





When Craft Becomes Art
The Destroy All Guitars Telstar

BY BRANDON BRINSON

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Late Night Show host Conan O'Brien has many running gags. One of the more popular is "If They Mated," a rendering of two celebrities' most prominent features on one face. Builder consortium Destroy All Guitars has taken that one step further and applied it in real life—using two of the world's most famous solidbody electric guitars, the Stratocaster and the Telecaster, to form the Telstar. It is most certainly not a gag.

Organized by Cliff Cultreri, DAG describes itself as "a guild for guitarists," where builders, designers, and parts makers can all combine their strengths instead of competing with each other. The Telstar represents the first original guitar designed and built by DAG. It combines the strengths of master builders Gene Baker and Chad Underwood. Baker (who was an apprentice Master Builder at Fender, and Senior Master Builder at Gibson by age twenty-five) starts the process, carving the ash into the Telstar's new-yet-familiar body shape. When Underwood receives the body, he sets to work putting the pieces together—he's highly acclaimed as one of the finest bolt-on builders available today. Underwood also handles the relicing of the guitar, transforming it from a new-looking guitar to a well-maintained classic. "Why would you want a guitar with modern looks and vintage playability?" asks Matte Henderson, who came up with the idea for the Telstar. "We grew up looking at people playing Strats and Teles and SGs and Explorers—and there's something very cool about that aesthetic—but it's not always the most functional scenario."

Cultreri also gave us a hilarious description of the Telstar as a mix between a long-term relationship and a one-night-stand: "I started off as a Tele fanatic. Somewhere in my playing career, I *did* romance the Stratocaster, and it's been in and out of my life like this psychotic ex-girlfriend that just doesn't quite want to go away, shows up every now and then, locks itself in my bathroom, refuses to leave, bangs its head on the wall a few times... this really allows me to keep that crazy girlfriend in check." ►►

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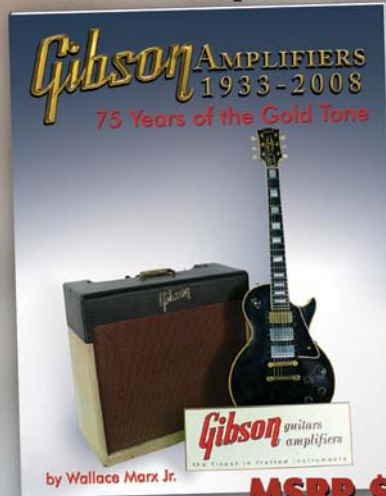
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Designing the Telstar

Another humorous description can be found on the headstock of the guitar itself, which features the two slogans of DAG: "Modern Vintage Mayhem" and "Schizophrenic Mojo." These slogans capture the Telstar in a nutshell—it's a near-perfect blend of new and old. "Part of Schizophrenic Mojo is balancing out aesthetics and functionality," says Henderson. "I wanted this to have that classic fifties Leo aesthetic, but I wanted any modifications we had to enhance the playability to scream out not when you look at it, but when you play it."

"What's at the heart of it is the versatility," says Cultreri. "There's no such thing as one Swiss Army Knife that does everything, but there certainly are some that do more than others." It's obvious from the get-go that the Telstar is a multi-tool; it combines two singular instruments into a cohesive, organic whole. And it is clearly intended as a tool for players: the nature of that merger goes beyond the striking visual appeal of the two guitars in one—at once both strange and familiar. It also goes into a collection of blended elements that you discover with

your hands and your ears, rather than with your eyes. It takes the best attributes of each and combines them in a unique way. "Guys that play Strats and Teles can get it done with one guitar," Cultreri explains. "You don't need to bring two guitars."

Nearly everyone who's seen pictures of the Telstar has marveled at the combination of elements from Fender's flagship models. "We didn't just want to make another Strat or another Tele," Cultreri offers. "We wanted to introduce something that was different into the market. You look at the bottom ledge of the Tele, the way it just sits on your lap more comfortably for sitting and playing; and vice versa the Strat, with the rounded contours and the tummy contours—it's a bit more comfortable up top."

The Telstar in Person

As we said, some aspects of this guitar are best discovered up close and personal. In addition to vintage styling, the Telstar has some of today's more advanced modern design elements. DAG has eliminated the need for a string tree, which they describe as a "vestigial appendage." Instead, the height of the tuners can be adjusted. In

addition to providing better tuning stability, this design also helps many Nashville-style players, says Cultreri: "Lots of Tele players do a lot of tricks and moves with bends behind the nut, and if you have a string tree in the way, you can't do them. So with the graduated height on the tuning pegs, it allows guys to get back there and do bends on the head of the guitar."

