

# the ToneQuest

*The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone*

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## Report™

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of rock & blues...

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## Joe Bonamassa

**J**oe Bonamassa is one of the greatest singer/guitarists fronting a 3-piece band that we have heard in decades. The fact that he had yet to be born when most of his heroes were at their peak simply underscores his brilliant, high-powered interpretation of rock and blues for what it is — fresh, original and utterly captivating in concept and execution. Unlike many of his peers, credit Bonamassa for having resisted the temptation to stylistically succumb to his many varied



influences. Bonamassa is nobody's wannabe — not Stevie's, Eddie's, nor any of the Kings, not Clapton's, Collins', Jimi's or Jeff's. Oh, they are all present and accounted for... you bet, but Joe Bonamassa has taken the music that chose him and made it his own, and he can rightfully claim his place as the master blues and rock guitarist of his generation. Now just 26 years-old, much of the heavy lifting had been done by the time Joe was just 16, already a veteran player who had attracted an impressive crowd of mentors and admirers like B.B. King, James Cotton, Gatemouth Brown, Eddie Van Halen, the late, great Danny Gatton, and Stephen Stills, among many others. Bonamassa's 2001 CD release titled *A New Day Yesterday* was produced by another legendary

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*admirer, the late Tom Dowd, with guest appearances by Leslie West, Rick Derringer and Gregg Allman.*

We first discovered Bonamassa when he opened for Peter Frampton in Atlanta last year at the Variety Playhouse. Arriving mid-way through his opening set, Delta Moon guitarist Mark Johnson and I stood transfixed and humbled as Joe tore through a mix of hook-laden rockers and incredibly emotional, bluesy shuffles. We heard shades of Beck at his best and Hendrix, too, while we both surveyed the stage to see what he was using to get that unbelievably clean and saturated tone... It's hard to mistake a couple of Marshall Silver Jubilee heads, even from 50 rows back. As we shot pictures that night for our upcoming Peter Frampton interview, we vowed to track Joe down, which happened in Nashville at Third and Lindsley — a small 'showcase' venue that might seat 100 souls, versus the Variety, which holds 900. When we arrived in Nashville we were shocked to see that Joe had the identical rig that he had used in Atlanta — a couple of 100W Marshall Silver Jubilees, another 100W reissue Marshall



MKII head, and a blackface Fender Showman head with two 4x12 Marshall cabs. Uh, uh... Joe's a blaster, but imagine our surprise when we were able to order a beer without yelling at the dixie chicks slinging the suds while the band played at full tilt. And no, he did not turn down... Joe Bonamassa has indeed invested a big chunk of his relatively short life learning to play the guitar and sing with a passion and fire rarely achieved in a lifetime, yet he has also devoted a great deal of intelligent thought to getting his tone just the way he wants it, every night, regardless of whether he's playing a shit hole dump in Columbus, Ohio or an outdoor shed with a capacity of 15,000. Same rig, same mind-altering clean and dirty tone, every night. So get comfortable (you have Joe's recordings cued up, don't you? — pity the fool if you don't) and savor our conversation with an unapologetic arsonist who proves over 200 nights a year that the music we love shall live on, Clear Channel be damned. Ladies and gentlemen, meet Joe Bonamassa. Now pay close attention, and enjoy...

**TQR:** When did you first begin learning to play, and what was your first instrument?

My dad owned a guitar shop and he still does. It's called Bank's Place Guitars in Hamilton, NY. There were always guitars around the house, and when I was one or two years old I might have been hacking at an old Brazilian rosewood Martin D28. My dad was also a third-generation musician. My great grandfather played trumpet in the '30s and '40s, and my grandfather was one of the top trumpet players in military bands, but my dad kind of rebelled against jazz and went into the guitar and blues rock — players like Rory Gallagher and Billy Gibbons — so I followed in his footsteps. When I was around four, I asked him for a guitar for Christmas, and he bought me a little Chiquita short-scale guitar with a DiMarzio humbucker in the back and a matching amp. My dad also had a lot of acoustics, so with all that I started playing blues and some classical music. I remember learning how to read charts, and when I was about six or seven years old I was playing at home one day and my parents heard me. They thought what I was playing was the actual record, so, by then I guess they began to feel that I had some natural ability to do this, and I continued to get heavier into the blues. I was really influenced by the second generation of blues players like Muddy Waters and Rory Gallagher, Hendrix, Beck, Clapton... Tommy Bolin was also a really big influence. So that's how I got started. I had a huge amount of music coming my way at an early age, and right off the bat I had a knack for pulling stuff off of the records. I had an ear for it I guess, but I also had to work really hard. I played six hours a day until I was around 19, when I decided it was time to go out on a date (laughs).

**TQR:** When did you begin playing in front of an audience?

Every Monday night my dad's duo would play at an Italian restaurant in Utica, and when I was eight I asked him if I could come and play. He hesitated a little because he really didn't want me to be exposed to that whole scene, but I really wanted to do it, so he let me play. I remember playing with my back to the audience the whole night, and for the last song everybody wanted me to turn around. I was a big kid for my age, and I don't think anyone realized that I was only eight. There were about 40 or 50 people in the place, and I still remember every eye being on me for the first time ever. So I played there sometimes, and when I was around eleven my dad started taking me to blues festivals. One day we were at a festival and one of the bands put out an open call for a guitar player — someone hadn't shown up — and my dad said, "Hey, you want to go up there and have some fun?" So I waddle up there and the band is looking at me, a pudgy, eleven year-old white kid, and I'm sure they were thinking this was the low point in their careers (laughs). They said,

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“We do “Pride and Joy” by Stevie Ray Vaughan — you know that?” and I didn’t say a word — I just broke into it. I ended up playing the entire set with them, and afterwards, James Cotton’s road manager approached me

and said, “Hey, James really liked that — would you like to sit in with him?” So I played with him that day, too. We went to a few more festivals and people would recognize me from that first festival when I played, and there was a ground swell of interest that enabled me to play with other people like Duke Robillard, Albert Collins, Keith Montgomery and Gatemouth Brown. Gatemouth told my dad, “He’s good — he’s *real* good — but he’s white and fat” (laughs). Then I met Danny Gatton. I was only eleven years old, but he became one of my best friends and he took me out on the road with



him on his north-eastern tour. We would do this thing where I would play guitar and he would play slide over the top with a Heineken bottle. He sat me down and said, “You need to learn jazz guitar, rockabilly, country... you need to learn all of the classic American forms of music.”

**TQR:** And he taught you?

He taught me in his Winnebago. We’d sit in there and just go back and forth, back and forth, and I really was the recipient of a master class on the guitar during a six month period. He was always very supportive of me and invited me to sit in at his New York shows. After that period, we decided to put together my own band and see what happened. I think my main goal at that time was to make enough to buy a Super Nintendo and some new pickups for my Tele.

**TQR:** At this point, what types of guitars and amps were you playing?

I’ve always been a real blaster, so I saved my money and

bought a blackface Twin reverb — a real one. I had Music Man speakers in it and I would turn it around backwards and just crank it. I also had a blackface Super Reverb that I would turn around backwards, too.

**TQR:** With the Twin?

Yeah (laughs). I discovered how to daisy-chain them together, put them on ‘10’ and it was twice as loud. I had a ‘71 Strat — Cinnamon red with a 4-bolt neck, and one of the first Custom Shop-era ‘62 Teles. Everything had Joe Barden pickups in it — that was the Danny Gatton influence. In fact, I had one of the first sets of Joe Barden Strat pickups ever made. Danny told me to give him a call, so in this squeaky voice I call Joe Barden (mimics and eleven year old) “Hi, I’d like to order some pickups...” and I sent him a money order. I had a ‘68 Tele for a while, and when I finally had four guitars, I thought I was Scott Chinery or something. My first Gibson was a ‘72 Medallion Series Firebird, because I was into Johnny Winter.

**TQR:** No pedals?

Just a wah wah pedal and that was it. I’ve never been into outboard overdrives... maybe a pre-amp pedal that will boost the gain a little, but I like to let the amps do their thing.

**TQR:** So you put your first band together and what happened?

We played for the door at our first show. No one was going to guarantee us anything, but when you’re eleven years old, fat and white, I guess you get a lot of press. There was a big article in the newspaper about this local kid who was going to play in a small theater called The Metro in Utica, and we played for \$5 at the door. We had no idea if anyone would show up, but 600 people came. So we got a name for ourselves, and we did the same thing in Rochester, Buffalo, Cleveland, Boston... like a ten city thing. Then we began to get calls from promoters. We got an offer to open for Foreigner, but we had to turn that down because it was on a



weekday and I was in 6th grade. But we were able to accept an offer to open for B.B.

King on a Saturday in Rochester. I watched him watch me play for about an hour during that show, and I remember that he was wearing this big red sparkle jacket. He called me back

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to his dressing room after our set — he had some time before he went on — and we started talking. He said, “Man, that was something. I don’t think I ever saw anything like that before.” Then he looks at his drummer and says, “You ever seen anything like that?” And his drummer says, “No... I sure haven’t.” He invited me to sit down and eat with him — he’s simply the nicest man you could ever imagine meeting — and he wound up asking me to open for him on about 20 dates during his tour. It was a blast.

