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the ToneQuest

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone

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Report™

Johnny A

"When you strum a guitar you have everything – rhythm, bass, lead and melody."

– David Gilmore

Of all the guitars you have ever owned, has one seemed to suit you more than all the others? Did you keep it, or has your memory of perfection only deepened with every guitar that failed to measure up to the one that got away?



Most of us have been guilty of letting great guitars go due to a temporary cash crunch or the fever that clouds rational judgment when we impulsively sell an instrument to acquire the next one. How many players traded a vintage goldtop, '59 burst or '50s Strat or Telecaster for an acrylic Dan Armstrong, Kustom tuck n' roll PA gear for the band, a Sunn head, or simply for the sake of change?

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Consider the fickle, shifting fads that have alternately placed various Fender, Gretsch, Gibson and Martin guitars among the most desirable instruments solely based on who was playing what and when. You could barely give away an old Stratocaster or Tele in the late '60s and early '70s while players like Jimmy Page, Peter Frampton, Mick Taylor, Duane Allman, Joe Walsh and Jeff Beck were playing vintage Les Pauls, and guitar fashion would flip again in favor of vintage Fenders while Les Pauls, SG's and 335's suddenly lost their allure. Crosby, Stills, Nash and (sometimes) Young propelled Martin D45's and big Gretsch's to must-have status, while Alvin Lee, Freddie King, B. B. and Elvin Bishop put the spotlight on Gibson ES*** guitars. Fads have always affected the popularity of various guitars, amps and effects, but how many of us can claim to have stopped playing a certain guitar specifically because a successful, celebrated artist played the same instrument? Indeed, how many players have become so obsessed with the subtle nuances of guitar design and evolving personal preferences to have successfully developed the specifications for their own signature guitar and sold a major manufacturer on the concept despite having recorded no national, chart-topping hits?

Perhaps you are already familiar with Johnny A, but we're betting the things you don't know about him will give you reason to pause and reconsider just what it takes to be a truly unique and inventive guitarist today while surviving the radio and record industry's gross indifference to talent. Of course, it's the music that ultimately defines Johnny A's creative prowess, but the story behind the music reveals a rare determination and creative flair that is instructive and inspiring.



Afflicted by scoliosis as a teenager, Johnny was required to wear a 40 pound body cast for 14 months and a rigid neck brace for two years after that. During this time, it was impossible for him to turn his head to see what he was playing on the guitar, but given the circumstances, practicing was one of the few activities he could pursue at all. Ultimately, his disability became an asset as he learned to play without the advantage of actually seeing the fingerboard of his guitar.

Johnny's career progressed with the frustrations and all-or-

nothing, on-again-off-again stops and starts typical of the rock music scene in the '70s, '80s and '90s. While Stevie Ray Vaughan was tearing up the rock and blues world on his #1 Strat, Johnny vowed to stop playing his vintage Stratocasters rather than being perceived as a "Stevie Ray wannabe," picking up a Gibson to develop and refine what would ultimately become his signature tone.

In 1993, Johnny bought what he believed to be the state-of-the-art in amplifier design for the time – the Marshall 30th Anniversary 6101 combo. He returned it, bought it again, and finally resorted to contacting the product manager at Marshall to help him decipher how the amp was supposed to be used. It has since become the only amp he has used for the past ten years, played through the direct XLR out straight into the house sound system, and his tone is stunning.



Suddenly jobless with no prospects after six years with J Geils' Peter Wolf, Johnny realized two truths that would have to be dealt with if he was to continue making a living in the music business. First, he would have to become a complete guitarist no longer dependent upon working with a front man, and secondly, no one was going to do anything for

him or his career unless helping him was profitable, and it was going to be up to Johnny alone to make that happen.

Today, Johnny A is living proof of just how times have changed. Thinking outside the traditional box has become an essential skill for all guitarists seriously pursuing a career in the business of music, and Johnny has proved that you can reinvent yourself. You can create and market your own music within the community you build around it through live performances and grass roots, guerrilla marketing. He has proved that you can evolve as an artist and develop your own signature sound, and that sound can continue to evolve... And yes, you can even play gloriously clean, sparkling Twin tones and magnificently distorted, high-gain brain-smack with depth and fidelity through an obscure, blue Marshall amplifier and a fully hollow Gibson guitar loaded with stock '57 classic humbuckers. Listen, and enjoy...

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TQR: How and when were you first exposed to music?



None of my family are musicians, but I did grow up in a Greek family where there was a deep appreciation and passion for music. Every weekend we would have these huge, crazy parties where all kinds of Middle Eastern

music would be blaring – Armenian, Turkish and Greek music. Also, my dad was a lover of jazz and big band music – Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller and Count Basie – and my mom was a big blues fan, so I really heard all kinds of music growing up.

TQR: Was the guitar the first instrument you picked up?

No, it was my grandfather's bouzouki. He wasn't really a player, but he had one and I would play with it around the house. My dad was also a bartender at night at a Middle Eastern club, and this great Turkish dumbek player named Ronnie Kirby gave me a solid silver dumbek, and I would bang on that. The first instrument that I really took up seriously was the drums when I was about seven years old. I took lessons and played the drums for quite awhile. I love the



drums and I'm still very passionate about great drummers and rhythm and I still own a drum kit, but as a player, I was frustrated by the instrument because I

always had melody running through my head. I finally picked up the guitar when I was about 11 or 12 years old, and I was a huge fan of the British Invasion – bands like Gerry and the Pacemakers, The Beatles, The Dave Clark 5, The Searchers, The Stones, The Kinks, and also the Everly Brothers. I was

still playing drums in a band at the time and I didn't even know how to tune the guitar at first. The first guitar I owned was a \$49 Lafayette guitar and amp. My mother and aunt were hairdressers and I would sweep up the hair off the floor in their beauty salon on Saturdays to earn money. I eventually saved enough to buy a Vox Clubman guitar that I saw in the window of a music store in 1965 for \$88. I still have it.

TQR: When did you finally switch from drums to guitar?

