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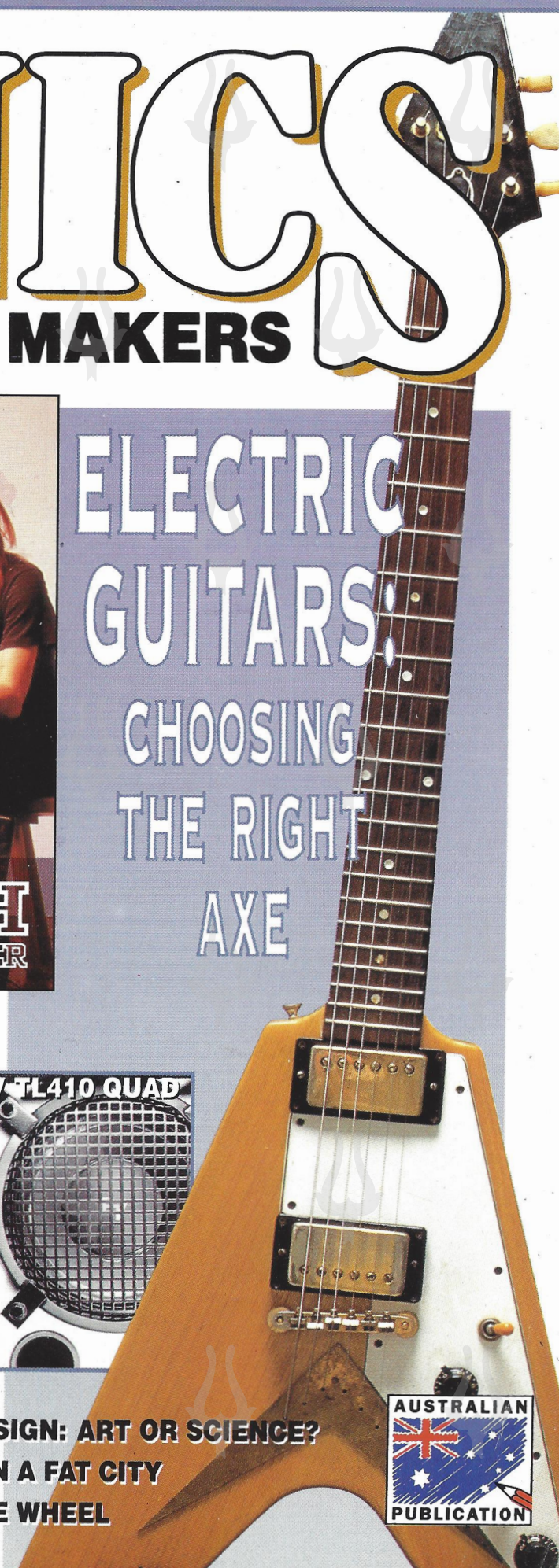
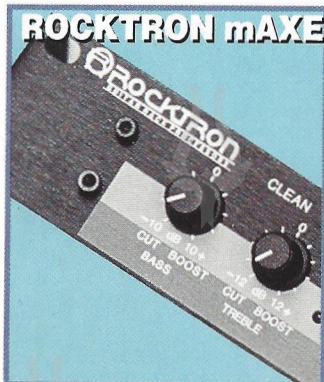
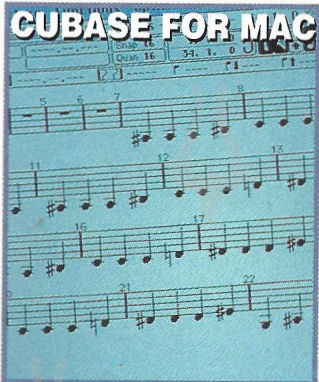
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CHOOSING THE RIGHT AXE



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Which guitar . . .

So you want an electric guitar, but which one for the job at hand?

by Peter Cerexhe

The electric guitar is not a novelty instrument. It's no longer "what you progress to after years of strumming an acoustic guitar". Even your dad or mum may buy an electric guitar and amplifier for your birthday (to keep you quiet and out of trouble — now, that's a mistake!). You can buy whatever your heart desires and your pocket affords.

