



Forward Thinking

As technology gallops ever forwards, you'd have thought the humble six-string would have been miniaturised, digitised and thoroughly 2010'd by now. Has it? Here we look at the most modern guitars around and consider your options if you want to step out of the dark ages...

by Dave Burrluck, Trevor Curwen & Mick Taylor

You could argue that the hi-tech optimism of the 1980s – complete with its numerous guitar-to-MIDI wonder devices – was killed stone dead by two guitar players: Stevie Ray Vaughan and Slash. Any forward-looking remnants were subsequently headed off by the back-to-basics grunge movement as a plethora of futuristic dreams ended up in dusty corners of music shops, bedrooms and lofts. That was then, but where are we now?

Parker Guitars would probably be at the top, or somewhere very close, should you make a list of the guitar companies most likely to embrace new technology. Since 1993 the US manufacturer has displayed an innovative streak and an apparent desire to move the electric guitar away from traditional 1950s designs. It was the original Fly that broke the mould, not just with its radical shape and construction but also that it incorporated a piezo saddle

bridge as standard to add pseudo-acoustic sounds; effectively a 'two-voice' instrument. Now, with the Fly Mojo MIDI, it's a 'three-voice' guitar, adding synth access.

Meanwhile, somewhere in Devon, Hugh Manson's work for musicians such as Matthew Bellamy (Muse) and John Paul Jones (Led Zeppelin, Them Crooked Vultures) has taken him to places that few 'luthiers' dare to go. His new MB-1 isn't a synth-access guitar like the Parker Fly Mojo MIDI:

instead it uses MIDI information from an onboard controller pad to allow you to manipulate outboard effects processors.

So let's take a forward glimpse and see how two completely different makers fare with two of the most advanced, yet very different, instruments that money can buy. After that we'll round up the best of the rest and also consider your wider connectivity options.

So who's ready for the 'future', then?





Manson MB-1 Standard £3,299

Hugh Manson plus Matt Bellamy equals the world's most usable hi-tech guitar? Let's plug in... **by Dave Burrluck**

As a premier British guitar maker, shop owner and touring tech to the stars, Hugh Manson is a busy man. Thankfully for us, however, he's found time to launch his first signature model, founded on his long-time association with Muse's Matt Bellamy, who plays numerous Manson guitars. As the owner's certificate included with each MB-1 Standard attests, "the instrument has been crafted combining the talent and artistic expression of Matthew Bellamy and the manufacturing expertise of Hugh Manson. Each instrument has been constructed in the UK using the finest components and unique custom electronics, replicating the shape and features of the stage guitars used by Matthew Bellamy." Each certificate is signed by both parties.

The MB-1, based on Bellamy's own cracked mirror M1D1, which we featured back in issue 274, is built in batches of 25. The first batch was announced earlier in 2009 and sold out in a matter of weeks. At the time of writing, a second batch has yet to be announced, but with Muse's ongoing worldwide tour supporting their latest album, we'd be surprised if demand doesn't continue.

The MB-1 is far from some successful artist 'take the money and run' concept. Tipping the 3k mark, however, it's far from cheap, but it is a very serious instrument, loaded with some pretty clever toys. Underneath the technology is a very well made, yet simple, solidbody electric. Its stretched Tele outline replicates Matt's original design in style, although the body is a little longer to make space for the X-Y MIDI control pad, and that

upper shoulder is slightly downsized. Only two finishes are offered, the standard matt textured black, as here, or a gloss red glitter, which adds a further £200.

Hugh has made a few necks in his time and this clean, satin-finished birds-eye maple bolt-on is a corker – Fender-style in dimension with a slight 'V' profile maximising depth and stiffness, without feeling overly bulky in the hand. The dark rosewood 'board only has

side dots, a compound radius and finely installed medium gauge frets. Load on top-of-the-line Gotoh hardware – including those beautiful 512 tuners with height adjustable posts to maximise the down pressure over the graphite nut – plus a slinky, clean set-up and, like we said, this guitar is beautifully crafted simplicity.