I was playing drums in a band and still learning how to play guitar when all the guys in my band left to play in another one. I had been taking drum lessons all along, but I was really working hard to teach myself guitar and learn all the songs of the day from the Invasion stuff to psychedelic music. Well, the guys that had left to play with another band had a gig at a pizza joint in Saugus, MA and I went to see them. The guitar player didn't show up that night – he had a fight with his girlfriend, so knowing that I could play a little, they asked me if I would fill in that night for him. I went home and got my amp and guitar and we played the ten songs I knew, then they taught me more during each break. That was the first time I ever played guitar with a band and they asked me to join them that night. During high school I also developed scoliosis, which is a curvature of the spine. I had to wear a 40-pound full body cast for 14 months and after that, a back brace for two years. That body cast forced me to practice without being able to look at the guitar or see what I was doing with my hands. It's funny to realize how obstacles and limitations like that can make you stronger.

TQR: So you continued to play in various bands throughout high school and...

I graduated and went to a business college. I have also always been fascinated by marketing and the concept of developing something from nothing and making it viable. I did that for about a year and eventually dropped out and went to Berklee School of Music for almost a year, but I didn't dig that at all. At the time, the curriculum was all jazz-oriented and I was into more progressive music like John McLaughlin, King



Crimson and Gentle Giant. I'm not suggesting that I'm against getting a musical education, and I did like the theory classes at Berklee, but the other things they

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wanted me to do, like transcribing and learning standards, I wasn't into. In hindsight, I do regret not having acquired a formal understanding of music and developing the ability to read music earlier, but that wasn't what I wanted to do at the time. And again, sometimes your limitations can help define what becomes your unique style. Take Keith Richards, for example... a phenomenal rock player who is emulated by how many people? Here he is playing 5-string open tunings and his limitations created that style. When so many people wind up emulating that style, who is to say what is "right?" I'd rather have it great than be perfect. For me, it's the guys that really have a personality and a voice, whether it be Chet or Wes, Jeff Beck, Clapton, Billy Gibbons, Hendrix, Jimmy Vaughan... It's not necessarily the guys with the greatest chops, but those with the strongest personalities that I gravitate to. I have always been intrigued by the things that make someone's voice print, and I have always tried to grab the nuances of those styles, throw it in a blender and hit "puree" and try to come up with my own style.

TQR: How did your career develop?



Bill Bruford & Johnny

True artists, and I'd like to think that I can be counted as one, don't choose music – it chooses you. So I did all the usual stuff with bands and music in junior high and high school and I also

worked in a big music store in Boston, so I got to know everybody – Joe Perry and the Aerosmith guys, The Cars, the Geils Band... All the big guys that came through town would go there – George Benson, Joe Pass, Steve Howe... So I worked there for a while, continued to play, went out to the Midwest for a while to start a progressive rock band, and then I went to England and auditioned for Bill Bruford from Yes/King Crimson (I didn't get that gig). Then I came back and played in local bands around New England, and I wanted to put a rock band together with a lot of melody – kind of like "Aerosmith meets the Beatles." That was a band called The Streets, and we were pretty successful in the Boston area. We were getting tons of radio airplay without being signed to a major label and we toured with Aerosmith in 1978-79. Then I went to California where I hooked up with Bobby Whitlock and played with Bobby and Doug Clifford



from Credence Clearwater. It was really good, but scattered and lacking focus – kind of *un-together* – so I came back home to play with my band The Streets again, but we eventually broke up after the drummer got busted. Then I put another band together called Hidden Secret, which was more of a pop rock thing with keyboards, two guitars, a percussionist and sax player. That lasted for

a couple of years before I began to stop feeling what we were doing. It began to sound a little too contrived and fabricated. At that point, around 1982, I began to wonder about the whole music thing. There wasn't a lot of guitar-oriented music being recorded or played. I mean, there was some wonderful stuff that came out of that period from The Cars, Talking Heads, Roxy Music... but as far as the guitar was concerned, there wasn't much happening with the kind of guitar I wanted to hear. I really wasn't even playing that much at home. I had gotten married in 1983 and I was working for Tom Scholz (guitarist with Boston) at the time with the Rockman Company. But then I started to get the itch again and I began writing a lot of songs. I've also always had a certain slant toward country music that dates back to my



early interest in The Everly Brothers, so I had this idea to put together a country rock band with Everly-style harmonies but with a more aggressive edge, and

that band was called Hearts on Fire. That was a really good band, and it was the first band of mine that seemed to have a very tight focus since The Streets. The band members were really good, we had some great songs, and I was playing a Tele somewhat in the style of James Burton and Albert Lee. We recorded a demo and we had a manager shopping it, but as good as we were, I couldn't get arrested playing this stuff even though the style we were playing was what Americana turned out to be – kind of like Lone Justice before their time.

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So we changed the band to more of a hard rock thing, but that really didn't feel honest to me and I eventually broke the whole thing up.

Later on around 1993, a friend of mine was working on a concert project with Peter Wolf (J Geils) and I got called to audition for Peter. I ended up getting the gig and we rehearsed for a couple of months before that gig was canceled because of permit problems. Well, we hadn't been paid for any of the rehearsal time, so Wolf decided to line up some gigs for the band to enable us to make a little money for the time we had put in. The band was called Peter Wolf & The House Party Five, they booked a half a dozen gigs, and the whole thing just exploded. The six shows turned into seven years, I wound up co-producing one album for him and we got a 4-star review in *Rolling Stone* for the album and we toured all over the US and Japan. But by early '99 Wolf didn't really want to tour anymore and that left me with no day job and no band. It was at that point that I had an epiphany... I was sittin' on my bedroom floor with my guitar when I realized that I was at the mercy of lead singers. I had sung lead before and I wasn't that bad, but it wasn't my strength, either. I realized that I had been playing guitar for 30-something years and I couldn't play a song by myself. I couldn't deliver the melody and the chords at the same time because I had always backed a singer as a lead/rhythm guitarist playing rhythm behind the vocals and occasionally taking a solo. Out of survival, I decided that my goal was going to be to become a more complete guitarist and put a new project together to feed my family. The question was, how am I gonna do this?