Yet it's not an easy decision to make.

On television you'll only ever see a fraction of the range of electric guitars available on the market. Fashion determines so much of what appears in music video clips. Endless clips show hip rockers flashing cool-looking gold semi-acoustic electrics: Gretsch Country Gentleman, Nashville Tennessee, a Gibson Super 400 or Trini Lopez. More Rickenbackers than you can shake a stick at.

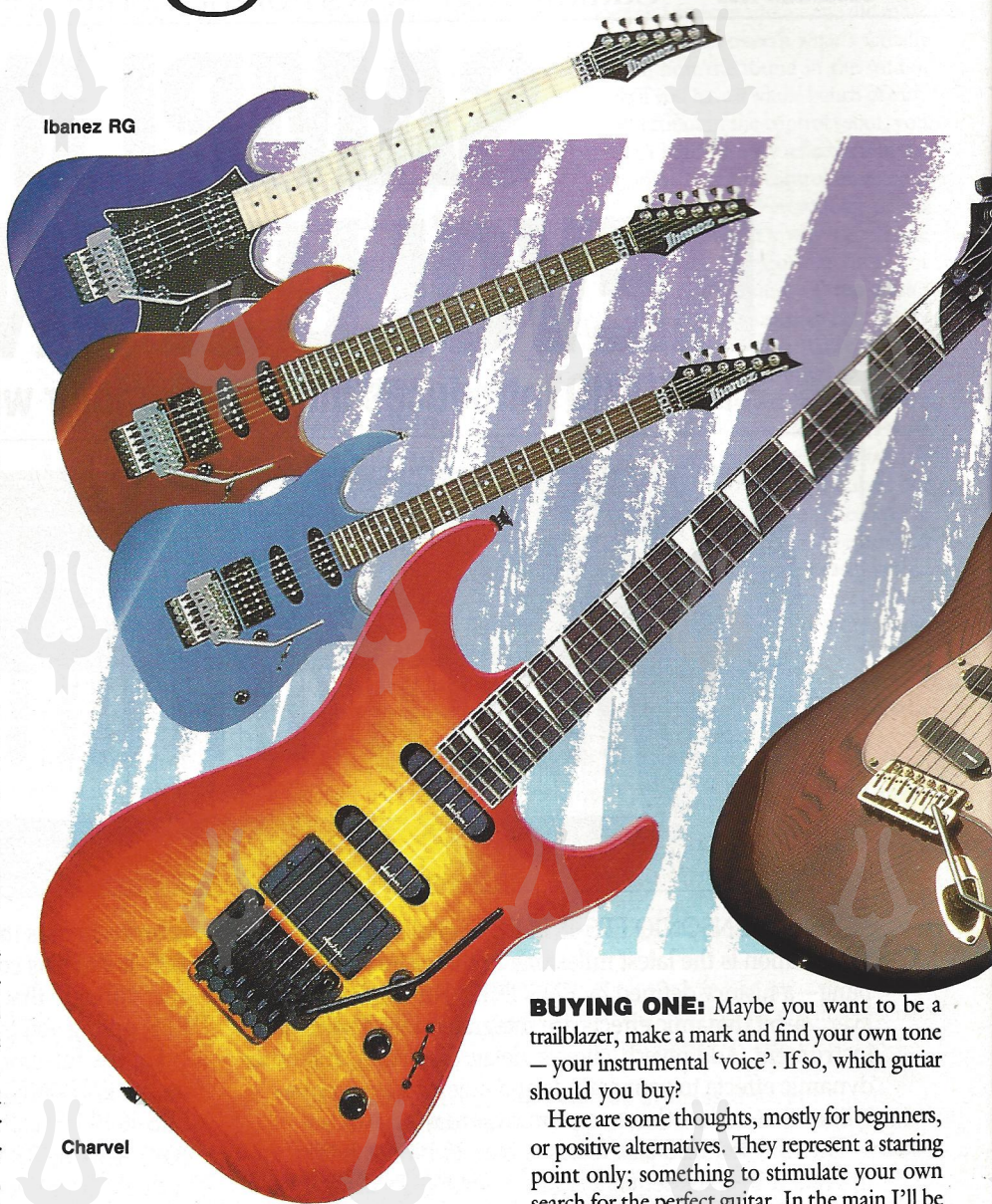
But the sad truth is that few of these vintage instruments are used to make the tunes underpinning the images of the clips. If you listen hard you'll discern the unmistakable tones of the Gibson Les Paul, Fender Stratocaster or Telecaster, and Charvel/Jackson or Kramer humbucker styles. Between them, these guitars are responsible for the lion's share of what we've heard from popular music for the last 30 years.