**TQR:** And what a great role model...

I never really understood how lucky I was until much later, but I’ve never gotten caught up in the business side of it to the extent that I felt that I was entitled to something. As long as I have a place to play, I’m happy, but I guess some people do feel as if they are entitled to something after they’ve done this for a long time, and they wind up becoming very bitter. I get to do what I love doing for a living. How lucky am I? Even at its very worst, it’s an honor to be doing what I do.

**TQR:** Was going out with B.B. a turning point for you?

Sure... I remember coming home from school in the afternoon and doing phone interviews every day. Then we got a phone call from NBC in New York. Someone at NBC had picked up a story about me off the wire and decided to give me a call and see what I was all about. My parents took the call, and the people at NBC wanted to know if I had any ‘interview skills.’ Well, I’ve always been kind of a character... you don’t have a vowel on the end of your name for nothing, you know? (laughs). So when I spoke with them at NBC I just went off, and the woman I was talking to said, “How old are you?” I told her I was thirteen, and she wanted



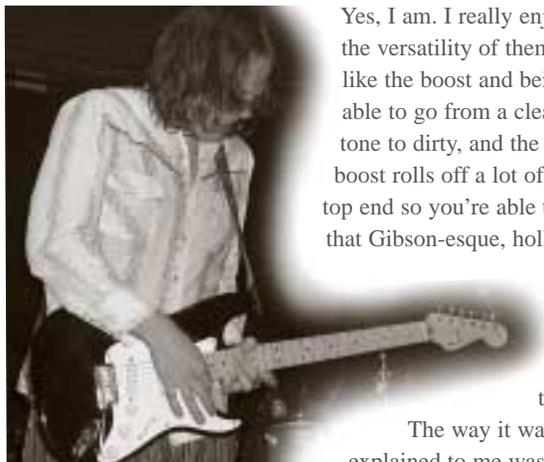
to know what we were doing next week. They wanted to come up with their trucks and film me playing in Utica and do an interview for this show called *Real Life with Jane Pauley*. So they came up and saw me and my dad play, and I’m doing the interview, and then they showed up with a tractor trailer at my school. I never had so many teacher friends in my life (laughs). I still keep in touch with the two camera operators — they’re in Iraq now. Anyway, the story ran first at 8 p.m. on prime time, and with-

in 20 minutes a guy from Columbia Records had looked up our phone number. He called, and that week we received calls from nearly every major label and a lot of the independents. I wound up signing with EMI for about six years, and my current manager and I got together as a result of him having seen me on TV.

**TQR:** And you weren’t even twenty-something yet. That could have ruined a lot of man-children, Joe. Let’s get back to gear again... How did your rig change and evolve?

I got a Fender endorsement and that helped. Do you remember the red knob Twins? Actually, those were very good. I got a couple of those and a reissue tweed Bassman. Danny Gatton showed me how to make that amp sound like something by using a GZ34 tube rectifier. I was using everything at once, paralleling the channels, and during that time I played a Clapton Strat that the Custom Shop made for me with a rosewood neck.

**TQR:** And you’re still using Clapton Strats



Yes, I am. I really enjoy the versatility of them. I like the boost and being able to go from a clean tone to dirty, and the mid-boost rolls off a lot of the top end so you’re able to get that Gibson-esque, hollow

tone.

The way it was explained to me was that Clapton wanted to be able to play something like “Wonderful Tonight” and Cream songs with the same guitar.

**TQR:** Tell us about your acoustic setup for stage and studio.

Stage is pretty simple. I play a Larivee DO3 and it has this great Fishman Prefix Stereo Blender system in it with a 4-band EQ. It has a built-in microphone and a piezo pickup so you can blend the two sounds. But in my world, the microphone feature is pretty much non-existent, because I play the acoustic pretty loud and the mike would feedback quickly. It’s a good road guitar. I use Dean Markley Acoustic Alchemy .011-.052’s on it.

In the studio I will switch back and forth. I have a Santa Cruz

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'Tony Rice' model made by Richard Hoover, which is a really great guitar. I have an old 1962 Martin 016NY and a newer Gibson CL20, a bunch of Dobros, and I have a 1936 Gibson L Century. It's just stellar, and kind of looks like a Martin-style triple 0 guitar with maple back and sides. You know how they used to do the banjo necks in all white pearl? The entire neck on this Century is all white pearl, and the story I understand is that it was a presentation model that Gibson did for the city of Chicago. I also have a 1917 Gibson A4 mandolin... Both of these instruments came from my dad's shop and they look practically new. He has set me up with some really nice stuff.

**TQR:** Let's talk about your vintage electrics...



Richie Sopa and Joe

I started collecting when I was about 13 years old. My first older guitar was something like a 1954 hardtail Strat. Over the years I seemed to get into a lot of guitars that had a high drool factor but low playability, so about 7 years ago I began trading them out for things that I could actually use. I went through a phase where I had to have every guitar that Clapton ever played during the Cream era... I went out and got the '62 ES335 and that's on the back cover of *A New Day Yesterday*. I got the '61 Les Paul SG, the Firebird I that he always used to play on "White Room," and the only thing I couldn't afford was the '59 Les Paul, so I bought a '56 Les Paul goldtop. I have a '54 blackguard Tele that plays pretty good, and I have a '61 Esquire that I think must be the loudest Tele ever made. It's a featherweight and it won't squeal at all. Last of the tweed cases, too. I also have a matching pair of '63 Strats. I actually have three old Stratocasters, and I used to bring a lot of this stuff out on the road, which was very stupid. Even though they all go into cases on the road, just the physical act of handling them every day gets them dinged up, and I see that all the time with my road guitars now. Anyway, I used to play this '63 Strat on the road and I decided I needed a backup. My dad ran across another '63 that I bought, and when I took the neck off I noticed that the neck date read 'March 1963,' just like my other '63. Back then they wrote in the actual day, month and year that the guitars were made, and it turned out that my two '63s were built just two days apart. Cool! I also have a '65 Strat and a '65 Jazz Bass that I use for recording.

**TQR:** Some people might wonder how you can have all of these great old guitars and not play them on the road, but it becomes a matter of practicality, doesn't it?

I do use them in the studio, and I really feel that guitars like that need to be played. When I'm home and off the road I'll take one of them out to a sit-in or something. I used to take four vintage guitars on the road, but having them just added another worry factor. About three years ago I just decided that I needed good guitars that played and sounded good, but could also be replaced if something happened to them.

**TQR:** Are you picky about your fret wire?

I like Martin fret wire. It's a little bigger than stock vintage fret wire, but it's not as wide as that jumbo wire. I like enough to grab onto, but for me, once you refret a guitar it takes about three months for it to feel right.

**TQR:** What gauge strings do you use on your electrics?

Dean Markley .011—.052 nickel wound strings.

**TQR:** And you don't suffer from any fatigue playing +200 dates a year using .011's?



I went to .011's because I was doing a lot of tuning down, but then after we did *Blues Deluxe*, I had been playing more songs in regular

tuning and I didn't give it another thought — I just kept putting .011's on. Well, after eight weeks on the road I wondered why my hands were so tired. You get those little calcium deposits in your hands...

**TQR:** And you're doing really big bends...

Yeah, and I haven't really figured out why, but with some guitars a set of .010's will still feel really tight, while on another guitar a set of .011's will feel loose. I don't know why.

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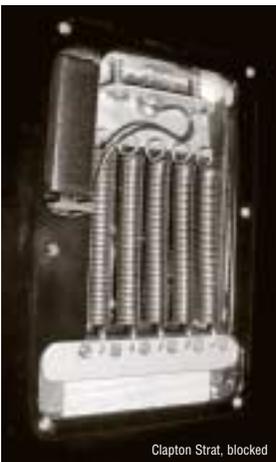
**TQR:** That *is* strange, and it can even happen with identical models, like two Strats.



Yeah, one might feel really slinky and loose and the other will be tight, even though they are set up the same with the same gauge of strings. I can't figure it out.

**TQR:** How many springs do you use on your Strats?

I use four, and I have this really weird thing that I do... people think I'm crazy for doing this, but the thing with vintage style Strat tremolos is that many people think they won't stay



in tune. The way I look at it is that if the tremolo doesn't return to the same place twice, just a little variance will set the whole thing off. So I took a 2x4 and a nail and a lot of different springs and stretched and measured them out to a certain point and measured the tension of each spring with a fish scale. Then I matched four springs that were equal in tension and resistance, so there was less variation. But I have used three springs on some old guitars and

it seems to do the same job as four... once again, I have no idea why (laughs).

**TQR:** Since you like using the tremolo a lot, do you lube the nut and saddles?

Just with a #2 pencil once in a while. The saddles freak me out a little bit because if I like the sound of the guitar with the old saddles, I know I'll never get the same sound if I change them to graphite or brass or something.