I had this music book that a friend had given me, *The Complete Beatles*, and I decided I would flip the pages, randomly stop somewhere and learn how to read that song – chords and melody at the same time. The song was "Til There Was You" from the play *The Music Man*. I was determined to read the notes on the staff rather than the chord symbols, so I'm playing the notes in these strange chord structures that I had never played before, and at first I didn't even know what they were. It took about three days, and my fingers, my left hand and the muscles in my forearm were sore and on fire by the time I was done, but I accomplished what I had intended to do. Now, when I play, I try to emulate the vocal melody, a back-

ground vocal part and the rhythm section as I hear a song and play it on the guitar.

TQR: And this all came about as a means of survival...

It was *all* about survival. I put a trio together in Salem, MA where I live, and we played this little place called the Dodge Street Bar & Grill. They had some of the best local talent around on the off-nights because the kid who booked the acts was a passionate music lover who had grown up during the whole punk scene in Boston and he knew all the bands and players. He didn't pay you shit – \$60 a night – but he had some great guitarists, great keyboard players... tremendous players all around. They had a shitty sound system, you set up on the floor, and the place held about 80 people. So I played there every other Monday night and that's where I crafted this new thing.



One night a guy came in who used to work for Polygram Records. He was blown away by what we were doing and he asked me if I wanted to make a record. He brought in a guy who had a local label with national distribu-

tion, he liked what I was doing, and we talked. I told him I wanted 100% complete creative control with no compromises, because I wasn't interested in just making a record to hear myself play. I only wanted to do it if I could make a recording to the best of my capabilities, with no stylistic or technical compromises. So we went into the studio, we went over budget before the project was finished, and he ran out of money. Eventually, I had to borrow money from all kinds of people and buy the tapes back from this guy and finish the recording with my own funds. I put out the record, *Sometime Tuesday Morning* and I sold it at gigs, it got played on a local radio station during this free-form lunch-time show, and it got crazy phone requests. Eventually I sold about 10,000 copies as it was picked up by radio stations in the six-state New England area. It got to the point where I would drop off CD's at stores and they would pay me for them on the spot, knowing they would sell them.

TQR: All through your own grassroots marketing efforts... How much did it cost you to make this recording?

About \$37,000. I had a lot of friends over the years that I had

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done a ton of favors for, so when it came time to finish that record I asked everybody for everything and called in all the favors. I also was given a listening post spot in Newbury Comics, a 21-store CD chain across New England for three months, which helped immensely. At the time of that recording, the band hadn't played a lot of gigs together live, so we didn't take a lot of liberties with the songs in the studio, consequently there is a lot of space in that album. It turned out just the way I had hoped and even when I listen to it today I'm still happy with it.

TQR: Do you think you could duplicate that grassroots formula today?

Yes. I think someone who is not in the mainstream has a much better shot getting somewhere doing it that way than through regular channels. When I was in The Streets and some of those other bands I played in during the '80s, if you didn't have a record deal you weren't even in the business. But now with the Internet, I'm not even sure you *want* a record deal today (laughing).

TQR: But bottom line, you recorded music that people wanted to hear, and hear again.



Well, yeah. I eventually licensed *Sometime Tuesday Morning* to Steve Vai's Favored Nations record label as a result of him hearing that album and the instrumental

version of "Wichita Lineman." It was released internationally and the song "Oh Yeah" became the highest charting instrumental on AAA radio since Eric Johnson's singles from *Ah Via Musicom*. We went on to sell 80,000+ copies and that made it possible to cut the latest CD, *Get Inside*.

TQR: That story is such a great example for any musicians who may be struggling to get exposure.

Well, the other epiphany that occurred in addition to my realizing that I couldn't play a song by myself and deliver a complete melody was that no one was going to do anything for me. I called an attorney to get a record deal and she told me that attorneys don't really make record deals anymore. Well, what do I do? She said, "You need a press story, you need to have a sales story, you need to have a live show story and you

need a radio story." So I took those four bullet points and I worked on them. I developed the live show and we started playing shows in the suburbs, I got a couple of shows opening for people at The House of Blues in Boston, and then a residency there, I got a little bit of press and the radio airplay followed, but I was never passive about any of this. If I had just been a guitar player that didn't take any responsibility for making this a viable commercial product, nothing would have happened.

TQR: Let's review the chronology of the gear you've played as well as the development of your signature Gibson guitar...



I had been playing all different types of guitars when I was a kid. One of my

first great guitars was a goldtop Les Paul in 1969, and I had a '68 Paisley Telecaster back then, too. I had a BC Rich when they were handbuilt, a PRS when they first came out, a Jackson when they were cool, Rickenbackers... But to me, the two great guitar companies are Gibson and Fender, and I had been playing Les Pauls, Strats and Teles for a long, long time. I had old guitars – a 1964 factory black and a '65 Lake Placid Blue Strat – and then Stevie Ray Vaughan hit really big. He got a great tone... great player... great for the blues... great for music....great for guitar... an incredibly explosive, passionate player, and he had *the tone*. And *the tone* on a Strat is Jimi Hendrix. So when Stevie Ray began to hit big, people would come up to me and say, "Oh, man, you're really into Stevie Ray, huh?" Well, honestly I hadn't been influenced by Stevie Ray. He was a little younger than



me and I think some of his influences may have paralleled mine. I mean, I saw Jimi Hendrix, and he had a profound influence on me in

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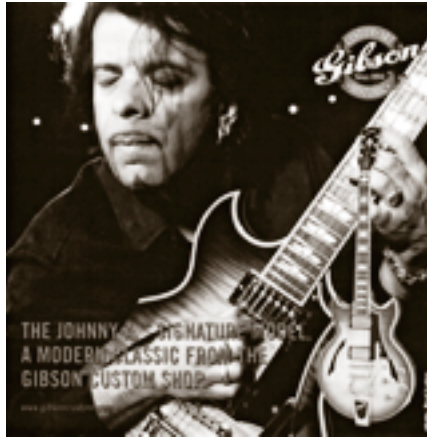
terms of my approach to tone, my approach to effects, my approach to phrasing. So as soon as I heard that comment about Stevie being one of my influences, I decided I had to get another guitar. I couldn't play Fenders anymore. This guy was taking it to the pinnacle, and that was the tone that, if I was playing a Strat, I got. But I didn't want to be compared to a contemporary. With all due respect to Stevie, it wouldn't have been good for my career. Stevie was strong enough with what he was doing to make me say, "I'm getting out of this game."