And for good reason. The old timers look great on TV, but they demand more from their increasingly lazy players. They are cranky or sweet; they have good nights and bad. In short, they are idiosyncratic. In the recording studio this can be a liability.

Then again, you're likely to find some guitarists who are prepared to take risks for their tone. Players who will use something new and unfashionable, or cheap (with softer pickups, for example) to go for something distinctive — something that will stand out immediately on the radio or make the audience lift its eyes from the lager.

No-one could really doubt that it's time for a change. If I've heard 150 hits from US semi-

Ibanez RG



Charvel

hard-rock bands where the lead break has the same notes and the same tone, I've heard 1500. Something has got to give. Accordingly, I predict the serious decline of the humbucker-in-the-bridge-and-two-single-coil-pickups-with-bolt-on-neck guitar.

Why? It has become boring and predictable. And the players who ushered in this decade of dominance (like the Messrs. Van Halen) have retired to their lounge rooms or passed the torch of inventiveness to newer and younger hands.

BUYING ONE: Maybe you want to be a trailblazer, make a mark and find your own tone — your instrumental 'voice'. If so, which guitar should you buy?

Here are some thoughts, mostly for beginners, or positive alternatives. They represent a starting point only; something to stimulate your own search for the perfect guitar. In the main I'll be looking at new instruments rather than classic models or the hard-to-find. The sentiments expressed are not necessarily those of the importers, distributors or manufacturers!

I'll run through a range of guitars according to styles of music.

PUB ROCK: Most garage guitarists are hoping to score a small pub gig. Come to think of it, most professional guitarists have the same desperate hope in a time of recession. And in the pubs of Australia the punters want to hear

and why?



Levinson Blade

Gibson
Les Paul
Junior

Gibson Les Paul

their music loud, dirty and strong. The more guitar cliché licks the better.

In a small corner bar you'll be left struggling with a Stratocaster, Telecaster or a copy of the same. It's hard to turn the volume up loud enough to get these guitars singing. So what do you do? You pile on the distortion (from your footswitch) until all distinctive tone is gone.

Many guitarists in this position end up with the tone of an Electrolux. And their tonally fat and flat solos get buried in the mix.

The Gibson Les Paul (\$2600-plus) has always been at its best in a small bar. Plenty of bottom end for a thunderous attack, and loads of sustain — even at lower volumes. But not everyone

wants — or can afford — a Les Paul.

As a young player your easiest solution is to go for humbucking pickups. At least there should be one in the bridge position. Charvel still has a number of affordable models around. For a sharper image and a colder sound (which is not necessarily an undesirable tone) Ibanez has a lot to offer: good shapes, bright graphics, proven craftsmanship and reliability. Good resale value, too. Take a look at the RG and PRO series at \$1000 to \$1500.

If you want something a little different, hunt around the second-hand shops for a Les Paul Junior or Melody Maker. These guitars have an absolutely killer tone; the trick is to get the shop

assistant to put on a new set of strings! These guitars sit in corners and rust, so you need to have sharp eyes to see the potential — but, boy, can they scream and howl. Big single-coil pickups; often with a one-piece body and, of course, glued neck.

