challenges but what we've been going through is so much worse.

TQR: I agree. It's unimaginable, and for me it has got me thinking a lot about what we would

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call the good old days... Have you ever seen those old Film-o-Sound amps?

Oh, sure. You could buy those for fifteen bucks.

TQR: There is one on Reverb right now that was built by a guy named Austin Hooks and it's listed for \$10,000.



Oh my gosh... Well, if somebody wants one, I know where they are back down home

and I'll go buy them suckers (laughing). I grew up going to a Baptist church—a serious down home Baptist church and they would use those things primarily for music. The first one I bought in the mid '70s was probably \$15, and a friend of mine in Dallas was starting to build amps and he converted it for me. In '76 he went to work for Willie Nelson as a sound guy and continued with him until just a few years ago. Speaking of amps, the old Supros... prices on everything have gotten ridiculous.

TQR: Yes, even the days of buying a Deluxe Reverb for \$1300 or a Plexi 50 watt Marshall for \$1600 in the early '90s are long gone...



I felt like I was cuttin' a fat hog in the ass in the '70s if I could sell one of those for \$300. At the same time my shop was just full of tweed amps... People would walk into the shop and ask if I had any amplifiers and I'd say, yeah I've got all these tweed amps

here, and they would say, no... I mean a real amplifier. Okay, I've got these blackface amps over here and it's \$125 for a Deluxe Reverb, \$200 for a Twin. And that was fair market. At one time I had eight tweed Champs in the shop and the most expensive one was \$75. I have a flyer from the shop that I sent out and I sold a tweed Twin for \$310 because it had an original extension cabinet with it and nobody wanted it.

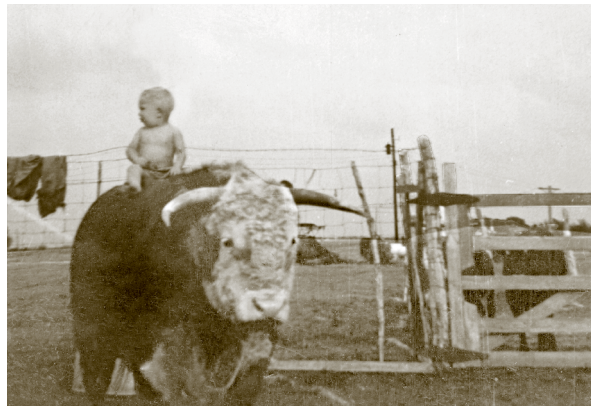
TQR: Remember the Pawn Broker newsletter and Guitar Trader out of Red bank, New Jersey?

Oh, yeah... I would sell '58 Les Pauls that were straight— no broken headstock, maybe the tuners had been replaced for \$1100. And for ones that were really nice with the original cases, I could get \$1500 for them. A brand new Martin D45 was \$1495. A D28 was \$860.

TQR: And that was a lot of money back then.

It was a shitload of money. I was charging \$18 for a bridge reglue, and fret jobs were \$28. People would come in and look at the new Martins, but things are different today. They look at a guitar now and think, what kind of an investment do I have here? Look inside of your soul because these old guitars and amps are extensions of us. They are tools for the soul. If you can open yourself up, you can really understand these guitars and amps. There is no one guitar that is better than the rest because we all hear things differently and we all play differently. The "best guitar in the world" is kind of a joke, because what would I vote for? An 1862 Gonzalez classical, the Torres I've played... These are iconic instruments that the Lord blessed me to be around and to use what I learned from them in building and repairing. I've been beyond blessed.

Your first question you were gonna ask was where did I grow up, and was I raised in a musical family? I was born in



Temple, Texas and grew up in central Texas. My family were sharecroppers— basically indentured servants— and the town we lived closest to was Schwertner.

TQR: And I bet you were schwetin' in Schwertner, too...

Picking cotton before we got a cotton stripper. Let me tell you, man. Some people look at me and they say, where did you come from and I say sharecroppers and they say, oh, there weren't any sharecroppers in the '50s. That was all gone. They have no idea. There were sharecroppers that were prevalent in Texas in the '50s. One year we went into town on a Saturday and there was some kind of political race going on and my

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dad couldn't vote because he didn't have the \$15 for the poll tax. That's the way Texas kept the blacks, Mexicans and poor white folks from voting. My mom and dad would get a \$20 bill from the landowner and that's all we

got. He would write it down in his little book and we'd pick the cotton and harvest it and he'd come back and say well, that wasn't a very good crop, so you owe me this much and maybe you'll get even next year. Well, daddy never got even.

TQR: Were there any dance halls or juke joints around where you lived?

Oh, hell yeah. Schwertner had the VFW hall and that was the big thing in Texas until you got into the bigger towns like



Austin. Knights of Pythias, Knights of Columbus... that's where you went to hear music, except once a year

they would open Fort Hood and have live music there.

TQR: What is your first memory of hearing popular music on the radio and what station did you get?

For me, I did not grow up in a musical family, but my dad idolized Jimmie Rodgers and guitar music and my mother loved Lefty Frizzell and Hank Snow. So, for me the first music I heard was on 78s, but when I started listening to the radio it was station KTAE out of Taylor, Texas. And every afternoon at 4 o'clock it was the Tony Von Show, and he played black music for one hour. He would come on and always say, "You're listening to the Tony Von Show, the only radio program in living color!" And his theme song was "Hideaway." Every day... We turned on the radio to listen to the farm and market report... hog prices, who died, who was baptized...



that's the way it was. I guess it was '60 or '61 when Tony Von had that show, and in '64 he came on the radio and said, "That's "Hideaway" by Freddie King and

he's playin' out at the One Acre Club this weekend." And I thought, holy shit, I'm goin'... He was the second person I saw play a guitar live, the first was Merle Travis.

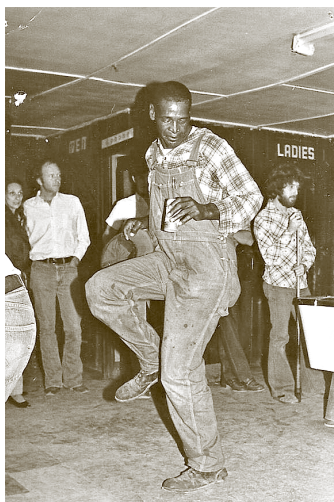
TQR: Now you have to finish that story because you stole your parent's car to go see Freddie, right?



Absolutely I did. It was a true juke joint that was out in the country by the cattle auction barn and blacks weren't allowed to have clubs in the city limits, and blacks weren't allowed to have churches in the city limits. All the black churches and juke joints were out in the country. At fourteen, I'd steal the

car and go down there. There were no windows in the place, they used a piece of wood to prop open a slat to let the air come through. I parked my car way down in the holler and grabbed on to the top edge of that slat in the window opening to peek through and people were dancin' and laughin'... there was a woman on the table with a half-gallon of Crown Royal and I was thinkin', man that's what I wanna do. Freddie was loud, and he was playin' and I looked at him and I thought, holy cow that man is huge! He made the guitar look like a mandolin. So, he takes a break and he's headin' outside with a woman on each arm and I walk up to him and say, "Hi, I'm Donnie Wade and I play the guitar and I love you, man." And he goes, "What the hell are you doin' here, boy. You gonna get us all killed... get the hell outta here." I said, "No, no, you don't understand... "Hideaway" is such an incredible song and I learned how to play it and I've added some notes." And he looked at me and said, "Boy, it's much easier to learn the notes than it is the spaces. Learn how to play the spaces." Then a man came out and told me to go home before

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I got them all thrown in jail. I was too stupid to understand that they would be in trouble. But that image... he was covered in sweat, women dancing and screamin'... I'm sure James (Pennebaker) has told you about the Bluebird in Fort Worth... Those women would come in there and they would all bring them a half gallon of Crown Royal and they would finish them, too.