Two things happened at that time. Someone made that comment to me about Stevie being an influence and I knew I had to make a change, plus, I was playing with Wolf, and I realized that a lot of the R&B guys he listened to were using Gibson guitars, but they were playing *clean*. The Jackson Five... Smokey Robinson's guy played a Black Beauty... If you listen to Gibson Les Pauls pre-Led Zeppelin in popular music, none of these tones were really dirty, but they were pure and they were pretty and really great. So I decided to get a Gibson, and it was just when they launched the Custom Shop in 1993 and I got a goldtop because I couldn't afford a flame top ('59). I saved some money and then I found one of those '59s at a shop in Bangor, Maine, and that's when I got in touch with Mike McGuire at the Custom Shop. I told him who I was and that I was playing with Peter Wolf, I was lov-



ing the Custom Shop stuff and would they be interested in endorsing me? He said yes and the first guitar I got from Gibson was a '95 'burst that is absolutely unbelievable. I still have it. That didn't mean I got guitars for free, but every time I needed something they would build them to my specs and I

paid artist prices. They learned about what I liked as far as color and neck shapes and all of that, and we developed a great relationship that continues today. When my first solo album was about to be recorded, I was looking for a new tone. I knew I wanted that romantic Bigsby sound and my Gretsch wasn't working for me. It didn't quite sound like I wanted, and I didn't want to get into that Brian Setzer thing. So I started looking around for guitars and I fell into this reissue ES295. I put a set of flat wound strings on it and that was the tone. Seventy percent of the *Sometime Tuesday Morning* record was cut with that guitar.



How the signature thing came about was that the guys at Gibson really liked the record, it was picking up steam and getting airplay in 2000 and 2001, and I was using the 295, a 335 and a Les Paul live to sup-

port that record. But I didn't like changing guitars. The neck placement between an ES 335 and a ES 295 and a Les Paul are all different. I loved the tone of the 295, but I couldn't turn the thing up loud enough and scream on it because of the feedback. So I called Mike and I asked him if he could make me a '59 flame top with a Bigsby. They made me one and I loved it, and they made me another, and another, and I think I have four of them. They were all great, but I still didn't have that hollow tone I was looking for.

The thing I was missing with the Les Paul was the hollow tone of the 295, and since I sit on a stool, I was hunching over that 13" body for 90 minutes every night and my back was killing me. So we had a talk during summer NAMM in 2002 and I was telling Mike and Rick Gembar that I love the Les Pauls, thank you, but I'm not really getting 100% of what I want, live. They asked what I was thinking, and I told them what I wanted was a guitar that was a little bit bigger, that was hollow to emulate the sound of the 295, and one that could resist feedback but still rock. So we did some prototypes and it was a year in R&D and we were all very excited about this guitar. That's what happened, and I guess because of the music I was playing and the critical respect the CD had received, they were as into it as much as I was. And you're right - I'm not a household name - I wasn't then and I'm still not now. I may never be. So when you think about contemporary players that have signature guitars like Joe Perry and



Peter Frampton - guys that have sold millions and millions of records - and then looking at the lineage and the history of Gibson and the absolute

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giants such as Les Paul, Tal Farlow, Chet and Wes, I certainly never even imagined having my own signature guitar with Gibson. It was the farthest thing from my mind. Other companies had approached me, but I never wanted to do it unless it was something that I really would prefer to play over everything else. To Gibson's credit, they really turned me loose with it, too. I was down there all the time. They even let me name the color, called "Sunset Glow" after my dad's old 1959 Pontiac Bonneville. Aesthetically, I wanted it to feel and look like a guitar that could have come out in 1961, because I am a vintage guitar guy and I love that look and feel. The neck has to feel like that, it has to be respectful of Gibson's Golden Age, and tonally... well, I really wanted it to sound like that 295, but I couldn't keep the P90's because they presented another set of problems live. We used a 25.5" scale neck with an ebony fingerboard for a bright attack, a totally hollow body and we used humbuckers to eliminate the hum of the P90's. That guitar can come very close to the sound of the 295 and yet, it can also really scream.

TQR: What type of pickups did you choose?

The '57 Classics – those are my favorite Gibson humbuckers. I'm a vintage guitar nut, so another thing I looked at was the dish (top carve) of a '50s Les Paul. Although the body of my guitar is larger, Matthew Klein calculated how to come close to that old style dish. If you look at the thickness of the peg-head, it's tapered very much like a '40s or '50s Gibson and that was really very important to me. It's thinner at the top



than it is near the nut and is much more pronounced than it has been in modern times. And I wanted the Florentine cutaways to be reminiscent of an old guitar but also to give me access to the entire fingerboard.

A lot of people think that my guitar is just a modified 356, but it's not. The body length is different, the neck scale length, the neck joint where it meets the body – all different. There are a lot of little subtle differences. The toggle switch functions at a 45 degree angle so that I can flick it with my pinky finger without moving my hand. It always seemed crazy to me that those toggle switches functioned vertically up and down on a 335 when the natural sweep of your hand is more like 45 degrees.

TQR: Let's talk about amps...

There are a lot of great amps out there, but I've been using

the Marshall 30th Anniversary amps almost since they first came out in 1992. I actually bought that amp twice, because the first time I brought it home I hated it and took it back. I bought a couple of combos and I just fucking hated them. They just didn't sound good. Then I started playing with Wolf, and I had to be able to get several sounds out of one amp, and I bought the amp again and I *still* didn't like it, so I called Nick Bowcott at Marshall. I told him who I was and that I had bought the amp twice because it was supposed to be the flagship amp in the Marshall line at the time, and it sounded horrible. He asked me what kind of tone I was looking for and he told me to start with the second channel, where to set the controls, etc., and as soon as he told me that, it was like having a key that unlocked the amp. It did everything I wanted it to do. It has three channels and MIDI channel switching. Live, I was mic'ing the amp just like you would normally do, but it also has a built-in speaker emulator in it – an XLR right out of the back. One day I went to the sound check early at a Wolf gig and I asked the house sound guy if we could try the direct out and compare it to a Shure 57 on the speaker. I tried it, going back and forth and it sounded pretty good, but I'm old school, and I couldn't believe that running the amp direct into the house system could sound better than mic'ing the cabinet. I mean, that's what you do... you put a mic on a speaker cabinet on stage to get your sound. That's the way it's done. We did a blind test and eight out of ten times I liked the direct sound best, so from that point on that's what I've done. I haven't used a speaker on stage since 1993 and I've recorded both my albums with just that one amp, all direct.



