

0.2 Signature guitars

To have a signature guitar built by a well-known company – for a guitarist, that is like being knighted. There's fame, the records are selling in the millions, and now the maker of that be-all-and-end-all go-to guitar asks whether one's name can be put on the headstock. And so Tawdro releases a Paco-Beslmeisl-guitar, and presents it to him with maximum ballyhoo at the SchlockMuCom. Such special edition models are usually developed in close cooperation with the correspondingly honored guitar player, and address all those who seek to sound just like their revered idol. A genuine Paco-Beslmeisl-Signature – only the dyed-in-the-wool fan owns that. Complete with yellow pick and a bandana.

The corresponding actual genesis, however, may be rather sobering: "Oh man! Look, Henry, the October numbers are not really up to plan – got an idea?" "Let's do another signature, then." "Yeah, that's what I thought of, too. Whom could we choose?" "Whom ... well ... that so-called manager of that WARLORD guy just mailed about when at last he'll get one. His present axe is a shambles." "WARLORD – that douche should first bring back the rig we loaned him and that allegedly is now in an ebay-auction the third time already. That guy – we will at the most supply him with a lid on his coffin – in company colors." "Jeez – you ARE having a bad day; it was just an idea! I kinda dig the WARLORD – he's not as grotty as people always say. What about ol' BLIND BOOBY BROONZY?" "You crazy? Nobody gives a sh.. about him anymore. I was rather thinking of SLOWHEAD." "Right back atcha: that jackass these days resells his guitars right away; he's a no-go. What about BIERMEISTER?" "Not notorious enough here in the States. We should stick to one of ours. Or a Brit. No, rather not – they're tough to understand. Texas, that would be good – 'Don't mess with Texas' 'n' all'. Yeah – I wanted to visit Austin again, anyway." "Speak about Austin: what are HEALEY AND THE DIFFERENCE up to these day?" "Told ya: no Brits, and certainly not that underpowered HEALEY! Power we need, so maybe JOE ROCKER. His *Strings from Hell* sells like hot cakes at the moment. Right: JOE ROCKER, that would be it." "What? That guy is gonna kick the bucket any minute now. He was constantly high on heavy stuff and wouldn't come down ... now he's in intensive care. In AXXES, Lix 'n' Trix they already published a kind of obituary." "Awright!! That's it, then! Think about it: if he makes it, we present him his signature at the next WAMM. If he doesn't we issue it at the time of the funeral. Posthumously, sort of, in a black gigbag adorned with a silver cross." "We could also bring it to the IC room right now. That would make for an epic pic: ROCKER with his eyes half closed, mouth hanging open – and our signature axe right across the bed. I could hold it in place ... we'll want to avoid a disaster like the one at Ronnie's rehab last year when the guitar slid off the covers and crashed." "Done! Go call the head physician for a permission of the shoot and such – we'll pay him a flight to Vegas with two weeks in a suite ... they always have some kind of conference there, anyway. I'll inform the custom shop. At last they can use up the birch slats from Patagonia; those were going to be woodworm fodder soon." "Should I offer the chief physician some sweetening if he gets difficult – maybe a complimentary ticket for his wife, as well?" "Get real, man – why would he want to take his wife?! He's looking at a voucher for the all-inclusive package, and I mean FULL inclusive." "Okey dokey; well just need the text for the official statement, then. Something like: in every clear minute ... well: in every free minute, JOE has contributed to the design and development because he insisted that his sound comes across at 100% in this signature. He brought us his original axe to measure it, and by his own hand wound another 25 feet of wire onto the pickups. Even the barf-green – he designed it himself. What a hoot!! That makes signature model number ... ????" "Must be the twenty-fifth or so, I think." "Very well: **LIMITED EDITION!**"

Signature models carry the names of famous guitarists, and are designed in close cooperation with these. Say the ads, and say the test reports. And many an epigone buys such a special model, hoping that now he/she will be able to get the same sound as the hero. The latter will present just that same model to the camera, and will play the instrument exclusively, live and in the studio. Will he, really? Now, many of the top players own not one but 10 or 50 or even 200 (or more!) guitars. Will they suddenly play only that signature model?? The specialist literature knows more:

Jeff Beck's Fender-Signature-model is already marketed in a second edition. He himself (as stated by G&B) "uses almost exclusively just a regular Fender Stratocaster (only the tailpiece and the nut are taken from his Signature model)". Regarding his album "Blow by Blow", on the cover of which he is shown with a Gibson Les Paul, he says: "*because of that cover, many people believe that they hear a Gibson guitar on that album. It was Strats and Teles, though.*" (G&B, 2/01). Conversely, the Gibson book states: "For the recordings of this LP (meant is "Blow by Blow"), Jeff Beck used this guitar (meant is a brown Les Paul) almost exclusively – even though a Fender Telecaster with humbuckers can be heard here and there, as well. On some of the tracks, Beck started to use a Fender Stratocaster, and since then has been as good as married to that guitar and that manufacturer".