TQR: That was back in the Delbert days, right?

At that time James was either playing with Delbert or at the Longhorn Ballroom. But Robert Ealey and His Five Careless Lovers was the house band with Sumter Bruton, who was Stephen's brother, and Mike Buck who was the original



drummer for the Thunderbirds. T-Bone Walker would play there, and the band would back him up. There are so many stories of people getting shot and stabbed... when there was fightin' goin' on Robert Ealey would jump up on the pool table and shoot his gun in the air to calm everybody down. He would bring it under control. And when the shootin' started you just

kept playin'. The Bluebird kinda took the place of Mabel's Eat Shop in Fort Worth. That's where I saw T-Bone for the first time, and Guitar Slim. My son lives in Texas and he's building guitars there, but when I go home it reminds me of why I left.

Back to music, Daddy bought a lot of guitar and steel guitar instrumental records, but I was really hot to trot for that Tony Von show...

TQR: So how did your interest in guitars really get going?

I started playing when I was eight and Momma and Daddy said, well, you learn these songs and we'll get you a real guitar. I went and bought me a used Les Paul from Ray Henning in 1962—a '58 goldtop for \$75. In '62, I was hearing all this music on the Tony Von show and that's what opened my mind... He played "Giant Steps" by John Coltrane one day



Momma & Daddy

and that was the most complex music I had ever heard in my life. Never heard anything like that. That motivated me to be creative. I got in high school bands and we played dances. We were playing Beatles tunes and I wanted to stretch out and the guys in the band said oh, hell no... Well, I just started to stretch my solos out and I wouldn't stop, so I got fired. Then I found three black guys in Georgetown, Texas and we just kinda came together—drums, B3 and guitar. We

would play places where they would put up really horrible light shows behind us and you could smell people smokin' seeds and stems. That kept me going until 1969, when I realized I had to get the same gigs in Austin as Johnny Winter, Mitch Watkins, Eric Johnson, John Inman, Al Staehely... They lived in town and played guitar all day, while us farm kids, we worked on the farm and played guitar at night. We started workin' at 4:30 every morning. I finally realized I wasn't gonna make it as a guitar player, and none of us had



the ability to practice the way we should. John Inman was one of my most influential guitarists

at that time who was in the Lost Gonzo Band and played with Jerry Jeff for twenty-four years. He's just a fabulous player and I never missed him playing. He would show me stuff and he turned me on to Doc Watson.

Now I'm not a guitar player anymore by '69, but everybody always wanted to play my guitars, because I would lower the bridges, adjust the nut and do truss rod adjustments. I started setting up my guitars with intonation and guys would ask me to do set ups that I would do for \$5. Then I started buying used guitars and taking them apart and seeing what they were made of. I had a subscription to Mother Earth News and there was an article in there about a guitar building school in Arizona called Roberto-Venn where they held a guitar building class for six months. Well, I thought I'd save up my money and go and I did. I was in the first class. Me and the owner John Roberts, we were like oil and water. He was a hard-core military redneck that hated anybody that didn't have a crew cut and a tattoo. We butted heads, and at that point you had to

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do everything the way John wanted it done. Bob Venn and I became really close friends because I picked up a guitar one day and started playing “Boot Hill

Drag,” and Bob thought how in the hell does a hippie know “Boot Hill Drag?” At that time, you learned what not to do. I knew enough to be an asshole, I had taken Martins apart, I had worked on Gibsons, acoustics and electrics... I had enough knowledge to be a real jerk, and it flew in the face of everything John did, because he would glue his necks in with sawdust and glue. He would mix the glue and sawdust and that neck was never coming out. That’s when the shit hit the fan and I just used glue on the necks. He strung up a guitar I built and said, damn Tex why does yours sound so good? And I said, I don’t know, maybe it’s because I didn’t use sawdust



and glue. Then he grabbed the guitar and smashed it on the table and yelled, you do what I say! Things didn’t go well after that. I completed the course

and moved back to Texas and went to work for the city of Fort Worth Parks and Recreation Department picking up trash, working on guitars part time. Well one day I was going down the street and I saw this house and the house number was the shape of a violin. I walked up to the front door and asked the man who lived there if he needed some help. He said if you want to work for me you do exactly what I say when I say it. I said I can work on Saturdays, so that went on for a while. Every violin maker I had talked to said get the hell out of here, I ain’t gonna have no hippies working for me. But Mr. Prince—Earl Prince got me on the right path.

TQR: James mentioned that Earl had worked on Stephen Bruton’s D28.



Yeah, I was working for him just absorbing everything I could, because he decided to go into the

guitar business after having worked on violins all of his life. We worked on making the body molds and he built like six guitars, until one day he died of a heart attack.

TQR: Were the guitars he built any good?



The one Stephen had was awesome. Definitely ‘60s influenced with Bigsby pickguards—Bigsby and Mosrite, kinda like the Jetsons being drunk

or something. Anyway, Mr. Prince was so important. Then I found out there was a store in Dallas that needed a guitar repairman. So, I took one of the six guitars I had built at Roberto-Venn—an 8-string Brazilian rosewood Dobro and said this is what I’ve done, and I was hired at BMC Guitars. That’s where I met Chris Martin and so many other folks.

TQR: James mentioned that was where Stephen got his D28.

Yep, I sold it to him, and a D42... I ordered stuff other people weren’t ordering. I ordered Martins but only shaded tops. Chris Martin kept telling me we don’t have anybody to do shaded tops... I said I’ll order one of everything, but I want shaded tops on all of them. And they did it.

TQR: What year was this?

You can see a few ‘74 and ‘75s and a few more ‘76 shaded top Martins out there. Eric Schoenberg and the guys at the Music Emporium were pressing Chris to do shade tops and I was, so I ordered a D45, a D42, a D45 12-string, triple 000’s... all shaded tops. That shaded top 12 was like \$1500—that was a lot of money...

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TQR: Well, back then a house was \$4000...



Stephen bought the D28 and the D42 shade tops, and I realized that any time you ordered a guitar that required extra skill, you always got a better guitar. By ordering shade tops nobody could work on those guitars but the best people. That was my way of thinking. Even though the bridge plates were as big as Manhattan, they still sounded good. The only thing you need to do to them is put a small maple bridge plate on them, don't touch the braces, you just do that, and those things will open up and they will sound wonderful.

TQR: Except that the bridges were also misplaced by 1/8 to a 1/4 of an inch in the '70s...

Yeah, but they were still heads and tails better than a Fender or a Gibson during that time. People would go buy a brand new '74 or '75 Strat and they would stick the frets in them and just ship them out. They were horrible, and that was a lot of business for me. Buy your new Fender or Gibson and take it over to Donnie at BMC and he'll get it playing for you. Some of them we couldn't get into playing condition, frankly. That was probably forty-five percent of my business, fixing those new guitars. McCord was the first and biggest Fender dealer



in Dallas and that's where the low power Twin with the extension cabinet came from, and nobody wanted it. It wasn't a Marshall, a Park or a Laney. Everybody knows the guitar industry was exactly like the car industry in the '70s. That's why I quit doing Gibson warranty work. I had a guy bring a new Gibson in and they had never even soldered the pickups in. You saw shit like that because they were the biggest in the world and they said we can do whatever we want to. Then Ibanez came in and kicked their ass into tomorrow. The first Ibanez Destroyer that came into my shop... the guy bought it



new and it was like \$198 with the case. And this thing is just an extremely fine instrument and I said, man, all you need is a couple of PAFs in this thing and you got you a nice, nice guitar. And he says, you got any? And I said, you bet, they are a hundred dollars a pickup. Oh! Well, they are hard to find. OK... And that was a really, good guitar.