The funny thing is, I do love vintage tones, and when I went to do the first album, I abandoned the Marshall and brought in

a Vox AC30, a Super, a Deluxe, a Marshall Plexi, a VibroKing, and I brought in all these things and got a great sound – they were good tones – but they didn't sound like me. They sounded good, but they didn't feel unique to me, so I scrapped all the tracks and did them over. We had first tried the Marshall direct and it wasn't working – it sounded thin in the studio, and that's why I had brought all the other stuff in. The engineer thought I was crazy, but I had been using the Marshall direct for six years with Wolf and I wanted the same

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tone on the record that I had been getting live, because that had become my sound. We kept working on it and tweaking it to get the tones I wanted, and that was the only amp I used on both records.

TQR: What has been your history with effects?



When I was with Wolf, I used a lot of rack stuff like the Rocktron Intellifex and

Replifex, good sounding dense reverbs, a couple of Lexicon Jam-Mans, and for distortion I always use the channel switching in the Marshall. When I record, I record totally dry. I don't even record through the console. The signal comes right out of the back of the amp into my old Neve preamp and I plug that directly into the input of the tape deck and record direct to tape. No compression, no EQ, no reverb, because I don't want to be committed to anything but the pure guitar tone when I record. I want total control for how I might wish to manipulate the tone of the guitar later.

As far as my pedalboard goes currently, it's very basic – a Dunlop 535Q Wah, a Boss tuner, a Boss OC2 octave pedal, I do run in stereo live, and I occasionally use an Aphex Punch Factory optical compressor when I want a more even or sustaining clean sound. I like this compressor a lot because I don't like to feel compression or hear it grab or pump. It's the best pedal-type compressor I've found because it seems to work without me *hearing* it work. I came across a couple of the new Line 6 Tone Core pedals... a stereo pan/trem pedal which is where the signal splits, and an Echo Park pedal. I also use a Radial Engineering A/B/Y Switchbone and an Xotic Effects RoboTalk, which is an envelope filter.

TQR: When people consider that you are running direct into a different house system every night, that would seem to open up a host of unwanted variables...

No, actually, it's just the opposite. It's more consistent than mic'ing, because one of the things that always drove me crazy when I was mic'ing a cabinet was that my tone was never the same – it was never dead nuts on. You gotta rely on guys using different mics every night, off-axis rejection, and how close is it to the cone? Is it in the right spot compared to the night before? Is it two inches? An inch and a half? Is it a 45 degree or a 30 degree angle? I used to sell microphones, and



just moving a mic as little as half an inch off axis totally changes the tone

of the guitar (or any instrument). I would probably never go back to using speakers in a traditional way unless I was in a different band playing different music. If I was in a Black Crowes type of band, I might... Don't get me wrong – I don't think I have the greatest tone on earth and there are things about my tone on stage that I don't particularly like, but the consistency from night to night outweighs the things I don't like. Sure, I would love to use a blackface Fender for this sound and something else for that sound, get the perfect Fender Twin sound on one song and a Marshall Plexi for another, but I'm riding in a van with three or four guys. I have to be practical. And honestly, every night there will be at least three or four guys that will tell me they can't believe I'm not using speakers on stage – like Paul Barrere from Little Feat. All he could see on stage was one of the 30th Anniversary heads and he still couldn't believe I was getting what he was hearing without speaker cabinets.

TQR: What would you like to accomplish in the future?

Making money might be nice (laughing), along with continuing to play live and making more records. I'd like to write for film. I'd also enjoy playing and touring as a sideman for other artists. That would be like a vacation for me compared to what I'm doing now, because the solo thing is very demanding and emotionally draining. Sometimes after a gig I feel like, "Wow, this is really a lot of work," because the concentration level for me has to be so high. But it's fun. We'll see what happens. **TQ**

www.johnnya.com



Once we heard Johnny's tale of woe and ultimate salvation regarding the Marshall 30th Anniversary amplifier, it seemed only fitting that we query the man who guided Johnny in his quest to embrace the amp that has become so important to his signature tone. Thanks to TQR advisory board member Mitch Colby at Korg USA, the product manager for Marshall, Nick Bowcott, graciously brought us up to date on the development and inner secrets of the 30th Anniversary amp...

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At the risk of stating the obvious, as the “30th Anniversary” part of their name suggests, these amps were specifically designed to celebrate Marshall’s 30th year in

business – a landmark which occurred in 1992! This tradition began in 1987 with the Silver Jubilee series of amps that marked the company’s 25th Anniversary and was further continued in 2002 with an extremely limited run of only 40 1962 JAGs – a gold plated 1962 “Bluesbreaker” combo covered in white leather by the legendary Jaguar automobile company. The majority of these highly coveted amps were sold via an internet lottery for £5000.00 (approx. \$8750.00, depending on exchange rate) with the bulk of the profits going to worthy causes (Jim Marshall has been a generous contributor and active member in various charities for many years). A precious few, however, did find their way into the hands of artists whom Jim felt had played a notable role in his company’s history – such as Eric Clapton, Gary Moore and Zakk Wylde.