**TQR:** When did you finally acquire and develop your signature tone — the one that is so strikingly evident on your last three recordings?

I really don't think that happened until much later. I experimented with a *lot* of gear. I eventually switched from Fender amps to Marshalls in a band called Bloodline. We opened for Robin Trower, and at the time, I thought I was the coolest



guy on the block with all these Twins slung together — one big wall of Fender — and then I watched Robin Trower roll three Marshall half-stacks out and that made

me feel very small. I immediately switched to Marshalls after that, and I've gone through so many different permutations of four-inputters — JTM 800's and 2000 Series, etc., but I was never really happy with my sound in terms of versatility until I began using the rig that I'm using now. I can get a really clean sound, a real dirty sound, and lots of tones and textures that are in between, just by switching amps.

**TQR:** And you can get the tones and textures that are on your records... that's the idea isn't it?

Yeah, and it makes recording so much easier. Before that, I'd find an amp that really sounded good in a room in the studio and it wouldn't sound like anything with the speakers miked, and that can be a very frustrating experience. I went through everything from three 4-input Marshalls with a Tube Screamer, to two Vox AC30's, and I really got into stereo, panning hard right and hard left with a dry signal on one side and the effects on the other. I think stereo is a great thing to do, especially in a power trio. It widens the entire spectrum rather than using just one half-stack, which sounds very mono. What I also realized is that a Fender and a Marshall



amp together will distort at different times — it's almost a timing difference

— and you can really hear it in the studio. It almost sounds as if you're hearing two guitars when in reality, there's only one. The Marshall is distorting quicker and compressing at a different rate, while the Fender is staying clean, and it sounds as if the guitar is doubling itself. Plus, you never want to show up with the same gear that everybody else is using... what's the point? Then you're just a guitar player with an amp. Not only do you want to play music that is different and

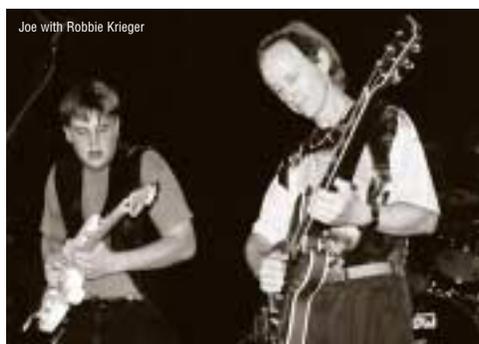
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special, but you want to have a setup that separates you from everyone else.

**TQR:** Do you have any particular things you do in the studio?

In the studio everybody tends to start talking about how much this mike costs or that one... I play pretty loud in the studio, and I find that Shure 57's work best. I've tried condenser mikes and Neumann's on guitar, and they just don't sound as big to me. The 57 is really tight. If you close-mike that thing, you're getting a lot of sound pressure and bass response that you're not going to get from anything else.

**TQR:** Do you use ambient mike placements in the room as well?



Joe with Robbie Krieger

What I did on the last record was have the guitar amp in an isolation booth, and for solos we would shut the snare drum off, open up the drum mikes and open the door to the isolation booth and let the amp blast out into the room. The engineer on *Blues Deluxe* is really brilliant, and of course, Tom Dowd wrote the book, but sometimes I'll get in the studio with an engineer and they'll be like, "Let me show you some things about recording guitar." Some engineers are so fixated on 100%, complete isolation. If the drum track is playing, they don't want to hear any guitar, and if the guitar track is playing, they don't want to hear any drums. All right... *wait a minute*. If you're doing a blues/rock record, the interplay between the instruments is *the sound*. The bleed-in — the air. If you get too isolated, everything becomes too sterile.

**TQR:** Especially with blues and certain rock styles, like early Led Zep — the sound of a band in a room.

Yeah, *a band in a room!* Now, working that way makes it very difficult to fix things if you make a mistake, but if you know how to play, you can get away with that. It's the interplay between the bass and the drums and the guitar... even the vocals. I did a lot of live vocals on the last record, and there were times when you could hear little ghosts of the original track and we had to go back and match it. But singing and playing at the same time made up for doing the rhythm track, then doing the leads, then doing the vocal,

which is very sterile. You know immediately when you hear it — there's no inspiration. The actual title track of the CD, "Blues Deluxe," was the only take, meaning that we cut it all in just one pass with no overdubs.

**TQR:** And you *did* work with Tom Dowd...

Yes, and I really got to know him during the last three years of his life, and you couldn't ask for a more humble, nicer man. He practically invented 8-track recording along with Les Paul, and the people he worked with... well, he wrote the book, and I was really honored to have been able to work with him and be included in the documentary that was made about Tom.

**TQR:** Now, let's touch on one of the most striking aspects of your music... It seems as if you could literally play anything on the guitar that you wished at will. Your influences are clear — echoes of Albert King, Albert Collins, Page, Beck, early Clapton, Hendrix, Rory Gallagher, and now that you've mentioned him, Tommy Bolin... and yet, you've taken these voices, their tones and their energy, and you've made them your own. You are not just another player with great chops copping licks that have come before... and that's a tall order these days.

Well, thank you. Obviously, for as long as this has all been going on, to do something completely original is practically impossible. But all the great players in this genre were also great *interpreters*, too. The key is not to be overwhelmed by your influences, in my opinion, and there are people playing



today who are much more successful than me who seem to have become overwhelmed by their influences. Why would you want to play exactly like somebody else? "Hey, you sound exactly like Stevie Ray Vaughan!" Well, that's good, but you don't sound anything like *you*. My goal as a guitar player is to be more like B.B. King... you hear one note from B.B. and you know it's B.B. King. That's what I want to be — I want to be known for my own style. And it's going to take a

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long time, because I'm still a product of my influences. But I think as I get older and the more I let go of those early influences, I tend to start finding my own thing. Tom Dowd was really good at pulling out little tidbits of things and bringing them to my attention. He'd say, "Listen to this — this is not you playing like Clapton or Beck — this is original." They would focus me on the things that were *me*. Look... play 1/4/5 on a Strat plugged into a Marshall and it's pretty much derivative of Jimi Hendrix or Stevie Ray, although I think Stevie was more a product of Albert King and Jimi Hendrix. To me, Robin Trower was more of an original guitarist than Stevie in terms of the things he wrote.

**TQR:** Let's get back to your rig... You moved to Marshalls and went through JCM 800's, 2000 Series... but you really locked on to Marshalls, and now you're using two 100W Silver Jubilee Marshalls, a blackface Showman head and a Marshall something...

The Showman is basically an 85W blackface Twin head.

**TQR:** So there's your clean tone...

Yeah... well, I have it turned up to like '9.' The way I get a clean tone is to play through an amp that is a little distorted on the top end and I turn down the volume on my guitar to clean it up. I like amps that clean up. The Marshall underneath the Showman is the re-voiced Marshall MKII reissue head — like the Plexi small box reissue. They revoiced it because the early ones were a little too gnarly, and this one sounds great. I did a clinic at a store in Austin, Texas and they had this MKII there and I plugged in whatever guitar was around and it was instant *Trés Hombrés*. That's the first time I think I've ever walked into a music store and bought something new on the spot. I parallel the channels on that one, and each combination sounds different. I used to bring out an old Marshall Plexi 100W on the road, but it was too unreliable.

**TQR:** How did you latch on to the Silver Jubilees?

A friend of mine started collecting them, and they were only



\$300-\$400 five or six years ago. He amassed a huge collection of them, and actually, I should buy some from him while he still has them...

Anyway, he was telling me that they had a really good sound — somewhere in between a Plexi and a JCM800. I never paid much attention because I was pretty happy with my sound at the time, and then I went to a guitar show and bought a head from Ray Gomez. Have you ever heard of Ray Gomez? He used to play with Aretha Franklin and he was on Columbia for a record or two... a Strat player. If you like that psycho Jeff Beck thing... he's like Jeff Beck with Stevie Ray's tone — an amazing player. I bought his Jubilee and it was really warm, with presence... all the things that I wanted the AC30's that I was using at the time to be. I think Slash was using Silver Jubilee amps, but no one else really cared much about them. I've been using mine now for five or six years and it's a really warm amp. A friend of mine who plays with Joe Cocker decided that he wanted to get a Silver Jubilee, and he finds one in the paper... So he goes to this guy's house and plugs it in and the guy who is selling it listens to him playing his amp and says, "Now that I know how good it sounds, I'm keeping it."

**TQR:** Is there a trick to getting them to really open up?

I set mine pretty simple. The gain is on '5', the master all the way up, and the channel volume is on '3' or '4'. That gives you enough gain, but it's still clear enough to clean up when you turn the volume down on the guitar. Bass is all the way up, midrange around 2 o'clock, treble at 11 o'clock... I don't use a lot of high end. Treble has always been my Achilles heel. I use two 100W Silver Jubilee heads with one 4x12 Marshall cab.