TQR: Now about those PAFs... We had a box of them that Kim LaFleur sent us and two or three were utterly incredible, overflowing with harmonics, beautiful, gorgeous tones, the two with gold pole pieces absolutely sucked...

Absolutely!

TQR: And the rest were just Okay, nothing special.



People wanted a black Les Paul Custom with the ebony fingerboard and they couldn't figure

out why they didn't sound as good as the flame top. People would bring them and the '59s into my store and say, I want some of those Mighty Mite pickups. No, you don't want to do that... Oh, no, I want those Mighty Mites and I want a brass nut too. And I want bone saddles on my bridge... You do all that and it would be the biggest tone sucker on the planet. Just horrible. That's why the pickups in the Customs don't sound so good and why the ES355s don't sound good either.

TQR: Or a guy comes in and says I want some of those new nylon saddles on my bridge.

Oh, god... That was like a normal day, David. Brass nuts... then the DiMarzios came out in '77, and nobody was doing pickup repairs... I saw an ad in Guitar Player for pickup rewinds and repairs by Seymour Duncan... I called and asked how much they charged to rewind a humbucker? Ten dollars. Okay, I'm going to send you a box of PAFs and I'm gonna trust you on this, and if you screw me, I know where you live. And eventually Seymour and I became friends.

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TQR: I would imagine you had a box of dead pickups back then.

Oh, hell yes, and people didn't want them. Throw them damn things away. The stuff we would see from McCord... In '76 this gentleman came in, he was in his 60s and said I need to get my Telecaster fixed. It was in the original case, but nobody thought at that time that a thermometer case meant anything... It's falling apart. I open it and the neck is painted the same color as the body and the Fender logo is in red. I go, who did this for you? He said, what are you talking about? I special ordered this thing that way. What? He said look here, and inside the string compartment he had the original receipt and it said special order Telecaster, red logo. I pulled the neck off and it's a '54, four years before Fender supposedly did any custom colors, which is bull shit. Charley Wirz, when he was a schoolteacher before he opened Charley's Guitar Shop would say, don't bring me those old Fenders, man, they are bolted together... players play Gibsons. One day he was all excited because he had bought this old Strat that was like brand new and it was a custom color, that green Strat that's been in all the books, and we pulled the neck, and it was all real. That's how we learned about stuff. There was no web, and no one was writing books about this. As I got older, I learned to ask more questions.

TQR: Well, you went through the transition from people looking at these old guitars and tweed amps as nothing but old junk to collectible heirlooms. The crap Gibson and Fender made in the '70s propelled the old stuff into another realm entirely.

Once George Gruhn opened, it changed everything. We Buy Guitars up in New York... Do you have any vintage guitars? I have old guitars... We weren't hip enough to understand. But in 1974 a '37 D28 was not as old as it is today. The companies today, Fender, Gibson and Martin are really making their money off of reissues. For me, I had a '54 Les Paul, I had '56. I still have my '55 Junior that's a smuggler's guitar. I think I paid \$5 for it and I turned it into a smuggler's guitar.

TQR: What do you mean by that?



I routed out a space under the pickguard that would hold about five ounces of weed or whatever. I made this ugly ass pickguard and it was a smuggler. Teles were best for

that, and of course I regret doing it—I was a moron. But I made more money doing that than I did playing.

TQR: You know who Ronny Proler is... We went to his house and he had six '59 Les Pauls laid out for us to hear and play along with the Explorer that Clapton owned. At the end of the day, I asked John, the guitar player we had invited what he thought as he sat there with a burst face up in his lap, and he said, "I wish I had never heard any of these guitars..."

Yep. Once you hear those... that's where a lot of younger people are missing out. Don't listen to the damn reissues... The reissues are eye candy. They aren't done right... They are getting better, but until you have played a '36 bone, you have no idea what an acoustic guitar is supposed to sound like. Once you hear that, the rest of your life everything is judged against that. It puts a footprint on your ears. Same thing with electrics. I've had all these guitars over the years.

TQR: And what were the real standouts that you've owned?



Well, there was a 1937 ES-150 Charlie Christian, one of the two first electric guitars sold in Dallas. One went to Eldon Shambelin and the other went to Zeke Campbell. He was a player in Fort Worth and he was just amazing. He and Eldon got the first two, and many years later Zeke comes to me and I'm looking at this old amp and it's a tweed Pro,

and he says I can't play this damn thing anymore, and you've been so helpful. I want you to have this amp and my old guitar. That ES-150 is a special guitar, I have a Larson Brothers guitar that is very special, a small one that Stephen left for me when he passed. It's a single 0 Martin size, and those two are incredibly important. I mean, you want to hold on to everything but when you have a family to support you have to sell stuff. You just can't keep it all. Recently I sold a 1927 00-40 Martin—their top-of-the-line Hawaiian guitar. I had that one and I wasn't playing it and when I did, I was missing Mike Seeger. When Mike passed away things changed with that guitar. The Seegers started the whole folk thing in 1958, before Dylan or anybody. The New Lost City Ramblers... Mike was a huge influence on my life because he could play

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anything, and he always played what was perfect for the song. It took me awhile to realize that, so I was a big fan of his and John Cohen. I had a first year Super 400, but there again, when life gets tough your family comes first. We had to feed the kids. I kept the treasured stuff. But I never bought a guitar as an investment. I don't care what it's worth... That's not the point. How many instruments do you hold against your heart when you play it? A mandolin and a guitar. Those are the two and you cannot get much closer than that when making music. That's my hillbilly pea brain way of lookin' at it. You have to connect to a guitar. It can be made as perfectly as humanly possible but have absolutely no soul to it. They spend so much time focusing on it being perfect that they forget about what it is. People like you and I might go into a pawn shop and see a Strat and the pickups have been changed out but it's not a paddle head, and you look at it a little bit, you plug it in and think, man this is great. The guy at the pawn shop thinks it's a reissue and it isn't. This happened to me. They had changed the tuners and the pickups, but I knew what it was because of the neck shape. The shapes changed by the person who worked on them. "All the necks were this way..." Bullshit. You could have a baseball bat neck on one guitar and the next one would be slim. Working on guitars you learn how they are different. You may have one built with Brazilian rosewood and another made with Indian rosewood and the Indian eats the Brazilian for lunch. It happens. Well, they put a crappy top on the Brazilian... With acoustics, it's all in the top, and Torres taught us that in 1886 and it's been that way ever since. You can make the back and sides out of paper mache and it will sound good. Torres did that to prove his point.

TQR: I have a little parlor guitar here called The Vernon made by C. Bruno & Son Co. New York in 1906... ever heard of that?