Conversely, put these little guitars (yes, they are small and very light) on a big stage and they die. Like a spitting, unruly, angry child they perform best in a quiet, dark corner.

In a larger pub gig you can get away with a Stratocaster, Tele or a good copy. Try a second-hand Profile; Daion has some quality guitars at around \$400 that are frequently overlooked; Kinman guitars — made in Australia — offer great value for money and genuinely superior performance to the orientals with their Blueprint (Strat-style) and LA Rock series; lots of nice extras, and a cost of around \$1800. The best Les Paul copies are made by Tokai. You may want to replace one or both pickups, but with a good amp that's not necessary. Excellent bodywork and fittings.

If tremolo is your main selling point, the Charvels (starting at \$1000, but frequently heavily negotiable) still have the edge in my opinion. For a little more tone and traditional looks, go for a Fender Stratocaster with factory-fitted Floyd Rose arm. Lace Sensor pickups are sensational — they really keep the noise down while retaining original tone; buy them if you can possibly afford to.

But if money is no object, you can move into some new territory and technology. On-board circuitry can add definition and punch at lower volumes. If you want a classic look, classic tone *plus* extended options, you won't do better than a Levinson Blade (Stratocaster-style). There's a guitar with expanded tonal possibilities but, at the same time, successfully retaining much of the original Strat tone. Sperzel locking machine heads are a great alternative to a bulky Floyd Rose and locking nut system.

If you're lucky you'll find a Blade for little more than \$2000.

For a choice of body and fingerboard woods, active pickups and personal attention, the Noyce Eagle Mark VI is worth seeking out. Not as tonally adventurous as the Blade, it nevertheless offers a mighty help to the occasional gigger. A big sound, a lovely feel. No real change from \$2000.

STADIUM ROCK: Guitars sound different in large venues, over large PAs. I don't know why I'm including a section on stadium rock, 'cause if you're playing such venues you've probably got pretty definite ideas of your own.

There's only one point I want to make about choosing a guitar for stadium rock: you may need to change your guitar to maintain the tone and sound you had when playing smaller venues (and on your records, if any).

Electric guitars

COUNTRY: The main country axe remains the Telecaster. Unchallenged for 30 years. Famous for its 'silver-throated' beauty and ringing chime tone, a good one has to be experienced by every guitarist at some time or another. It truly is the electric guitar with the

greatest *diversity* of useful sounds.

Country players like its plaintive, transparent sound. Too thin for the hard rockers, it nevertheless can hold its own in a loud band if care is taken in choosing your amp and effects. Newer Teles — both from Fender and its

imitators — have dealt with most of the dreaded feedback problems which haunted Tele users down the years.

If you can't afford the real thing, best copies are from Profile and, in many configurations, from Washburn. Get one made in Japan if



Gibson SG Custom

Gibson Melody Maker

Gibson 335

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Information based on Sonics Yearbook 1990.

possible; the woodwork on the Korean ones is still patchy.

But country players should not get stuck in a Tele groove. Out-of-phase pickup switching on Strats can also work well with country ensembles, sitting comfortably with the tones of mandolin, pedal steel and fiddle.

Gibson 335, 345 and 355 semi-acoustics can fit in (\$2500-plus new, \$2000 for a good one second-hand), but care must be taken not to become overbearing. Many Australian country acts have favoured Maton semi-acoustics instead: a lighter tone, same warm sound, and excellent craftsmanship.

JAZZ: If you want to play jazz in real venues — not just in the rehearsal room — you'll need a lot of luck. You can't crank the volume up, and you'll need a versatile axe.

If you're a first-rate player you shouldn't look down on Fender Strats and Teles. You've got to play your notes accurately and cleanly — so they're not for the high-volume hammers-on — but the pure tone sparkles.

Many players go for semi-acoustic electrics for jazz. Tradition has a lot to do with it: Joe Pass, Herb Ellis, George Benson, Barney Kessel, Larry Coryell, etc. If you've never played a 'jazz box', get down to your music store. What's the

attraction tonally?