Not surprisingly, when given the task of coming up with a 30th Anniversary amplifier, Jim’s R&D team decided to build what they considered to be the ultimate Marshall – the most comprehensive valve amp to ever bear the company’s famous script logo, not only in terms of tone but also in terms of flexibility and features. In order to attain this lofty goal, it was decided that the amplifier should have three totally independent channels – our best sounding and most versatile Clean Channel ever; a Crunch Channel capable of sounds spanning the previous 30 years – from the original JTM45, through the Plexi and early MVs, and right the way up to the high gain of the then-current JCM900s; and a Lead Channel with more gain than ever before. They also determined the amp should be loaded to the gills with modern features including comprehensive tone shaping options, MIDI channel switching, switchable speaker damping, a sophisticated Series/Parallel FX loop and no fewer than four output power options via Pentode/Triode and High/Low Power switches on the power stage – 100-watts pentode, 50-watts pentode, 50-watts triode and 25-watts triode.

The resulting 3-channel beast boasted no fewer than 17 control knobs, 22 switches and 3 trim pots. The number of valves its chassis housed? A Nigel Tufnel-approved 11 (7 x 12AX7s

and 4 x EL34s)! Was the amp worthy of its “ultimate Marshall” tag? Judging by the critical acclaim it attained and impressive sales in spite of its lofty price tag, the answer would have to be, “at the time, in the minds of many, yes.” In truth though, and with the universal gift of 20/20 hindsight, while Channel 1 and Channel 2 were truly breathtaking, Channel 3 didn’t quite hit the mark – even with the addition of a modification in 1994 that gave the channel even more gain, an upgrade designated by an LM (Lead Mod) prefix on the model numbers.



A High/Low Power switch that halved the amp’s output power by switching the output from Pentode to

Triode operation was nothing new for Marshall at the time as both the Silver Jubilee amps (1987) and also the then-current JCM900 Series boasted that feature. (Note: in addition to lowering the power amp’s output, this changes the amp’s sound and feel – pentode mode is brighter and more aggressive, triode is smoother and boasts a silkier high end). The other power-halving switch on the 30th Anniversary head and combo – the one marked High/Low Power worked by switching off two of the amp’s four power valves. This one is unique to that pair of amps and while it a very cool feature, especially when combined with the Pentode/Triode option, it does have one major negative – extended use of the “Low” option causes uneven wear of the output valves due to the fact that only two of the four are used.

In the JCM2000 series of all-valve amps that followed in the late ‘90s, the power stages are voiced in such a way that the amps start to “fatten up” at much lower volumes, making this sort of switching redundant, especially when the deep switch on the EL34 powered models is employed. This said, the all-singing, all-dancing TSL100 and TSL122 (as already mentioned, the triple channel successors of the 6100 and 6101) do boast a unique output stage switching feature named VPR. VPR is an acronym for Virtual Power Reduction and when this switch is engaged it kicks in a clever little piece of circuitry that lurks between the Phase Inverter and output valves which modifies the power stage, causing it to emulate the sound and feel of a much lower powered amp (approx. 25-Watts). VPR achieves this by doing two things: 1) It attenuates (reduces) the post Phase Inverter signal by approximately 6dB; thus effectively reducing the amp’s output power from 100W to 25W; 2) It alters the negative feedback circuit of the power amp and, as a result, lowers the damping factor of the

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output stage so that the speaker is less damped (i.e.: is allowed to “flap” more). This adds to the realism of the 25W output emulation as an all-tube 25W output amp has a lower damping factor than a 100W all-tube power stage.

In-between the brass-plated, Limited Edition 30th Anniversary amps covered in blue vinyl of 1992, and the brass-less, black vinyl models of 1993, there were also a bunch of brass-less, *blue-vinyl* models made in 1992. The difference between these three? Aside from aesthetics, absolutely nothing, except that for tonal preference reasons, the USA-sold combos were loaded with an Electro-Voice EVM 12L speaker while the rest of the world got a specially designed Celestion G12 “Gold” speaker. In 1994 however, as already mentioned earlier, that changed when the Lead channel was hot-rodded for even more gain – and upgrade designated by an LM (Lead Mod) prefix on both models. So, from 1994 until the discontinuation of the amps in 1999, the head and combo were known as the 6100LM and 6101LM respectively.

Regarding the changing of the output valves from EL34’s to 5881’s for a period in the mid ‘90s, that was not done out of choice, but out of necessity... Back in the good ol’ days of the ‘60s and ‘70s, good quality valves of all flavors were in plentiful supply. By the mid ‘70s however, due to continuing success of the much smaller, cheaper, cool-running and vastly more reliable transistor, the valve was no longer used in many of the everyday, electronic applications it once was (e.g. TVs, radios, hi-fi systems, telephone exchanges). As a result, companies stopped making the things and before long most of the Western manufacturers had disappeared, availability diminished dramatically and prices sky-rocketed. Jim and his troops saw the writing on the wall, stock-piled like crazy and worked closely with the few remaining suppliers to ensure quality and quantity. By the early ‘90s however, the only manufacturer making an EL34 worthy of the Marshall logo in sufficient quantity was the Tesla factory in the country once known as Czechoslovakia. Then disaster struck when the fall of communism caused that plant to close. Thus, when Marshall’s once huge mountain of EL34’s was reduced to virtually nothing in the autumn of 1994, we had no choice but to start using Russian-made 5881’s. Sure, there was a Chinese factory churning out EL34s at the time, but they were far from satisfactory (technically speaking, they sucked!) so the Sovtek 5881 was the only option.

Because of this, from late 1994 on, pretty much every Marshall valve amp that once boasted EL34’s was loaded with 5881’s instead and bore a “Marshall 5881 Power Valve Equipped” sticker on the front panel. In some ways, this was an ironic twist of fate because, as Marshall history buffs are always quick to point out, the very first Marshall, the JTM45 of 1962, used American-made 5881 power valves, but price

and availability forced the company to find another power valve (the KT66, then the EL34 by the mid ‘60s). So, some thirty years later history effectively repeated itself, but this time, in reverse! Thankfully, by the time the JCM2000 series was ready to roll a few years later, Marshall had been working closely with the Russian valve manufacturer Svetlana and a good sounding, reliable EL34 was once more available in plentiful supply. So, by the launch of the DSL100 and DSL50 heads in 1997, the EL34 valve crisis was over. Long may the supply of great EL34’s continue!