**TQR:** Loaded with what?



Whatever doesn't break. The cabinets last for about a year before I have to replace them. They start buzzing and I burn the stereo units up in them. I remember being in rehearsal one time and noticing that something smelled funny, and I was burning out the stereo units — those little PC boards. One cabinet is tweaked out with Greenbacks in the top and 75W Celestions in the bottom. I used to have that same rig in the second cab, but I blew it up. The Greenbacks are for bright rooms, because they are really warm, and the Vintage 30's are good for really dull rooms that might be carpeted, where you need some extra sizzle.

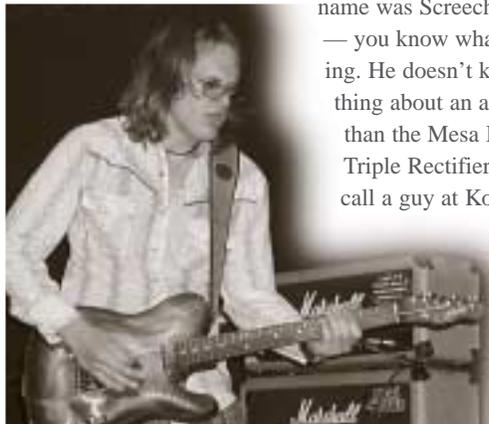
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**TQR:** And with those baffles, you're using the same rig in a room like the one you played in Nashville that might hold 100 as you did when you played here in Atlanta in a theater with a capacity of 900.

Same settings, same rig, every night. I like to play loud, but don't hurt me. Those baffles that I use are made by a company called Clear Sonic. They make baffles for drums, and the ones I use are made for an amp like a Twin Reverb, and they also make them for a 4x12. Even in the big rooms I use the baffles to protect my hearing and to keep the guitar from bleeding into the vocal mike. You can play as loud as you want in a 100 seat room with those baffles, and it always sounds great. I just got tired of battling with sound men telling me to turn it down. By the way, I prefer the Marshall straight bottoms over slants. Mick Ralphs from Bad Company turned me on to that. You get more low end from the straight cabs — 80 Hz clean. Anyway, each head runs into two 12's in two 4x12 cabinets.

**TQR:** Do you pay much attention to the kinds of tubes you use?

We just put new Groove Tubes in the Marshall MKII because it had been about a year since we had changed them and I had forgotten about it. I went to Guitar Center, although I usually order them through Mojo or some place like that... We were on the road and it was an impulse buy, so I'm at Guitar Center somewhere and I get a sales guy — I think his



name was Screech (laughs) — you know what I'm saying. He doesn't know anything about an amp other than the Mesa Boogie Triple Rectifier... I usually call a guy at Korg when I place a big tube order and they send me the

tubes Marshall is using now, which are Svetlanas. They run pretty cool and they have a consistent midrange character that I like. I've noticed that when the tubes start going, I lose a lot of midrange around 700-900 Hz — the real meat and potatoes — and the tone becomes all top and bottom.

**TQR:** Let's talk about your road guitars. In Nashville you had a couple of Clapton Strats. Are they unaltered?

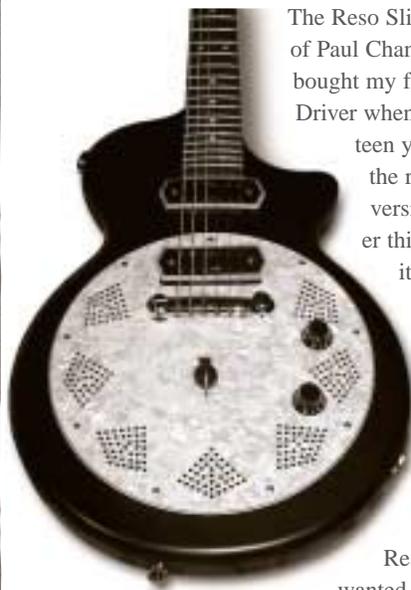
The gray one has a custom profile neck that is a softer V and a little wider, and the black one is stock. The Telecaster is

built by Patrick Gigliotti. I'm pretty much a tried and true guy when it comes to guitars — Fender, Gibson — I've tried things like PRS and found that I've not been *unimpressed*, but maybe *uninspired* by the bodies and the way they feel — kind of sterile. So Patrick builds these Tele and Strat copies with brass tops. The Tele has a mahogany back, sides and neck, and the Strat is alder with a maple neck, but the tops are all brass. He brought a guitar to a show in Seattle and I played it and I was just blown away by it. It's one of the best tuning guitars that I've ever had and one of the best sounding — it even rivals my old vintage Strats and Teles. It has this very warm tone and feel, which you would not expect with a brass top, but they are just awesome.

**TQR:** What kinds of pickups does he use in them?

Seymour Duncan... In the Tele he used flat pole '52 vintage Tele pickups and some kind of vintage neck pickup.

**TQR:** What's up with the Chandler reso?

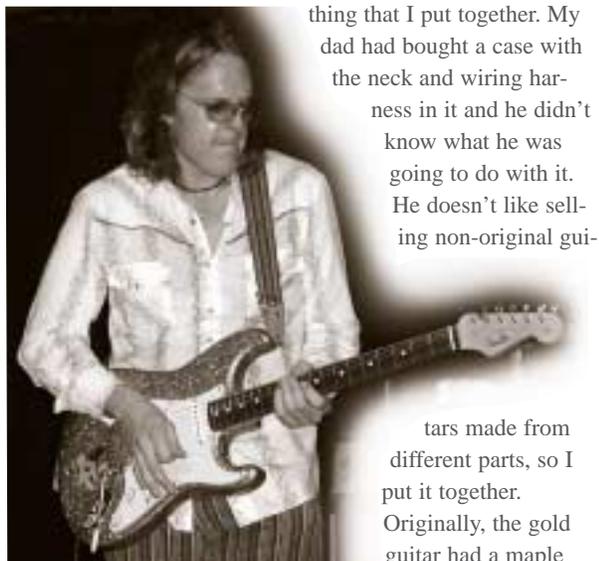


The Reso Slide... I've been a fan of Paul Chandler ever since I bought my first Chandler Tube Driver when I was twelve or thirteen years old. I have both the rack mount and pedal versions, and that's another thing that I like because it's so simple. I also use the Chandler digital stereo echo, and that's how I got to know him. He built me three guitars — an Esquire copy, a Stratocaster and the Reso Slide. I really wanted a guitar that I could play that sounded like a lapsteel. It's a great-playing fretted guitar as well, but it's really great for slide. The pickups are like two sets of staggered pole Strat pickups in one, and they are humbucking.

**TQR:** You also had a couple of other Strats that you played...

I usually play the Chandler Strat, but I wore the volume pot out and we haven't had a chance to replace it yet. The backup to that is what you saw me playing, and it's a '92 or '93 Strat Plus that I got from Fender way back when, with Lace Sensors in it. The gold sparkle Strat is a Custom Shop body with a '65 neck and wiring harness and pickups. It's some-

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thing that I put together. My dad had bought a case with the neck and wiring harness in it and he didn't know what he was going to do with it. He doesn't like selling non-original gui-

tars made from different parts, so I put it together. Originally, the gold guitar had a maple

neck on it, and once I put everything together with the '65 neck that guitar just exploded with tone. It plays great and really stays in tune. Eventually, all three of the pickups had to be rewound, and I had Lindy Fralin rewind them.

**TQR:** Are there any guitars that were predominant on *Blues Deluxe*?

I brought a lot of vintage Strats to that session, but the best one for that record was a sunburst '65. I had the matching pair of '63 Strats that were built one day apart that I brought, but they were both a little darker and not as punchy as the



'65. When I go into the control room and listen back to the guitar, I want everything to be really forward, like that old Billy Gibbons Pearly Gates sound. Oddly enough, the least valuable of all the vintage Strats I brought to the

session turned out to be the winner, which says something about the whole vintage guitar thing... For the clangier rhythm tracks, I used the Esquire.

**TQR:** Did you vary from your standard amplifier rig that you use on the road?

I mixed and matched different things. On one track we used one of the Silver Jubilees and a tweed Harvard, both cranked up. We also used a '65 Princeton Reverb on a couple of things like "You Upset Me," and I used an obscure amp from Canada that I really love called a Garnet... But primarily, my standard amp rig is always in the mix.

**TQR:** Have you done anything else with gear that is worth noting on your last three recordings?

Well, in the past I've often cut two guitar tracks and panned them wide to create a thick wall of sound, and I was conscious of *not* doing that for *Blues Deluxe*. I did use a 1969 100W Marshall head with a Tube Screamer to drive it on the *A New Day Yesterday* CD, along with the Jubilees for stereo. They had a lot of vintage Marshall cabinets with Greenbacks in the studio for that record and we used those, but I did use more Fender amps than I ever have in the past on *Blues Deluxe*.

**TQR:** We'll get to your road pedal board in a minute, but would it be accurate to assume that you don't use your pedal board in the studio when you have access to more rack effects?