Yeah, I've seen them and they were made by Lyon & Healy or the Tonk Brothers. The best Washburns were made by the Tonk Brothers. Washburn never built any guitars. You had the Larson Brothers, Lyon & Healy, Regal and Tonk. The Larson Brothers made some of the best Washburns ever made. They made these guitars with other names on them like Stahl, Stetson and Washburn at the turn of the century. All of them were in Chicago and Bruno was a huge distributor out of New York. I have a Bruno mandocello and it looks like a guitar that Gary

Larson would use in one of his cartoons.

TQR: Believe it or not this guitar sounds really, good and it's Brazilian...



They are great guitars and about four years ago people started charging \$1200 to \$1500 for them. For \$800 or \$900 you've got a good guitar. I could look at it and see how they sanded on the inside and how the braces were made, and I could tell you who made it. Before I retired one of the boys at work that I was trying to mentor didn't want to know anything about how things were done in the old days, he was all about new stuff and I said, anything you want to do with a guitar has been done, and you need to learn about that. It's been done for almost 200 years. Seven string guitars were around in the late 1700s. To get where you're going is to know how you got here. Buy old guitars and start fixing them. He started buying guitars on eBay and within a month he had like fifteen Washburns, and some of them he only paid \$200 for.

TQR: I call them seductive.

There were only two Larson brothers and they built all the guitars from the late 1800s to around 1940 in Chicago, and



they had a water wheel because they didn't want to pay for electricity. They immigrated from Sweden and they were real hardheaded. They were the first people to do laminated braces, on my guitar they are three piece with spruce, Brazilian rosewood, and spruce. Sometimes they used ebony. Around 1928 they got away from that a little bit.

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TQR: Are these guitars affordable?

Mine is probably worth \$5500 or \$6000, about half of what a Martin would go for. It's almost like a D42 with beautiful inlay.

TQR: You've had the opportunity to play a lot of guitars that were owned by legendary artists, haven't you?



Yessir. In the shop in Dallas one day the bell rings and it's Freddie King. I'm shakin' in my boots and peeing on myself 'cause I would drive a hundred miles to see Freddie play. When Freddie passed it was really awful. When he would come in the store I'd say, hey... remember the One Acre Club? And he goes man, how you know about the One

Acre Club? Well, I came down there to see you. Oh, you that crazy white boy that come down there! Man, you could a got us all killed. I started doing his repair work, and he was hanging around people in Dallas that he probably shouldn't have been hangin' with, but he was still brilliant as he could be. He had bad times when he was just out of it, but to be able to play and work on his 345 and his 355, those memories will last forever. Playing Merle Travis' D28 and Super 400... Those two guitars... I was six years old and the stage was just a trailer with hay on it and it was Lefty Frizzell, Hank Snow and Merle Travis. Momma wanted to go cause of Lefty Frizzell. I'd seen somebody play a Bajo Sexto but never a guitar, and he walked up on the stage with a Nudie suit on, big cowboy hat, and a guitar that was bigger than me. And what's that big gear shift on his guitar? He walked up on the stage and looked down at me and said, "How you doin' boy?" And I'm thinking that's the biggest radio I have ever seen in my life and it was his guitar amp. He started playing and my head was even with the amp and it was like pow! I ran back to Momma and Daddy and said this man has a gear shift on his guitar! From that moment on I wanted to be Merle Travis... I wanted to dress like him and play that big guitar with the gear shift on it. We stayed friends for a long time because his daughter lived in Fort Worth. When you play a guitar that belongs to someone you respect so much... Like Mississippi John Hurt... I never got to meet him, but his Guild acoustic is in Denver, Colorado and it's owned by Harry Tuft who is the godfather of everything folk. He took care of Kris Kristofferson when they didn't have



gas money to get from Woodstock to California. He has that guitar, so I went to visit

him one time and he said I need to show you something—you're probably one of the only people that will appreciate it, and it was this little Guild OM triple O shape, and I said, "Wow, that looks like Mississippi John Hurt's," and I just started cryin'. I got goosebumps all over me, and that was his guitar. He put so much of his soul into that guitar and being treated like crap... all of that. I've played a lot of really famous classical guitars. Jimmy Page's Les Paul... Showco Sound Systems was in Dallas, so whenever a band would go on tour, well, Showco invented the hanging sound system... Led Zeppelin would go on tour and they would rent the auditorium for a month and Showco would get the sound system all dialed in, and then they would open in Fort Worth at the big convention center. Everybody from Harrison to the Stones and Clapton would come into town to get their sound system dialed in, and I worked on their guitars. They were all wonderful except for Lynyrd Skynyrd—I just could not get along with them. I had that Explorer and I glued the headstock on one more time after it had been glued on twice already, and there was a black guy on the crew for the venue and Skynyrd were saying they didn't have no niggers working on the crew, and that wasn't cool. I told Ronnie Van Zant, "I'll



bite your damn nose off and beat you with your leg. Don't you ever do that to another human

being in Texas." I told Showco not to send those people to me again.

TQR: Back in the '70s in Atlanta I saw where the Byrds were playing in a club in a shopping center in Atlanta—Broadview Plaza. Well, shit I'm gonna go see the Byrds, and it was Roger McGuinn and

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Clarence White... and Clarence is playing his b-bender, and I lost my mind. So, they take a break, one hour on you know, and I run to the dressing room, how I got in I don't know... Clarence is leaning in a chair and I say, man you have to show me what you have on that guitar, please... And he smiled and said, well sit down and I'll show you what it's about, and I got a ten-minute demonstration from Clarence on his b-bender.

That was a mystery, but people know what it really looks like now, and Marty Stuart tours with it. He's got the Hank Williams D45 that he tours with, too.

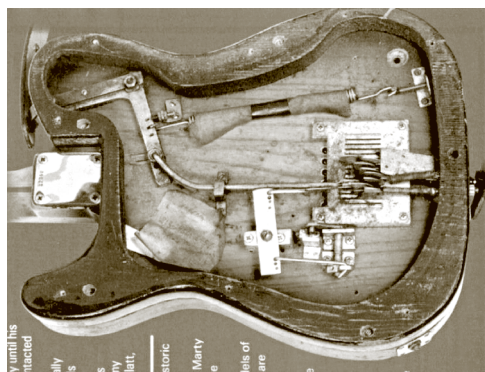
TQR: Marty is one of the most incredible guitar players I have ever seen, period.



Mandolin, too.

You know what rankles me... Ricky Skaggs and Vince Gill were put into the country music hall of fame and it took five more years before Marty got in. That really made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. We had met several times and one year at a festival I set up a table for the artists because there wasn't

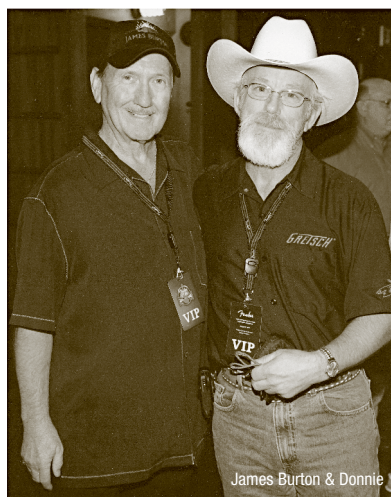
enough room for techs or anything, so I took all my tools there and if anybody needed anything, I'd do it for no charge, and Marty came over and he said, man, have you got a .008 string? And I just laughed, are you kiddin' me? Whaddya need it for? A b-bender? Yeah, I do... I went over to the John Pearse booth and asked Mary Faith, do you have an .008? Is that for Marty Stuart? How did you know? He's the only guy that uses .008s anymore. I had a chance to look at Clarence's guitar and it was clear to me that he had done the work in



his back yard, with the fibre-board on the back where it had been carved out. If you saw it in a store nobody

would buy it. It was covered with particle board on the back. I saw that and I thought this is great! It was like Freddie's guitar that had grooves in the frets from all his gold rings, and every piece of metal on his guitars was rusted. I changed out every screw in his guitar every two weeks and he kept a bottle of Hai Karate in his case, so the guitar smelled like me after pickin' cotton and Hai Karate. I took it in the back and there were two fellas there and they said, "Whoa what's that smell!" That's Freddie King, man. And Marty had that D45 of Hank's and I'm lookin' at it and I said that's one hell of a guitar, Marty and he said, well, play it! Take it somewhere quiet and play it for a while, we don't go on for another hour... I just set down and played it and again it was one of those guitars that just made me cry. It was a fabulous guitar, but this one didn't do it until I hit the first chord and it set my hand vibrating. I told him I was so happy he was taking them out and playing them. He sold one of them last year—a lot of stuff has come up for sale because of the pandemic.