With its mainly black livery, from a few feet away the extra black switches and buttons almost disappear, but even if they were more visible, it's a testament to the design that the MB-1 is actually a pretty easy drive. At the bridge we have a covered Manson/Bare Knuckle humbucker modelled closely on Bare Knuckle's own Nailbomb. At the neck we have a humbucker-sized Fernandes Sustainer (one coil is the sustainer driver, the other a standard single-coil). The dual pickups are controlled by a black-tipped



The five-pin MIDI socket enables you to use the touch pad to control a variety of external effects



MANSON MB-1 STANDARD £3,299
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPH BY NEIL GODWIN



The Rivals

Fernandes' Dragonfly Pro (£599) also offers an alder body with bolt-on maple neck and the all-important Fernandes Sustainer. And if you wanted to retrofit a Sustainer to your own guitar, the Fernandes kits start at £179. You could use a **Korg KP-3 Kaoss pad** (£349) to treat your guitar – you just won't have the convenience of the X-Y control screen on your instrument. **Gibson** has been creating some higher-tech axes with its auto-tuning **Robot** and **Dark Fire** ranges – the later offering Robot tuning, preset instrument EQs, piezo acoustic tones and computer connectivity. Also, its **HD.6X-Pro** allows individual placement of each strings' output anywhere in the stereo field. Gibson has recently released the **Dusk Tiger**, which offers "programmable active four-band parametric EQ systems for both the magnetic and the piezo pickups, which allow infinite fine tuning of your tone." See Front End this issue for more on that.



The bridge humbucker on this particular MB-1 has a coil-split, controlled by a pull/push switch on the tone pot

Chords and riffs sound big, but still quite organic, and flicking in the Sustainer (which automatically voices the bridge humbucker only) just adds to the fun

three-way toggle placed near to the closely-spaced chromed metal Tele-style knobs of the volume and tone controls. Below are two black-plated mini switches (Sustainer on/off and Sustainer mode). The upper shoulder houses a second

three-way toggle – a centre-off kill switch. For many of us, this alone would be our dream guitar (well, perhaps with a vibrato), but the MB-1's largest visual clue to its sonic potential is the black-rimmed screen at the base of the guitar: an X-Y

MIDI controller pad, set up out of the box to use with both Korg's KP-3 Kaoss pad and DigiTech's Whammy pedal.

Of course, all this electrickery needs power and the MB-1 uses two 9V blocks (no power consumption is quoted) housed in their own rear cavity. Two separate outputs offload the info: standard jack and five-pin MIDI outputs.

Now all that we need to do is get out heads around the Manson's technology...

Sounds

As you should expect at this price range, the feel, playability and set-up are first class. The frets aren't overly heavy and it actually feels really quite classic in that regard, with an excellent weight and strapped-on

balance and, played unplugged, a clean, ringing response.

The MB-1 is actually a straightforward guitar, with the exception of its Sustainer/MIDI capabilities. The bridge humbucker kicks out a big sound, full strong mids, thumping bass-end and rounded, slightly muted highs. The single-coil neck pickup is lighter, but actually quite well matched tonally – full and tubby, with a little of a single-coil's classic edge. The dual-pickup mix adds some more hollowed jangle, and on this guitar (a custom modification) we have a pull/push switch on the tone that splits the bridge humbucker and gives the MB-1 a funkier edge. It's with a thick-gained amp that the MB-1, not surprisingly, feels most at home. Chords and riffs sound big, but still quite organic, and flicking in the Sustainer (which automatically voices the bridge humbucker only) just adds to the fun. The killswitch isn't the quietest we've encountered,



The Manson/Bare Knuckle bridge 'bucker is derived from a BK Nailbomb



with quite a low-end thump as its switched out and a little crackle too. Also, with the Sustainer on you can hear a little 'bleed' from the pickup when it should be muted.

Whether or not your MIDI lead is plugged into anything, the control screen glows in a variety of otherworldly colours. Plugging into a DigiTech Whammy pedal illustrates the potential. By moving your finger from treble to bass side on the screen (it only works on this one axis here) your finger effectively 'moves' the pedal's treadle. Now, you could do that with your foot, but the interesting thing is that you have much more control. Tapping two fingers on the screen creates pitch effects you just can't get with your foot alone and for onstage show-offs you're not rooted to the position of your pedal, just the length of your MIDI lead.

The Korg Kaoss pad is well named. Designed to treat, effect, filter and sample virtually any kind of audio, it's an Aladdin's cave for the adventurous and a definite no-go area for the 'a smattering of chorus is as far as I go' brigade. A couple of hours spent experimenting with the Kaoss pad left us slightly queasy. Some of its effects seem to work better than others with the control screen: LFO and filter patches (with a dollop of heavy

gain and the Sustainer on) are obvious places to start – thankfully you can save at least some of your experiments. Less extreme uses would obviously include altering distortion gain and tone parameters, so long as your FX unit (or software) can be MIDI controlled.