Actually, I plug the pedal boards right in, just like I do at shows. I want to be as comfortable as I possibly can be in the studio, and I want to be capable of getting a tone up quickly so we can start cutting tracks. I don't like sitting in a studio screwing around with strange gear. A lot of guys go into the studio and maybe the studio has a huge collection of vintage amps and they start experimenting and getting knocked off their game plan. It doesn't matter if I drag in a Peavey Bandit... if I'm comfortable with it, who cares? Sometimes you can get great results with the craziest stuff. Everybody brings out their good shit when they go onto the studio — that's how they can justify owning it. But if it doesn't sound good, I don't care how much it costs, it's gotta go.

**TQR:** Let's just grab a track from one of your CD's to make a point... "Pain and Sorrow" on *So It's Like That*. Now that's a very complex song — lots of extended Jimi musings on that one and plenty of effects to make it swirl and growl way down deep... So you can duplicate all of that, without exception, using your standard pedal board setup?

Correct. The swell stuff is all that green Line 6 delay, and what spreads it all out is running in stereo. If I'm going into the studio and I know the engineer and I trust him, that's one thing, but when I hear that we need to cut the tracks dry and we'll add the effects later, I'll say, "Let's do a couple of passes with my effects on the track and you tell me if you have a problem with what you hear."

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**TQR:** The prevailing approach is to bake the cake and add the frosting later...

*Blues Deluxe* was a 10-day record, and there really wasn't a lot of time to think. But if you're doing a 6-week project and you're inspired to complete a track, you're not going to remember what your settings were on the Eventide or the TC2290 that you were using when you were recording it. My point is that if we're digging the sound we're getting, even if it's with a little Boss delay or a TC chorus box, just complete it and finish it. Make the call right then and there, then when you go to mix it you're pleasantly surprised and it seems like a much more natural approach to doing the whole recording thing.

**TQR:** Let's run through your pedalboard, starting with the Korg G4 Rotary Speaker Simulator...

My favorite pedal in the world, and I have two of them. It's the best Leslie simulator that I've ever heard, and they aren't made anymore, which is very sad, so I try to buy them every



chance I get. I've tried the Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere and I wasn't very impressed by it. Warren Haynes turned me on to the G4, but most people who have them are actually keyboard players. They used to sell for about \$250 new, and I bought the one I use for \$75 and I've never had a problem with it.

**TQR:** The Boss DD3 digital delay... some might ask why you aren't using the older analog version...

Because it doesn't sound as good as that one (laughs). I'm not kidding... that DD3 has the best overall delay sound that you can get. You just set all the dials at noon and it works. It's very clean and present, but it doesn't get in the way. You just hear it. If I was still using a rack, I'd use the Chandler Digital Stereo — that was my favorite — but I really dig the DD3. It's simple and easy to use.

**TQR:** I see you have a Reverend Drivetrain II...

That's a recent entry since I just pulled the Fulltone Fulldrive II off that spot. I wasn't really feeling the Fulldrive, and I use the Reverend to lift the Showman and it gives you that fat

Tube Screamer tonality, but it leaves the bass in. I have two of them — one for my fly rig and the other in my pedal board. The jury is still out on durability because I have only had it in my pedal board for a month.

**TQR:** It's unusual to see a Carl Martin Hot Drive 'n Boost.

Nice fat boost that I use to boost the single coils — it adds just a little bit of dB and a little gain.

**TQR:** The Prescription Electronics Vibe Unit...

Does what it does... a nice Univibe copy.

**TQR:** Tell us about the Flip tremolo — we've never seen one.

It's a Japanese tube tremolo made by Guyatone. What I like about it is that it gives you a nice, subtle tube tremolo with a little gain boost that creates a nice texture, and if you turn the intensity up it doesn't sound like those on/off tremolos — it's much smoother and not so staccato. I had tried the Voodoo Lab and the Diaz and the units themselves can't handle a lot of power. The Flip has its own 120V power supply so it has enough juice and headroom to stagger the sound. It's more like that old Ampeg reverberato sound.

**TQR:** It looks like the Fulltone Octafuzz is set wide open on your pedal board. We're familiar with the Lehle A/B box, since we recently reviewed them.



Yeah, I paid like \$225 for mine and at the time I thought, "This better be the best damn A/B box on the planet" (laughs). It's the best I've ever used, definitely.

**TQR:** Is that Vox wah new or old?

It's a V846 and I go through two a year because they're all pieces of shit — pots, jacks, switches. The thing is... that's the only pedal I use that isn't true bypass, because I like the treble that it rolls off the top. The thing with the old wahs is that they just aren't durable, which is why I also use newer guitars on the road.

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**TQR:** The TC Stereo chorus is a classic.

Yeah, and with the Boss choruses I just find that even the minimum settings can be too much.

**TQR:** What are you using on the Line 6?

I use it for the volume swell setting, like on “Pain and Sorrow,” and it’s got a really good reverse for when we do “Are You Experienced.” I call it the \$300 stereo split, but then some nights I don’t even look at it.

**TQR:** What kind of power supply are you using, and how are you managing noise, or don’t you care?

I *do* care — especially in theaters. We carry enough ground loops to lift everything, and we’ve gone through it all. If you look at the picture of the pedalboard, all of those 9V adaptors are plugged into the power strip in a very specific way, because they can be plugged in two ways, and the way you plug them in varies the noise. And because all of the pedals are 2-prong, I’ve made all the amps except the Fender 2-prong to keep them from going crazy. All the Marshalls are on ground lift, and the Fender has a ground switch.

**TQR:** Have you played around with guitar cables enough to formulate an opinion on how much they matter?

I use Planet Waves primary guitar cable and the rest of them in the snake are TBI. I think you really need to have at least 16 gauge cable, but as far as paying \$200 for a 20 foot cable, you sitting in the audience aren’t going to be thinking, “Wow, that’s a really great-sounding cable!” (laughs) As of November 28th we will have played 225 shows this year and when we come off the road I will redo the snake and even recover the amps. Even though we use road cases, stuff gets beat up, and those Jubilees have at least 1,000 shows on them.

**TQR:** How have you kept those amps up and running and sounding so good for so long?

Well, we have recapped them and changed tubes every year and that’s about it aside from just taking care of them and keeping them in road cases. But I’m also not pegging them too hard every night... The master may be on ‘10’, the gain is on 11 or 12 o’clock, but the other volumes are set at just ‘2’ or ‘3.’ 100W heads can get loud pretty quick. With the older amps, they’re inconsistent. They sound good one day when you have the right power supply voltage, but the next day they may not.

**TQR:** Do you carry a Variac on the road?

No, but we do have a line conditioner that protects the amps from any voltage spikes, but that’s to protect the output transformers. My guitar tech and I have this running joke — “What’s four output transformers among friends?” If we get a power surge or a big spike and it blows up \$10,000 of amps, the owner of the venue isn’t going to pay for it, and we’re playing all kinds of venues, from small places like Third and Lindsley in Nashville to big outdoor amphitheaters. You never know what you’re going to run into, so I’m a big believer in controlling your own destiny by fool-proofing your rig so that it works everywhere, from the studio, to the worst shithole club you could ever imagine. You need to be prepared for that.

**TQR:** I wonder if you realize just what you’ve accomplished? The single biggest rub with guitarists seems to remain the entire volume/power, distortion/clean headroom thing. Their big amp is too loud for the venue and they can’t get it cooking, their smaller amp doesn’t have enough headroom, and the only way they can get both is by using a pedal... But you’ve cracked the code as far as your shows are concerned, and we’ve seen you play a corner bar and a big theater with the same rig...



It’s that baffle, and the baffle is the cheapest part of the whole setup. Even the case that it sits on costs more than the baffle, and it saves me every time. If we’re playing the Majestic Theater that holds 2,000 people, it can be even worse than a small club, because those theaters were designed for people to sing and play with no amplification, and the amps really throw in them. When I do a sound check, I will play my guitar from the first couple of rows. If I can sit there and play, have a conversation with myself, and it still feels punchy and warm, we’re done. Once the place fills up you won’t really hear the stage volume so much. And I will say this about the baffle... a lot of people that use them still have problems. We toured with Indigenous and they had a straight baffle custom built and they were still having problems. With a flat, straight baffle there is still nothing to absorb and deflect the sound — it just goes up and over. The baffle that I use folds up, and I can stagger it so each panel is at right angles to the speakers and it’s truly baffling the sound. If I really wanted to get

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crazy with it I'd get that eggshell foam and put that on the inside of the panels. There are times when I can hear some of the high end coming over the top of the baffle on stage, but knowing how it sounds in front of the stage, I can deal with that. That baffle has just saved me so many times...

**TQR:** Well, back to Third and Lindsley... your rig in that little place sounded just like it did at the Variety Playhouse in Atlanta and just like it does on your recordings. There was none of that low-volume, overdrive pedal weenie tone at all — it was loud, but not deafening, big, full and punchy, but not painful in the least. Amazing, really.

I still run into an asshole occasionally who gets excited when they see us wheel the Marshalls in, and Marshalls get a bad rap for being really loud amps when a Fender amp can be much louder, and in a not-so-pleasant way. You have to pull your frequencies in so that the amp isn't too bright.