TQR: Well, nobody's working...



Yeah, the record companies are doing okay with 99 cents a download, but they are only paying the songwriter .007 cents. It's like Peter Frampton—they downloaded my song 500,000 times and I got a check for \$17. He went to Congress... they want to make it so, songwriters aren't

paid at all. The only thing you can do is put a video up and try to sell your CDs direct. It's like people that record concerts on their phones...

TQR: That's YouTube... hundreds of thousands of performances...

You got to go out and play and sell your CDs.

TQR: Are you familiar with the Gibson Spirit?

It had a pointy headstock...

TQR: Some of them did but most didn't. They built them from around '82 to '84 and they were made from poplar with maple necks, some with quilted maple sunburst tops. Phenomenal guitars.

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I agree. Poplar... absolutely. I've got a bunch of poplar. I'm not building solid bodies anymore, but I've been buying wood since '71, '72. Poplar makes great, great guitars. We made thousands and thousands of them in Japan—Charvel, well they had pointy headstocks and locking tremolos, that was hot at the time in the '80s.

TQR: They built some Spirits with those big Kahler tremolos and they look like they need a pointy headstock, but they also did them like mine with a wraparound tailpiece. It looks like the traditional Gibson double cut Les Paul Special.

Lenny Breau... The most influential guitar players to me were Freddie King, Merle Travis, Charley Patton and Lenny Breau. That's not to say that George Barnes and Tal Farlow didn't have an effect, but those are the four for me. I never used a flatpick because when I saw Merle it looked like he was just twirling his fingers over the strings.

TQR: Let's talk about how guitars are being built today and yesterday. It seems like the overall quality and appeal of guitars is better than it's ever been.



Well, I would agree. For me working in BMC guitars I realized I needed to find a manu-

facturer to go work for, and here was Hondo guitars and they were building a lot of guitars, so in '79 I went to Korea. I've seen manufacturing from then to today. Right now, you can buy an imported guitar and the quality is almost better than a Gibson or a Fender. If it's a good guitar you can always change out the pickups... Gretsch is a great example. The binding was always coming off and when Baldwin got them, oh, you're killin' me. But now at Fender, Jason Barnes and Mike Lewis said okay, we're starting from ground zero. And before I



left, we met with the factories in Indonesia about how to build a Gretsch guitar right. So now, for \$799 you can buy a Gretsch that's every bit as good as any Gretsch ever made. You go look at 6120s and Falcons and that factory in Japan does incredible work.

TQR: We had a Japanese White Penguin here and I wanted that so bad I could taste it.

I have a 6121 here with the cactus and it's my main guitar now. I love that guitar and I changed out the Bigsby on it. Since I retired, I've actually been playing a lot more now.

TQR: I pulled a '56 G brand 6120 with a repaired headstock out of Rhythm City in Atlanta in the '80s for \$600 and stupidly sold it.

I don't even want to go there... To give away a box of twenty PAF pickups because I do acoustics and I don't need 'em—here you want them? Twenty pairs. I had a box full of old Gibson parts and Fender parts...

TQR: A pair of zebra PAFs is \$7,000 now.



Well, a '37 bone D28 has dropped to \$60,000 or \$70,000.

TQR: In the past year I bought a '76 D18 and a '76 D28, both sunbursts and had them restored by Bryan Kimsey in New Mexico, and they are just astounding guitars after he put in a maple bridge plate, reset the necks, lost the old Grovers, refretted and scooted the bridge. He said that among all the D18s he's done dating back to the '30s through the '70s the sound of my D18 was in the top ten percent of them all.

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Yeah, if you put that little maple bridge plate in them those guitars are great. Before Martin came out with the HD 28, I was doing bridge plate replacements for \$35. Once you put that bridge plate on and do any scalloping, they are great guitars.

TQR: It's \$900 now, but that includes a neck reset and a refret.

Being the first American to go over to the Asian factories, I taught these people how to build and improve guitars, from 1979 to 2018. I worked in Japan, China, Philippines, India, South Korea, and Indonesia... I set up factories in five of those countries. When I moved there, I never saw any other Americans because these factories were in rural industrial areas.

TQR: And some of them had dirt floors...



Samick did when I first got there. I walked in the door and the floor was dirt, and I was thinking how are you getting all these finishes done, and there was dirt in the finishes. I look up and there are like three fifty-five gallon drums that are glowing so hot you could almost see through them and that was how they were heating the

factory. They would take a rejected guitar and throw it in one of those drums and the flames would just shoot up. And that was fifteen feet from where they were shooting finishes. They were shooting polyester and that stuff will go off like rocket fuel. When I went to Korea, this factory was making 60,000 guitars a month. They had twenty-two painters all in a long line using waterfall booths, not one had a mask on, no gloves, and they would last about five months. Well, what happened to Mr. Han? Awww, Mr. Han died. These painters were dying, and finally I sat down with the owner and told him we needed to get masks and gloves for these painters, because you're paying the families some money but that's not the thing... they are dying. The owner of Samick agreed but the workers didn't want to wear them, so we all got together and drove over to the factory and there is one guy out of twenty-two wearing a mask. You need to remember that South Korea was still under a dictator, and the plant manager was a former five star general. He walked over and talked to the workers and fired all the men that weren't wearing masks. That was the first time



anyone had ever talked to them about safety. South Korea was a third world country, and that's the way it works. Americans go into a third world country and

start producing stuff and people aren't getting paid anything. And then when those people actually start making a living, oh, we're paying them too much, and all of a sudden, we have to go find another country. And that's how we wound up in China. Japan got too expensive, so we went to South Korea. South Korea got too expensive, so we went to China... Because of tariffs the price of a guitar in China went up fifteen percent. But Americans won't work for a dollar an hour, and that's how you get cheap underwear and cheap guitars. I couldn't even get into China, then they started opening up trade, and we were sitting at a big table in Hong Kong. Now the only place to go is South America and Africa. And then there is the corruption... When I'm trying to get my equipment off the boat and into the factory, all of a sudden there is a \$10,000 duty you have to pay before they will take your stuff off the boat. Personally, I don't even look at stuff from South Korea or China. Now they are not guitars, they are a lifestyle product, and there is a whole generation that seems to think that's okay. You go into factories now and they are finally using safety guards. You would go into them before and you'd



be so scared... you're watching a guy cut the slot for truss rods and all he's doing is slapping it down with one hand and pushing across this router, and you're thinking, oh my lord because if the wood blows up his hand is gonna go straight into the bit. Epiphone has settled down now with stuff coming out of Indonesia, and I think it's better than the guitars made in China.