Verdict

The MB-1 is a rare bird: a British-made signature guitar for a unique British guitarist. Matt Bellamy's embrace of technology is reflected in this guitar, which as far as we're aware is totally unique. But for

all those plus points it remains an expensive piece – you'd have to be a huge Bellamy fan, or very confident that you can use the sound manipulation potential it offers in your own musical landscapes, to get your money's worth. Otherwise there are cheaper ways to achieve similar results and, of course, you'll still need a Kaoss pad or MIDI FX to use all of the MB-1's features.

On its own it's a mighty fine rock guitar with onboard Fernandes Sustainer – something Fernandes do quite nicely at a far lower price and that'll happily integrate with a Kaoss pad, although manipulating that unit's touch screen is certainly not as convenient as having it built-in to the guitar.

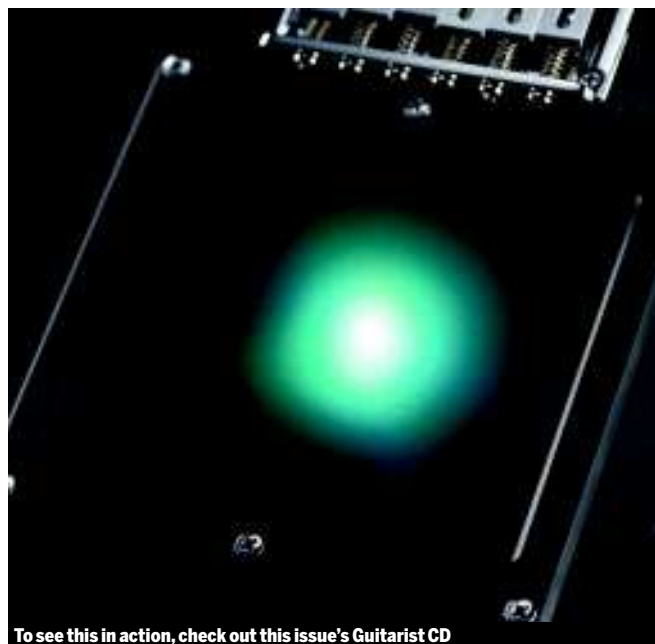
All in all a great job, but it does come at a steep price. **G**

The bottom line

We like: Very tidy build quality; massive rock tone; Sustainer; the potential of the MIDI controller

We dislike: The killswitch isn't the most efficient; it's rather expensive

Guitarist says: Finally you can buy the exact same guitar that Matt Bellamy uses. It comes at a price, but remains a unique collaboration between artist and luthier



To see this in action, check out this issue's Guitarist CD



Manson MB-1

PRICE: £3,299 (inc case)

ORIGIN: UK

TYPE: Single-cutaway electric with Fernandes Sustainer and an X-Y MIDI control pad

BODY: Alder

NECK: Birds-eye maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: Graphite/42.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearl side dots, approx 228-305mm (9-12-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium (2.6mm wide x 1.3mm high)

HARDWARE: Chrome-plated Gotoh GTC102 fixed bridge (with steel saddles), chrome-plated Gotoh SG510 HAP tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm

ELECTRICS: Manson/Bare Knuckle MBK-2 bridge humbucker, Fernandes Sustainer humbucker-size Sustainer Driver at neck, three-way toggle pickup selector switch, three-way toggle centre-off-kill switch, volume and tone control, mini toggles for Sustainer on/off and mode selection (natural/harmonic). X-Y MIDI control screen with bypass/freeze push switch. Standard 6.4mm output jack, MIDI out five-pin DIN socket.