While the 6100LE and 6101LE numbers were obviously extremely limited, and the blue covered, non-brass plated ones limited to only being produced during the anniversary year of 1992, both the 6100 and 6101 did in fact remain in production all the way up until 1999 – by which time public demand for them was no longer present due to the unparalleled success of the three channel TSL100 head and TSL122 combo. So, in truth, the numbers were far from limited!

As a company, we always strive to learn from our successes and our occasional failures too. As the saying goes, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” Jim Marshall has always been a huge proponent of his company paying careful attention to the likes, dislikes, demands and wishes of his users and reacting accordingly. As is now rock folklore, the JTM45 was born in 1962 as the direct result of Mr. Marshall listening to the desires of the young rock guitarists in his shop...43 years later the song remains the same! **To**

www.marshallamps.com

REVIEW

Johnny A

SIGNATURE GUITAR

We’ve had mixed feelings about many “signature” guitars that are marketed as having been inspired and meticulously designed around the preferences of major players, and perhaps you share our misgivings based on personal, hands-on experience. Of course, we do believe that artists for whom signature models have been developed are consulted during R&D and various phases of pre-production concerning pick-up specs and tone, wiring layout, neck and fingerboard profiles, scale length, fret size, and finish color options. The problem is, in the public’s mind the term “signature guitar” implies that either the artist’s most treasured instrument has been painstakingly reproduced to exacting specifications with no compromises, or the artist’s “dream” guitar has been created with extraordinary passion and obsession for detail. Unfortunately, the marketing story often fails to accurately reflect reality for discerning players capable of resisting the rip tide of hype surrounding a new product launch. Given the

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number of such instruments that are produced (in a factory staffed by hourly employees with quotas to fill), if the artists whose names appear on many signature guitars were required to sign-off on each and every one, rest assured there would be bounces and rejects. It's one thing to sketch out a prototype based on individual specifications, but quite another to achieve and maintain a reproducible level of craftsmanship throughout the entire run of a signature guitar model, which may last for decades. In all cases, with *any* guitar new or old, it remains up to you to find "the good ones,"

because as long as guitars are made by human hands and wood, they aren't all gonna be good out of the box, and some of the good ones aren't going to age particularly well, either.

We continue to experience inconsistencies to varying degrees among all types of guitars – signature models and otherwise. Just this week as we were returning a couple of new Gretsch amps to Midtown Music, we spied a Gibson Custom Shop case on the counter (a sure sign that a fresh trade has just gone down). "What's in there?" we asked. "Oh, something that just came in." Pop go the clasps, and we lift the top of the case with the same anticipation that has plagued us for years, followed by a barely controllable gasp. An extraordinary 2002 '58 Custom Authentic Les Paul lay nestled in its plush womb, beckoning us within. Once we recovered from our initial shock (it's a shockingly attractive and unique guitar crafted in the image of a moderately figured and faded to amber-butterscotch vintage Les Paul with aged hardware) we took it home to be re-strung with fresh Pyramid wire, set up, inspected, played and prodded, and it has now earned a permanent home in our music room after some quick horse-trading. Right time, right place, luck of the draw, and we have owned a dozen Les Pauls that couldn't come within a mile of this one on all counts, although we can't say precisely why. We could tip you off to other finds, but we've kept you in suspense long enough about the Johnny A Signature guitar, so let's get to it.

The Gibson Custom Shop doesn't keep a wide variety of completed guitars sitting around, and there were no Johnny A's in production at the time this article was being developed,



so we prevailed upon the ever-present goodwill at Willcutt Guitars and they promptly sent us a Johnny A for review. If there is one word that can describe the 'A', it's stylish, in a very *old school* style, yet still unique when viewed against the backdrop of the entire Gibson heritage. We like it a lot, as the look seems to have been inspired to some extent by a vintage Barney Kessel, a Trini Lopez and a Les Paul, with none of the funky quirkiness of a Barney/ Lopez.

Even more significant are the practical design features that evolved from Johnny's wish to maintain the hollow character and comfort of his ES295, and the solidbody prowess of his Les Pauls when a song calls for ballsy sustain. The 'A' can indeed range between the classic, clean, hollow humbucker tones required by jazz and swing tunes, and it can also be pushed into subtle, bluesy tones with just the right hint of girth and dirt, or all-out screaming sustain. The 'A' was specifically designed to avoid being a one-trick pony, and nearly every stylistic variation on the electric guitar can be authentically explored with it by degrees. The key contributing factors to this uncommon versatility are the solid mahogany back and sides carved from a single block of wood and joined to a solid maple top, which creates a much more stable and controllable hollow body electric guitar tone than



the typical 'ES' design that has historically utilized plywood construction with or without a center block.

The 'A' is also laid out by design to provide easy and constant access to the Bigsby and the entire length of the 25.5" scale length neck. As described, the toggle switch can be moved with a flick of the pinky,

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literally between notes. This is also a very light and comfortable guitar at 6.8 pounds, very well balanced, with none of the dive-bomb tendencies of a Les Paul teetering on your lap. Even in the absence of a traditional center block, the thinline-style hollow body produces a great hollow tone without robbing the guitar of sustain or causing squealing feedback at higher volume levels. The neck profile can best be described



as similar to a '60s ES335 – not nearly as clubby as a typical '50s neck shape, but slightly more rounded than an early '60s thin-taper or the flatter Les Paul Classic neck shape. The fret wire feels similar to medium jumbo Dunlop 6105 with plenty of crown, and the fret ends extend over the fingerboard binding rather than beneath it – a good move. We were also pleased to find that the 'A' did not exhibit any string binding and telltale creaks

at the saddles or the nut. We sometimes find new Gibson guitars to be plagued with nut slots that bind the strings during tuning until they have been tweaked with a fine needle file, and if you choose to use anything larger than a .010-.048 set, you'll need to re-work the nut slots on the 'A.'