TQR: I've got an Epiphone Casino that was made in Indonesia with a '59 P90 in it and it plays and sounds really, really good. Couldn't be better.

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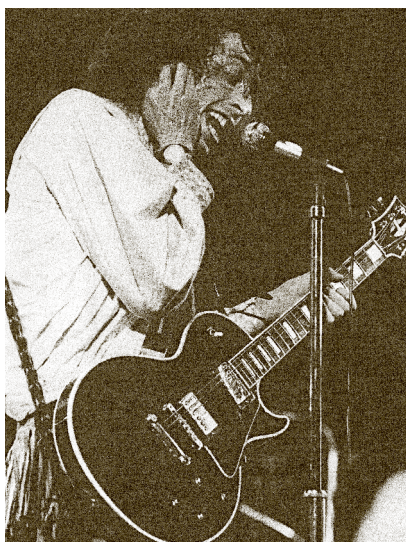
You can go out and make a living with it all day long.

TQR: We had a recent Custom Shop Gibson guitar here and I was playing it and something wasn't quite right... If you did any string bends you kinda lost contact with the frets, like you were playing the fingerboard instead of the frets, and this guitar had been Pleked... I think they took too much off the crown when they Pleked it. The frets were too low.



I had a '54 Les Paul that I got from Walter Carter, number one for 2019 serial number 0001 and I was excited so, I asked James to go down and check it out because if the neck isn't right, I don't think I want to trade for it. Well, James said the neck was huge and I thought that's right, so I work the trade and get the guitar and I'm playing it and thinking

what's the deal here? They've got jumbo frets that they call 'vintage' and now they have ground them down like a fretless wonder and you can't get your fingers under the strings when you're bending. But more than anything, the pickups were horrendous. I looked at the wiring and somebody had done it over and it just wasn't right. I mean, 'vintage' low wire is fine for acoustics... I was so disappointed that I got rid of it in two weeks and traded it for a Collings Waterloo. The pots were Korean, the caps weren't real... No wax, no paper... How many hours and dollars would I have to put in it to get it to where I wanted it to be? Wasn't worth it. And the screw counters won't buy it because it's been messed with.



TQR: You didn't buy an instrument you bought a commodity.

That's right made in America. I knew better... I just loved the idea of a wrap-around tailpiece and P90s. A great slide guitar. My favorite Les Paul of all the ones I owned was a '54. Les Dudek... he was a slide player that

played a '54. Stan Webb with Chicken Shack had a custom and a '54. That band was really great—I think they only did one record in '68 maybe. The only other person that knew about that record was Seymour Duncan. Stan Webb wasn't a showoff—it was all about tone. The cover of the record has a little black kid sittin' in a chair and standing up on the floor is a Les Paul custom with his hands around the neck. That's a great record... right up there with the Blodwyn Pig records. I'm sure you can find it online. Seymour didn't realize I collected records, and I've kept about five hundred. I had about 20,000.

TQR: At some point you got to lighten the load...



Yeah and I'm at that point. Linda is still spry and full of piss and vinegar and I'm just a wrinkled up old man.

TQR: So, what's ahead for you Donnie—what do you want to do?

The first year of retirement I just tried to push it all back because my heart was broken because I left a lot of young guys up there and I could have taught them a lot more. I was working with the Gretsch guys. We did the Steve Wariner model...

TQR: Oh, he sent us his guitar and it was just phenomenal, Donnie. The best.



And you can crank that baby up. A Filtertron through a tweed Twin on '7' is just really something'. Steve is a sweetheart of a guy in addition to being unbelievable songwriter and player. He's like Ricky Skaggs, Marty Stuart and Jerry Douglas, like somebody you would run into at the hardware store.

A lot of people that are really heavy into religion are trying to change people, and if that's your number one thing in life you miss the beauty of what people really are. When my dad died, the preacher at the

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church called me out for having long hair and my dad knowing I was headed for hell. That was the last time I went to church in 1969. The one thing I've learned from the bible is that it's great to have fellowship with people but it's another thing to have God in your heart. I don't go around trying to save people, and I have friends who don't believe in God... I do.



My son builds guitars in Fort Worth, and his name is Travis Django Wade. When someone asks who your favorite guitarist is everybody knows that Django and Chet have impacted our lives. Travis is

making incredible guitars, so much better than I could... my son has patience and this natural ability. You can hear it, or you don't hear it. You can't teach that, but what got him on the right path was that he worked at Collings for four years. Bill would always give him extra time on the weekends and that with his natural ability has made him a fabulous luthier. I can't get him to do a website, but he makes some really fine guitars. And there are other young guys making great guitars, and it's almost time for me to sit back and watch and try not to be a curmudgeon about it.

TQR: Your son is your legacy.

Yes, he has surpassed me at thirty-seven years old. Bill called me ten years ago when Travis was workin' there and he said it took us forty-five years to learn what this boy knows. He asked, did you teach him? No, he just watched.

TQR: How would you get a guitar from him if you wanted one?

I'd have to give you his phone number (laughing).

TQR: We might want to do that.

I know... He does French polishes and he is using wood I have been air drying since the '70s. For me, I want to get these thirty guitars built. I'm building them how the wood is telling me to build them. I'm picking out the wood for two small bodied guitars and the wood I picked out all talked to me. I went through two hundred sets of wood to get the thirty. Just looking for the things that jumped out at me — a single O and double OO acoustic.

TQR: What kind of wood?



Some of them are rosewood, some are big leaf Honduran, and I'll probably build the Brazilians at the end. There are a couple of people I'm building for— Harry Fleischman... I'd be surprised if Larry Pogreba didn't mention Harry. If I had not met Harry, I would be stupid as a rock still. Harry and I did the Hondo Flash bass— ever seen one of those? And we made some guitars. He's incredibly intelligent and he does everything perfectly

aligned. Like Larry... Larry builds like his heart feels, and if you don't like that, then don't order it from him. You may not like the way some of the things work, but I promise you when you plug it in, it's gonna blow your mind. Just like that square neck he builds that I have with the ten-inch biscuit cone, you can't buy those anymore. (Donnie pulls out the Pogreba and plays it). Larry said oh, I'm gonna make a 12-string dobro. I told him you can't do that, oh yes, I can... and he sent it to me and it was unplayable. When Larry got it back, he just whacked the head off of it. You know, I've been so blessed in meeting people... Seth Lover and Mr. Fender... to be at the right place at the right time.

TQR: You have been truly blessed.

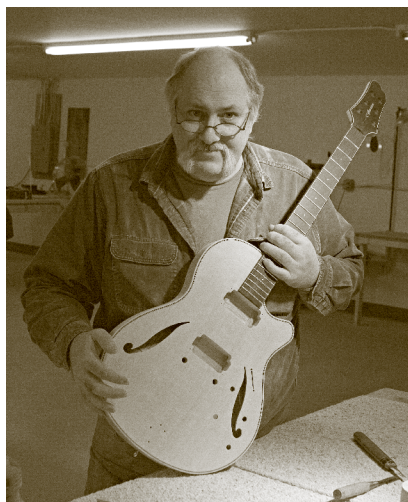


Yes, I have. **TQ**

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CHUCK THORNTON'S LATEST WORK OF ART

A Legend



We have played and reviewed a lot of Chuck Thornton's guitars in the past fifteen years, and with his latest Contoured Legend he has truly created a work of art with inspiring tone. A more toneful or beautifully built guitar just hasn't been created by anyone. Enjoy...