Another state-of-the-art element is in the choice of a bridge. You can go with a vintage Tele-style "double-cut" stainless steel with compensated brass saddles for the hardtail option, or you can accommodate your Strat leanings with a Glendale Chimemaster Tremolo, with a steel top plate, brass block and compensated brass saddles. In addition, DAG has included the "Tinker Street" design option—which simply reverses the bridge pickup to mimic Hendrix's sound.

The 22-fret maple neck on the Telstar is one of the finest, most advanced features—Baker has designed a compound radius neck that has a huge feeling at the nut, but tapers off smoothly to increase playability at the higher frets. The taper really allows you to adjust ►►

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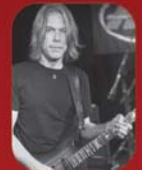
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your playing style between the two designs as well. Open chords really twang and pop, while the thinner profile higher up allows for lightning-fast leads. "Maybe someone's never going to go past the third fret, and just plays cowboy chords," said Cultreri. "They'll love this guitar, too. Someone who's going to push the instrument to the extreme is also going to appreciate this instrument."

The bridge pickup is one of the few standard accoutrements on the Telstar: every model has a Tele pickup in the bridge. "What's the strongest trait of the Telecaster?" asks Henderson. "The bridge pickup. What's the weak link on a Strat? The bridge pickup. So it makes perfect sense to use a Tele bridge pickup in this guitar." There are eight different pickup combinations in all, each using a Tele pickup in the bridge. From there, any combination you can think of—and some you might not, at first—are possible. For example, how about a Tele/Strat/Tele lineup, or a Tele/Strat/Humbucker? Notched tones

with two Tele pickups? *Sacre bleu!* All of the pickups are made by Jason Lollar specifically for Underwood's design.

DAG sent us three different models to check out, each bringing something different to the table. Two of the guitars are Sonic Blue, following in Fender's fifties tradition of using automobile colors on guitars; the third is a blonde. Each one has been masterfully relined by Underwood, who has worked closely on every detail. The peg heads are tarnished, the paint is chipped, and the pickup magnets look like they've seen years of playing.

In addition, a two-tone sunburst, a Mary K greenguard and a butterscotch blackguard are offered right now. "When we started messing around, we were like, 'Man, wouldn't it be great to offer the fifties custom colors!' " says Henderson. "All these colors came from car colors, and we started looking at colors that were a little more

esoteric. Over the next year, we're going to start exploring those colors too."

Each guitar in our office now also has a different bridge than the standard options: one has a Glendale vintage Tele "single cut" bridge, another has a Glendale "hardtail" Strat bridge, and the last has the aforementioned Chimemaster Tremolo, but with steel saddles. One also has the Tinker Street pickup option. There are numerous other options for customization, as well. If you want a two-tone Telstar with a Tele/Strat/Humbucker lineup, a Tele-style pickguard, and Strat-style top hat knobs, it's yours.

If you're crazy about a Strat and a Tele, but wish the (relative) shortcomings of the one were compensated by the strengths of the other, the Telstar might just be your dream guitar. With the list of options available, you've got the ability to dial in exactly what you want. ▶▶▶

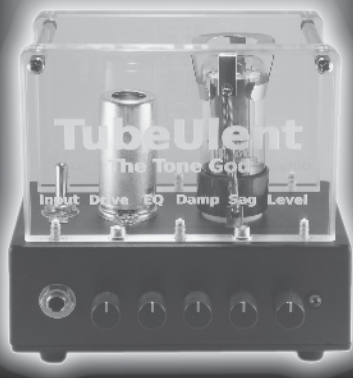
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"We have Gene constantly working on pickguards, bodies, necks—there's always interchangeable parts and pieces, so that we can always have a little bit of a backlog," says Henderson. "That way, when someone calls for a specific combination, chances are we'll have what we need, unless it's a complete oddball. So many people just want to be done. They don't want to do any more work," he adds. "And that's what separates us—that's what artistry is: following an idea to its logical conclusion." 

Build time from date of order right now stands at about 2 – 3 months, but that can vary depending on the options. The Telstar is \$3950, but that doesn't vary according to options—one price fits all.

Contact Destroy All Guitars at: 919-552-3047; or send an email to: cliff@destroyallguitars.com.