**TQR:** How many players turn the bass all the way up on a Marshall like you do? I would bet very, very few...

Yeah, well, some of the metal guys like to turn the bass and treble up and scoop the mids on zero. It doesn't sound like anything... But it depends on the amp you play. With a Plexi, I have to roll the bass off to get the mids. I treat a Plexi like a Fender amp, and you can't turn the bass up too high on a Fender because the lows will fall apart. Plexi Marshalls are basically just a Fender Bassman with EL 34's, right? Midrange is really where it's at, but the problem with the midrange frequencies is that they can expose a lot of flaws in your playing, because now you're *hearing* it. If you get used to dialing in the mids, you become a cleaner player.

**TQR:** Are you going to change your rig at all when you go back out on the road in January?

The only thing I will change from when you saw me in November is regarding the Fender Showman head. It seemed like it was the loudest amp ever made, and it would take peoples' faces off, so I called my dad, who is a Fender blackface fanatic, and I asked him if he had any blackface Bandmaster heads laying around. He had four of them, so I swapped out the Showman for the Bandmaster, and the entire rig with the Marshall 100W Plexi and the two Silver Jubilee 100W heads is completely balanced now.

**TQR:** That's interesting, because the blackface Fender heads rarely get any attention.

They really don't. Obviously, everybody wants the blonde ones, but to me, the blackface heads really do sound good.

**TQR:** Did you go back and refresh your memory of any players in particular before you cut *Blues Deluxe*?

The vibe I really tried to get with *Blues Deluxe* was a combination of old Muddy Waters records with that live, loose feel, the guitar sound and warmth of *Trés Hombrés*, and the attitude that's present in the Jeff Beck *Truth* record where they just seemed to decide to make a blues record, but make it *heavy*... People ask me, "What is your sound?" Or I might go out to a jam and someone will ask, "How do you get your sound out of that Peavey?" My answer is that I just turn it up all the way. I guess that's a big part of my sound (laughs). You might come out to see us and think that my stage rig is a mess, but it's actually very simple, and if something was to blow up I could change it out or remove it from the chain and be back playing in 20 seconds, because I can see it all right in front of me.

**TQR:** We've intently listened to all of your CD's from the past three years, and they have ranged from very intense, contemporary commercial rock, to blues-oriented rock and all of your influences that our readers will certainly hear and appreciate. Now you've made *Blues Deluxe*. I'm wondering if you made a blues record because it was simply time, or was it more of a deliberate, concerted effort to define yourself and your music, and to hang your hat on a more specific, identifiable peg?

That's pretty much what it was. I've honestly been trying to do that for a couple of years now. I brought up the idea of doing a traditional blues record to the record company, and you know... I'm sitting in a meeting with them and I say, "Hey... I've got a great idea! Let's cut a traditional blues record," and you get blank stares, somebody coughs in the background and there is this awkward silence (laughs). You sign with a record company, they're putting money into you and you have to play the game a little bit, but I'm still gonna do my blues stuff, right? The best thing that ever happened to me was when Congress proclaimed this the year of the blues. All of a sudden I get a call suggesting that I consider doing a blues record, and I said, "Really? You know, that's the best idea that I've ever heard. I'm shocked that I didn't think of that." Within a day of getting the go-ahead I had put the whole thing together. But I didn't want it to be perceived as if the only reason we made *Blues Deluxe* was because it was the year of the blues and next year we'd be doing salsa music or something.

**TQR:** So will the next record also be a blues album?

Absolutely. Eventually, I want to do *Blues Deluxe Volume 2* — another album of covers — but before that I also want to record an album of original blues music.

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**TQR:** I was thinking about the fact that you are one of those rare players who can play anything, and that can be a liability sometimes. It was eventually a big commercial liability for Danny Gatton, I believe.

Yeah, I was talking to the owner of Alligator Records the other day after he'd come to see a show and he said, "So, are you a blues guy now? I always thought of you as a blues guy, but then I'd listen to your records and they were more rock, and a little of this and that..." I said, "I've always been a blues guy — I was just never able to talk a major label into letting me make a 100% blues record because they didn't think it would sell." This record (*Blues Deluxe*) has sold better than the other ones, so at least I have a leg to stand on in a business sense. I mean, it's fine to be an artist and say that you are going to make your music and no one is going to tell you what to do if you're making your own records on your own label and you have no one to answer to but yourself. But you still have to be accountable for whether or not your records sell, and you have to do something that's believable. I could cut my hair, get some khakis and Skechers and write some sappy love songs and try to be like John Mayer... He can sell it, but I can't. I'd love to make \$50,000 a night and travel with two tour busses, but I've always been comfortable with the underground thing that I've had, too. For me, prior to *Blues Deluxe* it's always been about *this is where I am, this is who I am, and this what I'm doing right now*. But I felt very comfortable and at peace making that record — more than perhaps at any time in my life. I can still put that CD on in the van when we're traveling and listen to it from beginning to end and feel very proud of it. I'm proud of the guys in the band and the job they did, and we really have a lot of fun playing the songs on stage. I was talking to George Thorogood, who is a good friend of mine and has always been very supportive, and he asked me, "Where do you want to be?" I said, "George, everybody starts at zero, and you either wind up at the very top, or somewhere in the middle." I'd like to wind up at like three quarters, because then I could play 1,500-2,000 seat rooms for 30 years. Like B.B. King... for 60 years he toured 2,000-3,000 seat venues, 200 nights a year. If I could do that, I'd die a happy man. **To**

[www.joebonamassa.com](http://www.joebonamassa.com)

**Amp Switching... Do It**

Aside from his Clear Sonic baffle, the ability to switch amp combinations on the fly and run different amps together is key to Joe Bonamassa's incredibly varied tone. Hey, he didn't invent the concept, but it's worth noting again for obvious reasons. Even if you are playing in small rooms using smaller, low-powered combo amps, why not consider playing two,



alternately or together? In addition to the dramatically expanded tonal possibilities, you'll have the option of running delays or Leslie simulators

*in stereo*. You'll need a good passive A/B or A/B/Y pedal that doesn't introduce any unwanted complications such as line level drops, RF and hum. We've already covered the excellent but rather expensive Lehle pedals, and we've since discovered an excellent alternative that sells for less than half the price — The StarTouch ST1 A/B (\$50.00) and ST2 A/B/Y (\$79.00).

Developed by veteran San Francisco musician Tony Chostner, StarTouch signal switchers were created in response to Tony's frustration with using inferior A/B boxes and his unwillingness to pay for a custom-built unit on a musician's income. StarTouch pedals are built with 16-gauge steel, using 16 and 18 gauge copper primary wire soldered point-to-point for superior signal transfer, double-grounded to eliminate noise and RF interference. We've been using the ST1 and ST2 for months with every conceivable amp combination in locations that have varied from nearly-new construction with code-compliant wiring to old southern structures that were probably wired by Big Daddy's Uncle Bug before they was a-makin' talkin' pitchers, and the StarTouch pedals do what they were designed to do flawlessly, with no surprises. **To**

[www.startouchpedals.com](http://www.startouchpedals.com), 510-733-0369

**LESLIE ANYONE?**



Of all the guitar effect sounds we can think of, nothing quite surpasses a genuine Leslie cabinet, but unless you've got a road crew humping your

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gear, a full-blown Leslie is a grossly impractical and potentially trouble-prone addition to your rig (and they are worth beaucoup bucks today, daddy-o). But if you are undaunted and flush with cash, please refer to our previous Leslie article written by Dave Boze in the July 2000 issue of TQR. It provides a comprehensive overview of Leslie cabinets, the vintage Fender Vibratones, and even the happy accordion player's Cordovox.

Joe Bonamassa's favorite old-school Korg G4 is a terrific option for a compact and versatile rotary speaker sound, but these units have become hard to find and they are no longer cheap (not to be confused with the Korg G3, which is more common and can be bought on eBay for under \$75.00). For Leslie effects, the G4 is the Korg you want, and when we've seen them for sale they usually reach \$350-\$400. Of course, that's not to say that you can't get lucky and score one cheap. Patience pays, and the G4 is definitely worth having.

On the other hand, just about everyone is familiar with the Hughes & Kettner Rotosphere. It has become the default Leslie simulator of choice in pedalboards from coast to coast and it does what it does pretty well. The latest MKII model sells new for \$400.00 and used Rotospheres can be found for about half of that.

Thanks to Ernie King at the Gibson Custom Shop and Option 5 founder Jay Woods, we've discovered another Leslie simulator, and it's a good one.

## DESTINATION OPTION 5 ROTATION

Right out of the box, the first thing we liked about the Destination Rotation was its compact size. Unlike the Rotosphere or the G4, this unit won't monopolize precious real estate on your pedalboard. The Option 5 is also clearly built for the road, with a sturdy steel housing and heavy duty switches.