To me, the wooden bridge is the heart of the matter. The tone produced is rounded and a little dull: ideal to sit among the piano, upright bass and horns. It doesn't scream for attention, but aims to *blend*. These semi-acoustic guitars are team instruments.

You've got even more working for you once you discard your prejudices (if such they are) for such traditional instruments. With their shorter scale lengths you find you are right on top of your work; no stretching required. With less effective space to move around in — because fewer frets are readily accessible — you are forced to concentrate more on *what* you are saying with your instrument, rather than *where* (on the fretboard) you are saying it. By limiting your options you can actually expand your musicality.

Secondly, mild feedback is never far away. With a little skill you can turn this natural tendency to advantage, keeping just inside the line of feedback control, where tone is fatest and warmest.

A good compromise for the jazzier who also has to play a little rock and country to earn a living, is the Gibson 335, 345 or any number of variations. Go for the humbucking pickups, not the single coils. It's only a ply body (and

a steel bridge), but a magic tone nevertheless. And a huge sound is lurking inside, should you want it for the end of the night. The most versatile guitar in the world.

For a real buzz hunt down the newer Guild semi-acoustic guitar (reviewed in *Sonics*). It's got a wooden bridge, maple bodywork and a wonderful, smooth tone. Even better (for the rockers) you can turn it up much louder than most similar-looking jazz guitars. A real find. **CLASSICAL:** Sometimes classical players end up on stage with a band. These days there is a range of good pickups built-in to acoustic guitars, from Takamine to Ovation and Barcus Berry. But maybe you want an electric guitar? What's a good axe for your technique?

Look for a guitar with even tone and volume across the strings. Some electrics strongly emphasise either trebles or bass. You may find that limiting.

John Williams, while with Sky, used a Gibson SG (\$1500-plus) for much of the band's work. That's an interesting choice because it has this clean, balanced quality. The SG is not just the plaything of Angus and Co.

IN THE END: I hope this has been useful to you in your search for a sound. Obviously, it's a very personal view. ▶

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Electric guitars

As a young guitarist — if such you be — it will serve you well to begin listening to tone. Hang around the music shops and listen; play as many guitars as you can.

Learn to tell the difference between guitars on record. Which pickup is being used? Would you have chosen a different pickup — or a different guitar — to put a solo in that song?

Looking even deeper, what's the difference in tone between a quad box, a single 12-inch

speaker combo, and a pair of 10-inch speakers? What can you learn about the sustain and tone of an electric guitar by playing it with the amp off? If you attune your ears, what you hear may surprise you, and change the way you make your music.

Although I've suggested various guitars for particular uses, don't get hung up on this. Sometimes you just have to make do with what you've got. In the one night I've been asked

to play everything from dinner music to heavy metal to bluegrass — with a Mexican Hat Dance to finish the night — all on the one guitar (but, fortunately, not simultaneously). I — and the band — got paid a lot of money for doing this.

Do what you want, and use the guitar you fall in love with. There are no rules. But if you want to get out of the garage, and in front of an audience, you can do a lot worse with your spare time than to learn your craft well. **S**

By the neck

How do you judge a guitar, especially when you've wound yourself up to a purchasing frenzy? After 25 years or more of playing and owning guitars, I've come to the conclusion that I buy when I like the neck. And afterwards, with time, it dawns on me that the pickups are microphonic, so Mr Duncan's product gets installed or I dip the originals. Or that the beast won't stay in tune, so new machines are screwed on. And so on.

Why am I a sucker for a pretty neck? It goes back to the first guitar I owned. It was a white semi called a Rosetti Lucky 7. Much like a Gretsch in depth and other dimensions, there the resemblance stopped. The baby had one venetian cutaway and one pickup, one volume and one tone control. These three items and the jack socket were mounted on a singularly unsuitable scratchplate made from woodgrain laminate, the sort of stuff that made good work surfaces in the kitchens of the period. The plate formed the pickup cover and the six pole pieces protruded through it. The whole thing was attached at the end of the fingerboard and with the usual angle bracket to the lower side of the guitar. I think it cost £14 brand new.