And now we've come to a part of this review that needs to be digested very carefully... The '57 Classics have remained one of our favorite humbucking pickups, and the more variations on humbuckers we hear, the more we like them. At \$198 a pair, they are priced far lower than typical "designer" pickups, and we have found them to be well-suited for all types of applications. As much as we admire and enjoy the work of builders like Jason Lollar and Jim Wagner at CR Coils, the '57 Classics originally designed by J.T. Ribiloff and Tom Holmes continue to earn "classic" status. They are warm and rich, exceptionally well-balanced with a very musical top end



character, and driven to extremes through a great amp they produce thoroughly pleasing inside/out harmonics, all of which serve to remind us that you don't always have to lay out a thick stash of cash to get the tone you crave.

Although we aren't big fans of gold-plated hardware, the workmanship and detail on our review guitar was really quite phenomenal from top to bottom. The sole negative we can report is that the 'A' may simply be *too* pretty and flashy for some players who would otherwise really dig this guitar. Perhaps Gibson and Johnny A will consider an optional model offered with nickel hardware and a slightly less flashy, toned-down look that would match up better with a t-shirt, jeans and a wallet chain, ya'll. We do believe they would sell well. But in all respects, the 'A' earns an A, and we urge those of you who can appreciate an extraordinarily versatile and exceptionally well-built guitar to check them out. This is one "signature" model that truly earns its name. **To**

www.gibson.com
www.willcuttguitars.com, 859-276-0675

J.T. RIBILOFF on the...

'57 Classic Humbucker

During the course of our many conversations with various Gibson employees past and present, J.T. Ribiloff is frequently-mentioned as one of the most passionate, knowledgeable and skilled innovators to have worked at Gibson in the days leading up to the development of the Custom Art & Historic Division, and he is credited for having developed the '57 Classic humbucker along with Tom Holmes, who continues to build his own signature humbucking pickups in Joelton, TN.

Thanks to TQR advisory board member Ernie King at the Gibson Custom Shop, we contacted J.T., now working at Floyd Rose in Redmond, WA, and we asked him to describe how the '57 Classics were created...

Well, by the time I was 21 I had owned over 400 guitars... I've been a guitar freak since I was 14 years old, I'm 44 now, and I'm sure I've had over a 1,000 guitars. I grew up in southern California, so we had access to a lot of guitars and I've owned lots of vintage Les Pauls, SG's, Specials and ES175's. When we started to develop the '57 Classic I had quite a few vintage pickups at my fingertips, and George Gruhn was very generous in that he would let us go in and pull guitars and hold on to them overnight so that we could find those that really had the ultimate tone. There were significant inconsistencies among all of those old instruments, because you have to remember that these factories existed primarily to make money, and the way to make money was to keep material and labor costs low and build as efficiently as possible. They were trying to use whatever was commercially available, but in the music industry the quantities of usage are very, very low compared to the automobile industry, for

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example, and that's where the inconsistencies in materials came in. The rod stock for the pole pieces in the PAF's was basically low-carbon steel, and I had different pole pieces analyzed to find out

what types of carbon compound and grade of steel they used, because that's a big part of getting that authentic sound. They used plain enamel 42 gauge wire, and the very first PAF's basically used the same magnets that were being used for the P90's at the time. The magnets didn't really change dimensionally until around 1961, but the magnet material in the early PAF's did vary between Alnico 2 and Alnico 4.

The '57 Classic was specifically aimed at making a "middle of the road" version of the PAF pickup that would sound equally great played through a Fender reverb amp or a Marshall 100W Super Lead. The final testing came down to just playing the pickup through a variety of guitar bodies and amps. And it's not just about how the pickup sounds, but also how it feels... At the same time the Classics were being developed, we were also trying to develop the historic Les Paul, so we were listening to a lot of different vintage guitars. There were some vintage pickups that didn't sound good at all, and it wasn't so much due to the way they were originally made, but the way they had aged. Enamel wire becomes brittle with time, and as it gets brittle, you can get little breaks in it, and the pickup actually stops working on inductance and starts working on capacitance. Some pickups with these breaks can become warmer sounding, and others become really bright.



The final testing of the Classic took place in multiples of different guitars because what I wanted was a good, rudimentary pickup that worked equally well in a broad range of instruments, and I'm sure that was the goal they had in mind when the original PAF's were designed. Any time I tried to duplicate the extremes that we heard in vintage pickups, one

style of playing always seemed to suffer. A pickup that sounded particularly great through a Marshall amp for really aggressive kinds of rock music would sound way too dark through a Fender. Then, if you made the pickup sound super sweet, it would sound like a buzz saw ripping through your skull played through a really bright Marshall.

Gibson had just started potting pickups prior to the time we were working on the Classic, and they had never wax-potted pickups prior to 1988-89. Fortunately, at the time we were working on the Classics we were also going through a complete re-tooling, so all of the usual restraints and resistance to change had been removed.

One of the main factors in how a pickup sounds is also due to the value of the potentiometer you use. You can change the sound of a pickup just by using different values of pots. Some of the 500K pots in the old '50s guitars can measure as high as 800K because of the loose tolerance in the part specs, and those guitars can sound cooler (laughing). The thing is, there is so little to these things that what little there is does a lot. That's my rule of thumb with pickups. If you change the type of steel you use for pole screws, you change the sound. Change the spacing of the pole pieces and you change the sound... What we tried to really do with the '57 Classic was to make them as close to the originals in terms of the material specifications as was physically possible. The actual grade of steel was specified from the original pickups, the #22 shielded wire was the same... The Classics *are* potted, even though the originals never were, but I haven't noticed anything detrimental from potting, unless of course you were trying to create a counterfeit PAF.

It was Tom Holmes and an engineer at Gibson named Ray Atwood who really helped me with the development and documentation for the '57 Classic. I'm proud of the fact that when I left Gibson, I also left them with complete documentation on every aspect of the pickup. In fact, one of the stipulations made when we developed the Classic was that there were to be absolutely no deviations in the production of that pickup. I hope that is still true today. **TO**

REVIEW *Eric Johnson* SIGNATURE STRATOCASTER

Over the years, Fender has developed an impressive range of signature Strats, including the Clapton model favored by Joe Bonamassa, the Jeff Beck (a favorite of Phil Brown), Stevie Ray Vaughan, Mark Knopfler, Rory Gallagher, Jimmy Vaughan, Buddy Guy, and most recently, signature models for John Mayer and Eric Johnson.

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