Jimmy Page "is known predominantly as a Les-Paul-player. However, he recorded all of the first Led Zeppelin album using a Telecaster (!) that Jeff Beck had given him. Replying to a remark that the guitar sound on that album was exactly that of a Les Paul, Page once told the interviewer from *Guitar Player*: "You know, I can get many sounds out of the guitar that you would normally not get from it. That confusion goes back to the early sessions that I played a Les Paul on. Those recordings may not sound like a Les Paul but I did use one." G&B Fender special, p.37.

Moreover, Messrs. guitarists the will be happy to switch the supplier. Here's **Richie Sambora** in an interview by G&B (10/02): "*Also, I am lucky to have a few 59's and a '60s sunburst Les Paul. Those are my favorites right now. As such, Fender has been marginalized a bit.*" G&B: "But didn't they recently make a signature model for you?" Sambora: "*True! But what can I do (laughs). ... Actually, I play everything that I get my hands on and that sounds halfway decent.*" Right above the headline '**Richie Sambora Standard Stratocaster**', we find in the Fender brochure: "Designed under the direct supervision of some of the world's most influential players, these models have been painstakingly crafted to accommodate each artist's unique specifications and playing style" (Fender-Frontline).

Duchossoir's book on the Strat, preface by **E. Clapton**: "The Stratocaster is about as close to being perfect as any electric guitar can be". Clapton-ad: "The one and only electric guitar*." On the other hand, we read in Bacon/Day: "*I have never found a guitar quite as good as that one*" – with Clapton referring his lost Gibson Les Paul. Why should I care about what I said yesterday?! 'The Gibson' cites Clapton using an ES-5, the 'Cream sound' is due to Clapton's SG, or to his Firebird, or to his 335, respectively, and he famously used a Telecaster, as well. The acoustic-sound of Cream, however, stems from the Epiphone and Guild guitars of Mr. Eric Patrick Clapp. It seems many more signature models will be in order. There is already one issued by Martin ... that apparently was scorned by E.C. for his UNPLUGGED oeuvre.

* Stratocaster, G&B 4/06

Mark Knopfler: *"If I want a fatter sound, I'll use my Les Paul – it is simply more dynamic. That does not mean, however, that I could not do the same thing with a Stratocaster¹."* That might not entirely reassure the gentlemen at Fender, since they write about the Mark-Knopfler-Stratocaster in the brochure: "His unmistakable tone comes from three Texas Special single-coil pickups and a five-way switch." And Mark even goes one better: *"Sometime I use the Les Paul to get a particularly clean sound¹."*

Gibson's Lucille is **B. B. King's** signature guitar. Charles Dennis, guitarist in B.B.'s band, comments: *"We were out there somewhere and Lucille couldn't make it – she was still on the plane. We had to play the job, though, and he played a Fender. What can I say: in his hands it still sounded just like Lucille²."*

Yngwie Malmsteen has been given a signature model by Fender, but remarks: *"But the only ones that I actually play, are Strats from the late 60's and early 70's"*, (G&B 11/02, S.63)."

"Our desire with the whole Signature Series was to build the guitars exactly the way the artists play them. We didn't just want to build something that everybody was going to buy and then the artist had to have his different". Fender-exec Dan Smith in Duchossoir's Telecaster book.

Lenny Kravitz got a signature Flying V from Gibson. However: *"I can hardly remember the details. I don't now anymore what I changed on it – just that I shortened the neck some."* True, as the test report in G&B discloses: the scale is 625 mm, compared to the 626 mm on the original Flying V. Also: *"It is much lighter."* True, as well: 3.2 kg compared to 3.3 kg. *"And it sounds better. That makes a big difference."* The tester does indeed state that there is a difference: "To my surprise, it delivered more sustain than first expected, but it cannot match the regular V. In terms of attack and the evolution of the tone, it lags behind." What! The tester does some straight talking? That's is rather unusual ... he even detects a constructional flaw: "Due to the shallow neck angle, the strings can exert next to no pressure on the bridge; they run across it almost without any bend angle. One consequence is an unintended and annoying sitar-effect on the e-string". That, on the other hand, the vibrato is a weak point, that is typical: "the Maestro-Vibrato has always had the deficiency that it is not adjustable – neither in terms of the spring-tension nor regarding the height of string retainer. On the guitar under test, the lever hovers so closely above the pickguard that it is just about possible to get the finger under the handle." Still, Mr. Kravitz heartily condones the fact that the signature model sets the customer back a cool € 6990.-, in contrast to the regular model at € 2190. *"Such things are always more expensive ... (grin),"* Does he actually play it? *"In the studio I always use a selection of Les Pauls. Mostly goldtops or vintage flames from '58, '59 or '60"*. Typical stuff you will just simply use if you *"store about 140 guitars in a storage area specially rented for the purpose."* ... getting a signature guitar as no. 141³. Having said that: the Flying V seems not to be a total loss, after all: Mr. Kravitz poses in the bathtub with such a piece. Watch out, though, dear fans: that is the white V. The black V *"I would have never subjected to the paint"*. Because (aren't our artists so precious?!): the tub is not filled with water but with red paint. The situation became rather dangerous for **Kurt Cobain**: "He played Jazzmaster- and Mustang-guitars – until he received a signature model. He committed suicide in 1994¹." Come to think of ... maybe ... had he stayed with the regular stuff