The Option 5 pedal has two outputs that "spin" in opposite directions with a "Bi-Amp" switch to simulate the lower frequency rotor of the original Leslie cabinets and the higher frequency horn. With the Bi-Amp on, the effect simulates the opposite phase and frequency separation of the rotor and horn spinning

in opposing directions. This feature produces a very realistic, swirling Leslie effect in stereo. With the Bi-Amp switch set on "Flat," the unit operates in mono (one amp) with two full-frequency rotary sounds.

Like the Leslie, the Destination Rotation has a fast and slow speed, and the unit gradually changes speed up or down when the "Speed" switch is depressed. We found the pre-set speeds to be right on the money — neither too fast or too slow, and the shifts in speed up or down were very Leslie-like. The "Gain" control adjusts the amount of overdriven tone present in the signal, and the "Optimize" switch adjusts the overall intensity of the effect, which can be set for a very intense effect to only a subtle hint of movement.

We preferred creating any significant gain from our amp rather than the Option 5. Noise was virtually non-existent, and we couldn't detect any change in the basic tone of our guitar and amp. The rotary effect of the Option 5 was extremely rich, deep, complex and realistic, with no trace of an over-chorused or artificial phase-shifting effect. The lush character of our unaffected signal coming from the guitar and amp didn't change, and perhaps best of all, the Option 5 Destination Rotation pedal sells for a discounted price of just \$249.95. We recommend the Option 5 very highly, and the price is right for a product proudly made in the USA.

Perhaps it's time you got *your* rotation on... **TO**

[www.hughes-and-kettner.com](http://www.hughes-and-kettner.com)  
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Patrick

**Guitars**

**"you don't pick guitars, they pick you."**

*Patrick Gigliotti is a painter who has always admired the guitar as both an instrument and a work of art, and the guitars that bear his name gloriously succeed on both counts. Our first sighting of Joe's Gigliotti was under stage lights that seemed to set the guitar on fire. Even from 50 rows away, Gigliotti guitars burn with a bizarre*

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*incandescence, and we were understandably anxious to discover the charm that had seemed to capture the imagination of a player who has pretty much seen and played them all. We weren't disappointed, and a review follows our conversation with Patrick Gigliotti.*

**TQR:** Do you have a background in guitar building?



No, but my background had *everything* to do with creating the guitars, beginning with working in my dad's cabinet shop and learning about things like inlay panels. Then he opened a finish shop. He had kind of a drunk for a sprayer at one time, I was doing all of the sanding, and this guy would show up on Friday, get paid, and not come back until the next week. My dad couldn't deal with that, so one day he handed me the spray gun and said, "Here — learn how to spray." We were shooting lacquer back then, and I learned all about using stains, how to spray in the winter, how to

cheat... (laughs). Then I started spraying cars at night in the shop to make extra money. I did my own El Camino first, and when my dad retired I kept doing it. I got into pinstriping, and the next thing led to another and I got into doing Harleys. I just learned everything I could about painting. Over the years, I had also been interested in guitars, and I always liked the Telecaster. I don't know why, but I knew it was a popular blues guitar, and I learned more about it by reading magazines, listening to records and watching tapes of the old blues guys. I kept looking at Fender designs and the Thinline, in particular. You know how guitars kind of grab hold of you? You don't pick them, they pick you. So they picked me. I had nothing to do with it. I was at work one day and this idea came to me about using metal and painting it as part of a guitar. My crude thought was to take a plasma cutter and create some type of guitar top from metal. At the same time, I was customizing and chopping a '51 Mercury with suicide doors. I didn't even know about a CNC machine. I asked around about where I could get a guitar body built and someone referred me to Tommy at USA Custom Guitars. We met, and I explained to him what I wanted to do and he said, "Sure, we can do that." So Tommy and USA Custom made the first chambered ash body with a center block, but I still had no clear idea how I was going to fabricate the metal top. I had

been working out with a guy who was vice president of Alaskan Copper and Pipe, and he had been a welder. He told me that rather than using a plasma cutter, I needed to use a laser water jet. He told me where to go to have the first aluminum top cut, but it was too thick and heavy, so we cut a second, thinner top. I painted it myself and clear-coated it and gave it to my tech to put the first guitar together. He called me up after it was all together and said, "What the hell did you do?" The way he explained it to me was that it had this big, fat tone, with a bright sparkle on the top end. I think a lot of it has to do with the fact that Tommy builds such great stuff, and that big neck also plays an important role in the sound of the guitar. If someone wants a '63 contour, we'll do it, but to my ear, the true sound of a Gigliotti is that big neck.

After we had the first guitar together I took it over to an older guy who worked at Guitar Center to see what he thought. He played it for a long time unplugged and he said to me, "You're going to have rock stars playing these guitars." I thought, "Yeah, right..." (laughs) I wanted to get some second opinions on it, and I took it down to a local blues club during an open mike night and it just hung on the wall all night — nobody even touched it. But if you believe in something, you don't give up on it.

**TQR:** How did you meet Joe?

Well, the first guy I met was Tab Benoit, and he seemed to be very closed-minded. All he wants to do is play his '72 Tele, which is OK. He was playing at *Jazz Bones* here in Tacoma, and he played my guitar and the crowd was loving it, but he didn't want anything to do with it. Fair enough. Then one night my wife and son and I dropped into *Jazz*



*Bones* to eat and there was a picture of Joe Bonamassa on the window, and in the picture he was holding a Les Paul. Now, my experience with guys that play Les Pauls is not very good — most of

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them just want to play Les Pauls and that's it. But there was just something about Joe — I don't know — maybe it was because he was Italian (laughs). While we were at Jazz Bones, my seven year-old son picked up one of Joe's fliers and it had a CD sampler in it. So on the way home I played "My Mistake," and I was impressed, and then I heard "If Heartaches Were Nickels," and I *had* to go see him play. Well, Jazz Bones gets pretty packed, so I decided to see Joe at this dump in Seattle called *The Tractor Tavern*. We waited in the rain and I brought the guitar and I started talking to his guitar tech. I saw that Joe was playing Strats and Teles, so I was thinking this could be good. When he was finished playing we showed him the guitar, and I remember everybody just froze when he opened the case. "What the hell is *this*?" I told him to take the Tele, and then we built him a Strat, which is completely hollow, and he really loves them both.

**TQR:** How many guitars have you built to date?

Only nine. It's all come together pretty fast since the first one.

**TQR:** So you started with aluminum, then you built a brass top, and now you've done a guitar using copper. What kind of finishing materials are you using?

We use all of the traditional materials that guitar shops use, but you can't touch the unfinished metal tops with your bare hands. If you do, the oil from your skin will leave a print that only appears when the finish is applied, so I began to clear-coat them with three coats of DuPont 7600 automotive clear.

**TQR:** How do you get the pattern onto the metal?

Each pattern is different. I use a body sander that rotates in one direction using #500 grit paper, I get the pattern I like, and then we clear-coat it and send it out to Ty, who does the painting for USA Custom, and I tell him what color to paint each body.

## REVIEW

It's pretty tough to get noticed with a new guitar design these days, but as you will continue to discover in these pages during the months ahead, uncharted territory still exists in places that demand and deserve your attention.

Whether by chance or design, Patrick Gigliotti will be recognized for having created inspiring works of art that you will really want to play, in large part due to having chosen USA Custom Guitars as a partner in the construction of his guitars. We saw an example of their work recently when Delta Moon slider Mark Johnson proudly showed us a custom Stratocaster



neck he had ordered. We contacted USA Custom, and an in-depth article and review is in the works, however, the Gigliotti's we received for review left no doubt that USA Custom is producing some of the finest custom guitar bodies and necks we have ever seen on any instruments by any maker, large or small. So good, in fact, that we sold a guitar to buy the mahogany tobacco burst Gigliotti Tele reviewed here rather than taking our chances placing an order after this article was published.

A mahogany Telecaster is a beautiful thing... warm, round, full-figured (but not too heavy), curvaceous, and sweet-sounding, although fully capable of barking like a dog, too. The mahogany Gigliotti lacks the thinner treble smack of a typical ash and maple Telecaster, and the semi-hollow 'thin-line' style body imparts a subtle hollowness and unique acoustic resonance that compliments the warmth of the mahogany body and neck very nicely. Unplugged, the low E and A strings set off a resonance that can be felt throughout the guitar, and the mids and highs are warm and sweet, with not a hint of harsh treble tones or muddy mids. The fret work is flawless, and the compound radius makes playing a pure joy anywhere on the neck. In other words, the sum of the parts works in both a functional and an aesthetic sense that beckons you to play the Gigliotti every time you see it, and you can't say that about every new guitar built today.

The neck shape on the Gigliotti is a deep, soft 'V' — less challenging than the full baseball bat heft of a typical Historic Les Paul, but the mass of the neck is still substantial enough to generate significant string vibration to the body of the guitar. This contributes to what some players refer to as 'vibe,' and we suppose this term really means that the guitar vibrates a lot and some of that woody, good vibration is heard through the pickups. Well, the Gigliotti vibrates *real* good. We dearly love that neck, and so will you. For your reference, USA Custom describes this particular neck as their rosewood 1.650 Fat Back with a 7.25 - 9.5 compound radius and Dunlop 6150 fret wire, mother-of-pearl face and side markers and rolled fingerboard edges. The Gigliotti certainly doesn't

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play 'new,' and this neck would be super-fine on a Strat, as well.