Powering is from two 9V batteries

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8

OPTIONS: The MB-1 Standard is available without X-Y controller screen at £2,999. Round tuner buttons and control knobs as seen on Bellamy's first two Manson guitars (add £250). For more info on the Korg KP-3 Kaoss Pad (£349) go to www.korg.com

LEFT-HANDERS: To order (£POA)

FINISHES: Matt black (as reviewed), gloss red glitter (adds £200)

Manson Guitars

01392 496379

www.mansons.co.uk

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★☆

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★ ➤

PARKER FLY MOJO MIDI £3,499
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS



Parker Fly Mojo MIDI £3,499

The tech gets even higher in one of the world's smartest MIDI-loaded guitars *by Trevor Curwen*

The Fly Mojo MIDI sports a Roland GK-KIT-GT3 Divided Pickup that allows for full integration with the Roland V-Guitar system, the GR-20 synth, or anything else that can take the 13-pin signal. It means you can access the modelled guitar and amp sounds and altered tunings found in the VG-99 plus the sounds of any synths or samplers connected via MIDI.

Based on the existing Fly Mojo, it looks pretty much the same as any other high-end Parker Fly, bar two important considerations. First off there's the Roland pickup firmly screwed-in between bridge pickup and bridge (hardly noticeable on our black model) and then there's the extra controls for the pickup, which (counting a red LED that illuminates when connected to an appropriate Roland unit) effectively doubles the control furniture. This guitar is fitted with two Seymour Duncan humbuckers – a Jazz in the neck position and a JB at the bridge. In addition, the bridge sports a six-element Fishman

piezo pickup that's connected to an active custom Fishman stereo preamp.

Standard output for the guitar is via a 'smart switching' standard jack that offers a split stereo or summed mono signal depending on the lead that you use. With a standard mono guitar lead you get a mixture of the piezo and magnetic pickup signals, but using the stereo lead that comes supplied with the guitar you can split the two signals to two separate amplifiers. An adjacent 13-pin output connects directly to a Roland unit, sending the signal both from the divided pickup and from the magnetic pickups (if selected).

The controls on the Fly Mojo MIDI might look a little daunting at first glance, but Parker has been careful in positioning the divided pickup controls so that they don't interfere with the standard Fly controls, which are all in their usual logical places. For the conventional magnetic pickups there's a standard volume knob and three-way pickup selector switch. A single tone knob

works for both pickups and it can be pulled upwards to operate a coil-split. The output from the bridge piezo is controlled by a third knob and there's a second three-way toggle that selects either piezo, magnetic pickups or both.

Sitting above that array are the three main controls for the divided pickup: a volume

control and two small black buttons to scroll up and down through the patches in your connected unit. A mini-toggle switch located directly between the two larger three-way switches controls what's sent to the 13-pin output: divided pickup only, magnetic pickups only or a blend of both.

Sounds

The look of the Fly may continue to polarise opinion, but it's undoubtedly a very nice guitar to play – finished with great attention to detail, lightweight and well balanced. With smoothly finished stainless steel frets and the slick carbon-glass-epoxy composite



Don't be frightened by the myriad switches and knobs, it's all well laid-out

The look of the Fly may continue to polarise opinion, but it's undoubtedly a very nice guitar to play – finished with great attention to detail, lightweight and well balanced



The Rivals

If you want to add synth access to your own guitar you can add a **Roland GK-3** pickup (£129) – either screw it in place or use sticky pads. The **Roland GR-20** synth (£569) includes the GK-3 as part of the package but the **VG-99** (£999) Virtual Guitar System doesn't. **Carvin** does several guitars with synth access, the newest being the **Alan Holdsworth Signature Series HF2S Fatboy** (£TBC depending on features chosen). For a considerably smaller outlay than the Parker there's the **Godin xtSA** (£1,153) – another three-voice guitar that we looked at in issue 309.

of the fingerboard, this is a guitar that you can definitely whizz around on. Furthermore the vibrato system is one of the best units around, with a very smooth action and accurate return to pitch.

As for the sounds, the magnetic pickups offer plenty of versatility. Set your amp up right and the two Seymour Duncan pickups offer up a full-bodied sound that belies the guitar's lightweight feel. The JB in the bridge position provides access to strident rock tones, while the Jazz at the neck confers the warmer, mellower vibe that its name would suggest, with plenty of sustain for liquid lead work with a cranked amp. Pull out the tone knob to operate the coil-split and you lose some of that girth and head towards more Fender-like territory.

Bringing the piezo pickup into the equation adds a different dimension. Selecting the magnetic/piezo combination with both sounds delivered to the same amp, it's possible to dial in a little of the piezo sound to add just a touch more edge and attack to the magnetic pickup sounds – plenty of subtle blends are available. On its own the piezo offers a fair substitute for having to switch to an acoustic mid-song onstage. It's best heard through a mixing desk rather than through a guitar amp, where some stereo chorus



The discrete Roland GK-GT3 pickup in front of the bridge feeds a 13-pin output that works with Roland's VG, GR and GI gear

and reverb can go a long way in helping the illusion, perhaps a little EQ as well. Of course, if you want a different acoustic guitar sound, a connected Roland V-Guitar system will provide that and much more.