By the standards of the time it looked close to what Eddie Cochran and (God bless him), Bert Weedon played. Anyway I learnt my first chords on it (E and A), enough to play the opening changes for the Stones' *Not Fade Away*. As I learnt more chords I played more, and came to play single note lines just like Hank Marvin, except that somehow my guitar seemed to go out of tune as I scaled the neck, which was something like Fred Flintstone's club, topped with a fingerboard of some white wood, stained black and fretted with brass frets. When I played the riff from *Memphis*, I was even more out of tune than Chuck. I moved the marginally adjustable fully floating bridge about, but got no improvement. The action went up and

down — no improvement. I tried to adjust the truss rod — there was a screw device in the heel of the neck, like some Burns and Guild guitars — only to find there was no adjustable truss rod, only a screw that held the neck on and which permitted its angle relative to the body to be changed, if you shimmed it with paddle pop sticks. This was an axe with serious limitations!

In time I got a solid body, a Watkins Rapier (don't laugh), and it was better, a whole lot better. This had a low action (well, lower), three pickups, a tremolo and a square neck. It, too, was a dog, but I didn't know it yet. When I did, I sold it with a clear conscience, to a guy who loved it and who played it for years. It didn't have an adjustable truss rod either. It had a great tone for Beatle-ish, Byrds-ish, Searcher-ish, jangly sorts of things.

GUITARS CAME and went, Hofners, Futuramas, all sorts, and all fit for kindling if I had only known it. I was gigging, using the all sorts, and then I came upon an early, Japanese, Guyatone classic Californian approximation, and this had a truss rod that worked, I think. I never touched it, though, as the neck was true and the action improbably low. I played it a lot at the start of the UK blues boom and beyond. I can't describe how it sounded, it didn't matter, I could play high up the neck in tune! And I could play fast and without effort. I became a better player.

When I first got my hands on a Gibson, it was a revelation. It was a cherry Custom with gold hardware and three pickups, and a factory installed Bigsby. It played like a dream and cost less than £200. If it was what I think it was, it had three PAFs on it, but I didn't know what PAFs were then, and very few people did because this was before Eric and Jimmy made LPs fashionable again, and took the covers off to show the bobbins. It was a Les Paul, but with the SG shape. Might be worth a bit now! It got

sold.

What happened to the Lucky 7? I never could sell that. But, in the blues boom, sometimes you had to play slide. The Rosetti was almost tailor made; it had a very high action, you could move the bridge so that the twelfth fret and the harmonic got sort of close to one another, and the pickup wailed through a Marshall as though it were a Danelectro or something. It was magic!

Somewhere along the way it got repainted with the then fashionable full-on psychedelic look, but it carried on wailing anyway. Present whereabouts unknown, but I do have some fond memories of the brute since it was the first guitar I took to pieces and the first I refretted. It was my learning exercise in more ways than one.

Are there any morals to be drawn from this story? Perhaps that you should never throw anything away. Or that some people (me), take a long time to learn. Or that it would be virtually impossible to buy guitars so bad today. Oh, and that necks are a very personal thing.

I got into 335s and I loved the necks from the late 50s dot-necks. I later found an ESP 335 in Venue that was even better. I like them flat-ish, wide-ish, and very shallow. I've still got a Travis Bean, the neck profile of which I like, even though being made out of aluminium it can be awfully cold on a hot day. On classic Californians, I like the triangular maple jobs from the mid-50s. And along the way, I owned, and loved, a Schecter Telecaster-style with a beautiful birdseye maple neck that wasn't flat-ish, wide-ish and very shallow. Reconcile that if you can. I can't. Necks are a very personal thing.

There's perhaps another moral, if you buy by the neck, you might go through a lot of axes and you might spend a lot on pickups, when you find out that necks ain't everything.

Klim Bucknole