The body is built from two pieces of mahogany with a center seam visible from the back. Each half of the body is fully chambered with a center block of maple wide enough to accommodate mounting for the bridge plate and routing for the neck pickup, which is accessible from the back. Despite the semi-hollow design, the Gigliotti absolutely refuses to feedback or squeal, and the brass top doesn't introduce any unwanted noise. It does, however, impart *tone*. Please don't ask us how, because we have no idea.

The bridge design is string-through-body, just as it should be (hate those top-loaders), with six fully adjustable, non-vintage saddles. The pickups in our Gigliotti are the same used for the first Tele given to Joe Bonamassa — a Seymour Duncan Vintage '54 bridge and Alnico II Pro neck. The inherent Tele brightness is nicely tempered by the mahogany, and we liked what we heard from the bridge. However, the neck pickup left us less than enthusiastic. Don't fault Seymour — he has re-created a softer, more musical rendition of the the original neck pickup sound of the early Telecaster, but we still found it to be a little muddy, dull and uninspiring. What do you *do* with it? How about losing it altogether. We'd like to see a Gigliotti Esquire, or at least another take on a neck pickup with some attitude from Duncan, Harmonic Design or Lollar, perhaps. Or how about a set of Bardens? They are not a 'traditional' Tele sound, but they will pin your ears back with some mighty big tone. Since Gigliottis are all custom-built, you can pick your poison when it comes to pickups. How nice is that!

Tuners are Klusons, and the bone nut was perfectly cut. Like Joe's Gigliotti, our guitar has stayed in perfect tune through travel and temperature changes. Now you're wondering how much this thing with a brass top weighs, aren't you? 8.5 pounds, or about the same as a light-weight mahogany Les Paul. In contrast, the surf green burst Gigliotti pictured weighed in at only 7 pounds (both guitars share identical specs), but we preferred the slightly darker, rounder sound of our heavier Tele. Weight isn't everything...

There is plenty of additional information available on the Gigliotti and USA Custom web sites, and the sky is the limit on various tweaks that can be made to your Gigliotti. Strat style or Tele, we urge you to get your order in now, because we expect demand for Gigliottis to go no where but up in 2004. Meanwhile, stay tuned for our upcoming mondo-in-depth story on USA Custom and the *ToneQuest Stratocaster*. Oh, yeah... **To**

[www.gigliottiguitars.com](http://www.gigliottiguitars.com)

RADIAL ENGINEERING  
**TONEBONE**  
**LES TONE BONE**

Aside from the above bilingual header, this will be one of our more polite reviews, simply because the people that build the ToneBone pedals are Canadians, and Canadians are generally *exceptionally* polite human beings. I have even occasionally resorted to posing as a Canadian in certain countries where the bar conversation turned to international politics and U.S. foreign policy. You need only smile, claiming you're from "Tronto" and even the surliest drunken Dutch "peace" activist will slink off to a hash house muttering about the Dew Line, leaving you to your thoughts and a warm Jonge Genever. There is simply not much not to like about Canada, and *especially* Canadians... By the way, have you ever heard a Garnet amplifier?



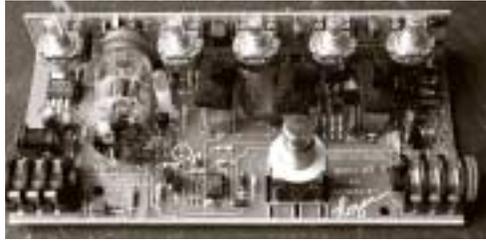
Well, perhaps you've heard the buzz about the Tone Bone

Classic and Hot British Tube Overdrive/Distortion units from Radial Engineering in British Columbia. It seems that guitarists' thirst for overdrive and distortion pedals cannot be quenched despite a deluge of highly respected pedals from Keeley, Z Vex, Analogman, Butler, Chandler, Ibanez, Boss and Fulltone, among others (we could write a book on overdrives alone), there will always be room for more — especially if there is a tube involved. Are guitarists eternally damned to pursue new stuff when it seems as if the last gizmo bought was the holy grail only two months ago? Apparently so, otherwise, the market for distortion and overdrive pedals would be contracting rather than expanding, wouldn't it? Sometimes we do wonder who is buying all of this stuff... Well, here are another couple of stellar tube overdrives for your consideration — the ToneBone Classic and Hot British. The company's slogan reads, "Tube distortion... at its best..." and that's what you get with the ToneBone — real tube distortion, just like the vaunted and grossly under-appreciated Real Tube Overdrive by B.K. Butler. Isn't it funny how some players hold inexpensive gear in such low esteem? Throw a NOS RCA 12AU7 in a \$80 Real Tube and call us when you come up for air.

The Radial ToneBone distortion pedals are *not* cheap (\$299.99), nor are they built like cheap effects that sell for under \$100. The

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ToneBone is built to last, and other than possible tube replacement, these things look as if they could easily out-live their



owners. Remember the heavy-weight design of classic '70s effects like

the Mutron Phase Shifter? Apparently, so do the chaps at Radial. Should you ever wish to replace the single 12AX7 in the ToneBone circuit, you must remove four Allen screws securing the bottom plate, and all of the hex washers for the jacks and pots. The ToneBone Classic we received from Radial was equipped with a JJ 12AX7 — a very solid choice from the former Tesla factory in the Slovak Republic.

Both of the Radial ToneBone distortion pedals excel at producing a versatile range of selectable tone and distortion levels, and this is where they really stand out from the crowd. Clean boost can be achieved by cutting the “Drive” or distortion control back to very low levels while turning the “Level” control up. The “High” and “Low” tone controls can be used as a boost or cut control from the 12 o’clock position. With our vintage Fender Deluxe Reverb and Pro Reverb amps, we felt that we needed to boost the low end on the ToneBones while leaving the highs flat. With our Marshall amps we also liked a little low end boost with just a tad added to the highs. The “high” settings on the ToneBone get bright very quickly, and high frequencies are not something you want to be too prominent with heavy distortion. Both ToneBone models have a “Mid Boost” switch that can boost mids up to 12dB — great for clean, Fender-like American amps when you want to add a little uncharacteristic midrange growl and a darker voice, and *especially* useful with Fender guitars. Additional controls include a “Top End” switch with “Dark,” “Flat,” and “Bright” settings, a “Drive Gain” switch with low, medium and high settings, and a “Filter” pot. We left the “Top End” switch flat and would probably leave it there. The



“Drive Gain” switch boosts distortion to three preset levels, and the low and medium settings seemed to be the most useful, although we suppose someone, somewhere would find the highest setting interesting. It’s over-the-top gonzo in our world. Quoting the manufacturer, the “Filter” control “balances the high frequency ratio between the amplifier and the ToneBone.” They recommend starting at the full clockwise position. We wound up leaving it at 12 o’clock and found that the filter affected harmonic content and feedback frequencies and depth more than anything else.

Neither of the ToneBone pedals are meek by any means. If you’re a player looking for some clean boost to fatten up your tone but you have no use for all-out overdrive and distortion, look elsewhere. The ToneBones have not been designed to produce a wide range of subtle, variable clean boost — especially at low volume settings on an amplifier. They sound best with an amp set on at least 4-5 on the volume control. We preferred to run the “Level” control at 12 o’clock or higher on both units, which enabled us to avoid any drastic changes in the basic tone of our guitar and amp, while creating a fuller, fatter distorted tone. You’ve probably experienced “pedal tone” when you turn the gain or distortion up on a pedal with the level turned down and the volume on your amp set at moderate to low levels. Not good. We call it “Saturday Afternoon at Guitar Center Tone,” although you also need a cheap flanger to really nail it.

The “Hot British” version of the ToneBone is just that — hotter and more intense, and while the distortion levels were certainly elevated, they also seemed a little smoother-sounding than the Classic. The Hot British also has a “Voicing” switch with “Out” (flat), “Notch,” and “Fat” settings. We liked them all (think light, heavy and *way heavy* tone), and a “Contour” switch adjusts the balance of low and high frequencies in the Notch and Fat settings — more coloration and fine-tuning for those times when only *freaky* will do.

If this all sounds a bit complicated, your worries will quickly fade after about ten minutes of tinkering. You’ll be pulling mucho grandé Billy F Gibbons pinch harmonics out of your axe in no time, and you won’t need to use a péso for a pick to pull them off, *ahow, how, how, how...* Both ToneBones are thoroughbred, well-built rock pedals that deliver authentic tube distortion and well-designed, versatile controls for shaping lows, mids and highs as well as distortion intensity, harmonic feedback and sustain. If you like to rock, we think you’ll find a permanent spot in your pedalboard or studio for these great tube distortion pedals made in Canada. The Musician’s Friend online low price guarantee as of January 2004 was \$299.99 for either model. *Quest forth... To*

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