With the 13-pin output in use, both the signal from the magnetic pickups and whatever sound the VG/synth is providing come out of the VG/synth's own outputs, where the two sounds can be separated if desired with the magnetic

pickups being sent through an individual output to an amp from there. There's no provision for sending the piezo signal out of the 13-pin output. If you'd prefer to keep your conventional guitar sounds separate from the synth output you can use the output jack simultaneously with the 13-pin output, but this disables its stereo operation, so you get a summed mono signal with magnetic and piezo sounds blended, rather than separated.

We pointed out to Parker that this is less versatile than having completely separate magnetic, piezo and synth outputs and it told us that the internal circuitry can be easily rewired to allow that possibility, but it would mean that no magnetic pickup signal could be sent through the 13-pin output. It's an either/or situation with benefits and limitations for either option, but Parker has opted for the benefits of having the magnetic pickups' output



The Fly's ergonomic curves are all present and correct

The range of sounds available is limited only by your imagination or – perhaps more to the point – by what you choose to connect to it

sent from the 13-pin output, presumably for the ease of using a single lead until you reach the VG. What we found, though, comparing the direct sound from the guitar's jack output to the magnetic pickup sound via the 13-pin lead through our Roland unit's output was that there was no contest – the jack output is far superior.

For playing VG/synth sounds the tracking on the guitar is excellent, with everything feeling completely natural, and the range of sounds available is limited only by your

imagination or – perhaps more to the point – by what you choose to connect to it.

A Fly's mix of piezo and magnetic pickups is always going to offer more tonal options than a conventional electric guitar, but the addition here of the divided pickup opens up a different world. This is true in conventional guitar territory – with the modelled sounds that Roland's VG system can provide – and in the more esoteric world of synths and samplers, where just about any sound that you can think up can

be triggered from six strings and a pair of hands.

Verdict

It might have extreme versatility and a massive sonic potential, but this isn't a guitar for everybody, the price being the first stumbling block and, of course that doesn't include any outboard synth gear.

This guitar could be the exact thing, however, for those who could use an expanded palette of sounds and at the same time want to invest in a guitar that also has many fine qualities in terms of playability and conventional guitar sound. There are other ways to get access to such a wide range of sounds, not least by adding a divided pickup to your own favourite guitar, but the Fly Mojo MIDI does the job in a way that's both elegant and ergonomic. Roland's electronics and Parker's hi-tech design complement each other perfectly. **G**

The bottom line

We liked: Wide range of sounds; easy playability; excellent vibrato system

We disliked: No mix of piezo and synth through 13-pin output; three voices not available through separate outputs simultaneously; it's rather expensive

Guitarist says: A massive amount of versatility and potential in one guitar. It isn't cheap but it's good



Parker Fly Mojo MIDI

PRICE: £3,499 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Solidbody three-voice electric

BODY: Mahogany coated with composite material

NECK: One-piece mahogany coated with composite material

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: GraphTech/42.7mm

FINGERBOARD: Carbon-glass-epoxy composite, 254-330mm (10-13-inch) compound radius

FRETS: 24, hardened stainless steel, medium (2.3mm wide x 1.14mm high)

HARDWARE: Vibrato system with custom flat spring and balance adjustment, three-mode step stop (fixed, bend down only or floating). Sperzel locking tuners.

STRING SPACING: 54mm

ELECTRICS: Seymour Duncan Jazz (neck) and JB (bridge) magnetic pickups, six-element Fishman piezo

CONNECTIONS: Mono/stereo jack output; 13-pin synth output

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.3/5

OPTIONS: The standard Fly Mojo (with synth access) retails for £2,799

RANGE OPTIONS: Parker's USA-made electric range starts at £1,399 with the Nitefly A bolt-on. The set-neck Fly range starts at £2,399 for the Fly Deluxe

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Natural Mahogany, trans cherry, dusty black, Italian plum, emerald green, ruby red, white, galaxy grey, majik blue and trans blue

First Line Distribution

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www.firstlinemusic.co.uk

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