Not everyone can rightfully conjure the name "Legend" when naming a guitar, but Chuck Thornton's latest solid body can be viewed against all other custom built and production guitars as just that, for he has created a truly legendary instrument.

First impressions matter most, and when we opened the case for the Legend, we were a little stunned. Chuck had emailed us to say that he had a new model built and without seeing a picture we asked if he could send a guitar for review. We didn't really need to see a picture because we have previously reviewed many of Chuck's guitars and we know what he's up to... Four days later the guitar arrived from Sumter, Maine



and we were indeed stunned by the sheer beauty and deft craftsmanship emanating from the case. It was as if we had opened a magical mystery box holding an untold gem, a masterpiece of the builder's art. And that is precisely what this guitar is... a masterpiece.

Let's start with the two-tone metallic finish—kind of a root beer, eggplant, magic mushroom underside hue that is captivating in its appealing perfection. The top transitions to ivory cream sides, then back to metallic mushroom on the back with cream covers for the control



cavity and pickup switch. The peghead is equally artful, cream with an eggplant border and a CP Thornton decal that mimics handwritten script. The neck and body are mahogany with a dark rosewood fingerboard, medium frets with a perfect crown, a Mojo Axe wraparound tailpiece and brown speed knobs that match the finish perfectly. The cream pickguard and pickup covers also flawlessly match the color scheme of the guitar. Frets are medium tall EVO with Gotoh staggered tailpiece and the pickups are Tyson Tone '57 P90s. You'll recall that we very favorably reviewed Tommy Tyson's humbuckers a few years ago and

the response took him months to recover.

Tone

The big, round neck on the Legend promises great sustain and that's what you get strumming chords as the neck and body vibrate in glorious unison. Weighing just seven pounds, this mahogany guitar is a sweet resonator with a long decay. Precisely what you want from a solid body guitar. It is perfectly balanced in your lap or on a strap, a true featherweight, and the neck is supple and full. Plugged in, the Tyson P90s are reminiscent of a great set of old '50s P90s—we know because we have a '59 Gibson P90 parked in our Epiphone Casino. Tyson's pickups are not shy, producing a blustery mix of harmonic complexity



with smoothly cutting treble, solid midrange and big bass tones. The bridge is sharp but musically pleasing with great sustain, both pickups together produce the perfect mix of bass and treble, and the neck pickup creates a quintessential bluesy tone. We ran the guitar through our new 5E3 Deluxe with a Fulltone Supa-Trem and an El Capistan tape echo and the tones were ethereal and captivating. Back off the volume and the Legend

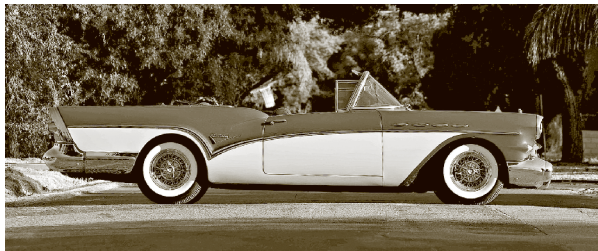
cleans up beautifully with a pristine single coil shine, and at full tilt the guitar roars without losing harmonic complexity or subtle string definition. It is simply a beautifully crafted and inspiring rock, blues and yes... even jazz guitar. And let's not leave out chickin' pickin' either... It's all there, gorgeous single coil tones with great sustain, clarity, attitude and altitude.

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For those of you that are image conscious, rest assured that the Legend also goes equally well with old jeans and flannel or a black jacket and a bolo tie. We don't know how Chuck managed to mix that magic mushroom color, but it goes with just about anything you might wear. If only there was a matching amp... Are you listening, Chuck? Who knows? Maybe you could send him a pine 1x12 cabinet to be adorned in metallic two-tone mushroom and cream?

James Pennebaker on the Legend Live from Nashville

I'm ashamed to admit that I wasn't familiar with CP Thornton guitars before receiving this Contoured Legend model in metallic brown and cream. It's a really beautiful instrument



to look at with its hot rod influenced paint job and "gold top" (In this case brown metallic) vibe, but it's much more than a one or two trick pony guitar. While it is definitely influenced by Gibson's mid '50's P90 equipped Les Paul models with a wraparound bridge, this guitar has much to offer the player who loves Gibson, Fender and PRS instruments as it shares construction and aesthetic influences of all three.

Weighing in at seven pounds two ounces, it has a mahogany body with a bolt on mahogany neck with Indian rosewood fingerboard and it plays like a dream. It's super comfortable and perfectly balanced. The neck to body joint is super tight. A combination of the CNC routed body and final hand fitting of



the neck heel. The neck pitch is dead on Gibson like. Not "flat" pitched like a Fender. This guitar doesn't feel or play like a bolt-on neck instrument at all. The fret work is beautiful and highly polished. It has a straight string pull headstock with six on a side staggered Gotoh tuners. It was still in tune when I pulled it out of the box in the midst of a Tennessee snowstorm.

So, what does it sound



like? I can usually get a pretty good idea of what an electric guitar is going to sound like well before I plug it in, regardless of what pickups are in it. Therefore, I don't plug it in for a while. I play it and listen and "feel" it. This guitar is especially lively and vibrant which I attribute to the combination of the solid mahogany body and the MojoAxe wrap around bridge/tailpiece. This guitar is incredibly

resonant in your lap. You can feel it vibrating against your body. All indications that this thing is going to really sing when I plug it in to an amp.

So, time to plug it in. I played the Legend through several different amps. A '49 Fender Champion 600, a '57 handwired Tweed Deluxe reissue, a '73 Princeton Reverb amp and a Todd Sharp JOAT 20 combo (my favorite amp!) with no pedals whatsoever. Nothing to color the sound of the guitar and its electronics. Equipped with Tyson Tone Labs '57 P90 pickups it's wonderful. Super twangy like a great Telecaster in the bridge position, deep and mellow in the neck and the two in combination it's just fabulous. I can get everything from Roy Nichols to Freddie King to Howard Roberts out of this guitar tone-wise. The sum of its parts adds up to beyond what you'd expect.



Internal parts are all of the highest quality. The potentiometers are CTS. All marked and matched at 530K. Switchcraft jacks and switches and German made capacitors (Singlecoil.com).

All in all, a great guitar by a builder who really measures what works. The woods, construction techniques and the right internal and external components added

together make a fantastic instrument. Quest forth... **TQ**

cpthorntonguitars.com

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A NEW GUITAR FOR NEXT TO NOTHING

Hittin' the Mother Lode



The great thing about Strats and Teles is that you can swap necks and bodies just as Eric Clapton did with his '50s Strats to create "Blackie" and "Brownie." Find a neck that you like, mate it to a resonant body and you're set. Well, that's what we did recently, and the results were a smashing success.