¹ G&B Fender special issue.

² G&B 9/06

³ G&B 06/2004 p.72, G&B Gibson special issue p.126.

Mike Einziger (Incubus): *"For a long time already I had no fun playing the PRS. I just wanted something new. I wanted to change, without any sanction. And so I decided that I never again would legally tie myself in such a way to a guitar company."* Is that the reason why there is so far no signature model for Mike Einziger? *"Correct. I have no interest in that. To be honest, I find that simply silly ... (laughs). I mean, what should I change in an instrument that in its own ways is already perfect?"* G&B, 1/07, p.48.

... and many more ...

The specialist magazines further fuel the signature- and custom-market by detailed reports on how the great guitar-wizard has had his (or her) axe and amp modified. Frequently with the hint attached: "if you want to do the same, be prepared to shell out € 8000.-." Many an epigone will save over the years to reach this (or a smaller) number to come closer to his/her hero. And if the original Blackie is out of reach, then at least let's go for a set of 3 new pots for € 600.-. Or – for the Marshall – let's get that more authentic (!) output transformer from the US. The old lag over there is not even able to send to Old Europe an offer that would correspond to mercantile convention, but he does have, no less, several transformer variants in his self-wound assortment. Better sound? Only if you believe (Chapter 10.6).

For the sake of fairness, we do need to cover another variant: there's the well-off forty- or fifty-something who gets onstage with his mates on the weekend purely for fun. He really enjoys that they all envy him for his original 1963-Rickenbacker. He doesn't mind that it was expensive; to the contrary: that's why he bought it. And of course because the old Beatles songs are a pleasure to play on it. Actually, if such a Ricky could be had for € 100.- at every yard sale, he would have rather chosen the old Epiphone Casino. Or some other pricey 'unique feature'. Just like his wheels, a tuned up Helby-S Corba – that cannot be found on every street corner, either. Without any malice now: making music has got a lot to do with emotions. Including the audience ("incredible, a 'Rickenbacker'"), and the artist ("how can that bloke next to me coax such awesome tones from his el-cheapo?"). Therefore it is not uncommon – actually it is even imperative – that many musicians attribute a power of inspiration to their instruments that cannot be verified scientifically. Looking at that translucent-blue stained maple top ... oh man! On the rear, a tiny sticker becomes visible with a 4-four-digit figure starting with a 9 ... that's how impulsive comfort shopping happens (especially if GAS – gear acquisition syndrome – plays a role, as well). Finally: a 12-string that not everybody has. Didn't that one player back in the day – what was his name ... he must have played one like that or something similar ... man, these rare stringed bodies can get to you ... it's so ... oh ... where were we? Which chapter was this supposed to be? Ah, yes, right, special models! Custom-Shop, Artist-Gallery, Signature-Model ... of course! And why not? Not due to any logic and rationale! Not because of any alleged extra-fidgeting and some supplementary wisdom of some trendy idol, but out of pure lust and passion. Right - that had to be said! Sure, the sales guys are perfectly aware of this, and every year they provide ample ordnance for the passionate buyer with the bursting wallet: model of the year, limited edition, custom colors, custom woods, with the original signature by Mr. X (surcharge is \$ 4000.- with no less than about \$ 5.- going to endangered jungles), and of course the original 2nd-hand gear used by the big stars. That will be seven digits, then, for the particularly well-endowed money-bag. No joke at all. Seven digits – that's \$ and €, not Yen.

"Any lively joy is, too, a fallacy, a vapor, because no fulfilled desire can yield persisting satisfaction. Because, too, any possession and any happiness is merely on loan from chance for an undetermined time." That would be Schopenhauer. Probably wasn't a guitar player.