We've had our Mexican Road Worn Stratocaster for quite a few years now and it has become one of our very favorites after decades of trolling for

Stratocasters and building fifteen of our own ash bodied Tone-Quest hardtails. Oh, we plowed the universe of Strats hard, beginning in the late '90s with Japanese reissues we acquired for \$350 in the first days of TQR— one refretted by Stevie Ray Vaughan's former tech, Rene Martinez. And there was an '80s black Clapton with Lace Sensors that sounded great but had a bowed neck that just wouldn't straighten despite cranking the truss rod. We bought many, many Fender Custom Shop Relics, a couple of Mexican Robert Crays (great necks and pickups), a Cunetito Vinetto, a Fender '60 relic fitted with Jim Rolph's pickups, a Vintage Hot Rod, '50s Classic Players,



a couple of upgraded Squires, and most recently a beautiful Ocean Turquoise Nash and our early Road Worn 3-tone burst. For whatever reason, the alder body on the Road Worn has always rung like a gong when you hit a chord, one of the most resonant Strats we have ever owned, and the Fralin Real '54 pickups that came with the guitar when we bought it on



Pure Vintage springs, Gotoh nickel button tuners, a round nickel disc string retainer, new parchment pickguard and back plate, and Slider's classic, too cool '54 pickup covers. The aging on the body is heavy, exceptionally well done and quite realistic, the 3-tone nitro sunburst finish is stunning in its authentic appearance, and the guitar weighs seven pounds three ounces... Perfect. If we had a quibble it was the neck... An Allparts replacement (the owner said the original had been broken) it is a typical C shape, aged to appear played



with some of the lacquer sanded off here and there on the fingerboard, and it has a yellowish tint to the finish, producing a look that isn't quite believable as 'relics' go. It didn't really bother us that much, but one day with nothing else to do during the insipid lockdown, we trolled the Net for a replacement neck. Despite the best intentions, you never quite know how these things will turn out...

Produced and sold by 1950s Finishes in Birmingham, Alabama, the neck we chose was described as a 1950s Closet Classic 9.5 Stratocaster Vintage Thick Maple Neck. Okay, it's a Strat neck, but wait, there's more... The neck is finished in nitro lacquer, equipped with vintage Gotoh tuners and the frets have been leveled, crowned and dressed. Now, that's our kind of party! We bought the neck, screwed it on to our beloved Road Worn, and voila... a new guitar for \$246.

Oh, there are all kinds of things to worry over when you buy a new bolt-on neck... Will it fit? Will the neck pocket be

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consistent along the entire length of the neck, or are there uneven rises and dips? In many respects buying a new neck can be a crap shoot indeed.

Well, our new neck fit perfectly, tight and precise in the neck pocket, the frets have been beautifully dressed, and they are leveled and crowned with perfect even height, smooth with no sharp or rough edges. The neck is a nicely rounded very full C shape with plenty of depth short of being a baseball bat, uniformly thick along its entire length, and the nitro finish is thin and ultra-smooth to the touch. Utterly flawless... We screwed in our favorite round disc string retainer in place of the provided butterfly, and then the piece de resistance... a gold ToneQuest decal. No longer a Fender, it's now a ToneQuest Strat. Well, why not? We have hundreds of waterslide decals left over from our ToneQuest Strat production, and the only thing original about this guitar is the body...



to be creating even stronger resonant vibrations emanating from the neck and flowing deep into the body of the guitar. It was resonant before, but now the Strat seems even more lively and vibacious, palpably intense with tremendous sustain

tight and right? Is the neck straight? How does it feel and play? And then there are the frets... Is the fret height, right? Do they have a nice crown? Are there any sharp or rough edges? Is the string height and action

that persists long after the last chord is strummed, from the cutaways all the way to the bottom strap button. How could this be you might ask? Can merely changing the neck result in inexplicably increased resonance and sustain? Apparently so. Every piece of wood is different, isn't it? The top half of our new guitar neck appears to be quarter sawn with some subtle grain run out on the bottom half... could this make a difference? Yes. Grain structure can definitely affect the tone and resonant properties of an instrument in guitar necks and certainly the tops of acoustic guitars. The increase in sustain from the new neck was startling. Let's just say we got lucky.

Essentially what we have now is a new guitar that plays better, sounds better and feels better than the old one. And that, fellow tonefreaks... is hittin' the mother lode. Quest forth... TQ

A Beater Gets A Makeover



For the third time in two decades we acquired an old Melody Maker ripe for resurrection, and once again Jason Lollar

came through for us in a big way. Enjoy...

So we have a bit of a history with old Melody Makers, having acquired two in 2004 and 2014. The first was a two pickup '65 that we bought for \$400 when you could do that, the



second a '61 with one pickup for \$1300. We planted Lollar P90s in both, and they were the heaviest sounding featherweight guitars you could ever imagine. The tones were massive and weighty, the necks were that classic Gibson shape, moderately thick and round, and of course both guitars were adorned with beautifully figured Brazilian rosewood fingerboards...

So for Talley's mongrel that had suffered myriad indignities including a cracked, expertly repaired headstock

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and crude pickup routs, Jason Lollar mounted two of his P90s on a nice tortoise pickguard with a complete wiring harness, allowing us to merely drop it in the Melody Maker. Well, sorta... Some additional work was involved... While this guitar had been previously routed for Gibson mini-buckers, we needed to take some more wood out for the P90s to fit. Greg had a friend with a drill press, so we took the guitar to his shop where we drilled out room for the pickups. Once that was done, we went back to the ToneQuest bungalow and began fiddling

with height adjustments for the pickups. The neck pickup screwed down just fine with a perfect 1/8 inch string clearance over the pole pieces. The bridge rout had been cut deeper, and we had to improvise to get the pickup height set, using a conical spring that was about 1 1/2 inches long on the treble side, and a rubber spacer from a set of Strat pickups on the bass side to get 1/8 inch spacing from the strings to the polepieces. We also installed a nickel TonePros wraparound tailpiece with saddles, and to our amazement, intonation at the 12th fret was perfect on the first pass. Jason had built the pre-wired harness with a concentric pot and orange drop caps, so we ordered a knob for the volume pot. Combined with the Gotoh nickel button tuners, the Melody Maker was ready to bark.

Melody Makers have their own sound. Not as heavy as a Les Paul, they are bright and trebly without becoming shrill on the bridge, yet very penetrating with thick harmonic over-



tones. The neck pickup is a beast with tremendous low end, solid mids and snap on the top. Chords at the second and third frets sustain with an intensity that few



guitars can match, rich with vivid textures on both pickups. Weighing just over six pounds, the Melody Maker resonates with a fiery intensity buoyed by great sustain. You can feel the guitar vibrating in your hand and against your chest. Melody Makers are great slide guitars with easy access to all the frets, they excel at producing rich and rowdy chords and lead lines that can be heavy and seductive on the neck pickup and fiery on the bridge. Despite the heavy routing that had been necessary on our guitar, you can hear and feel the body respond to whatever you are playing. It's a very interactive, tactile experience. And of course, playing a six pound guitar is truly liberating (some Melody Makers like our previous '61 weighed just

four pounds and change.) So the transformation of this old Melody Maker was a complete success and definitely worth the minor work involved.

Scanning the various listings on Reverb and eBay, we found one guitar in particular that represented a good deal for a Melody Maker—a two pickup '64 double cut with original



vibrato marked down from \$2495 to \$1595 in very good condition with no modifications. We suppose a case could be

made for not modifying these old guitars out of respect for their originality, but the Gibson Melody Maker pickups just don't pass the sniff test for us. Too weak and too thin for rock & roll. Adding Lollar P90s makes it a guitar you'll gladly play every day for a rock and blues, you'll hardly feel it hanging on your shoulder, and those Brazilian fingerboards are mesmerizing. And it's the only +50-year-old Gibson electric you'll ever acquire for less than two grand. Quest forth... **TQ**

lollarguitars.com

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