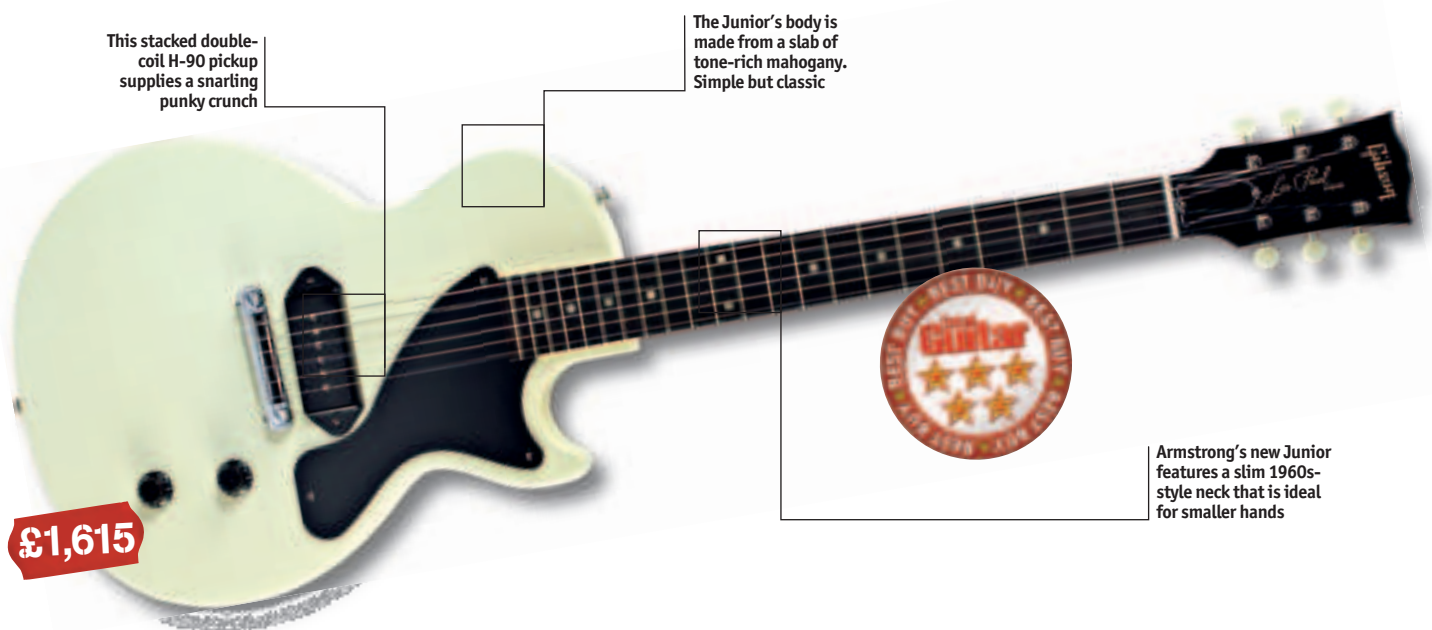


GEAR GIBSON BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG LES PAUL JUNIOR



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DON'T WANNA BE AN AMERICAN IDIOT? THEN STRAP ON BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG'S SIGNATURE MODEL... WORDS: HENRY YATES

THE SIZZLE

Billie Joe Armstrong has always been a great songwriter. But it wasn't until 2004's *American Idiot* that he became a bona fide rock 'n' roll icon. Meeting the band in Dublin upon the album's release, TG was struck by the transformation of the Green Day frontman. Gone were the hamster cheeks, the peroxide barnet and that bloody Fernandes Strat copy with all the stickers on it. In their place were razor-sharp cheekbones, tousled black hair and a '56 Gibson Les Paul Junior affectionately referred to as 'Floyd'. "This is my favourite guitar right now," he told us. "I always thought Juniors looked so cool, like Johnny Thunders' guitar or something like that."

Armstrong wasn't the only one who thought so. Never one to miss a marketing opportunity, it was around this time that Gibson knocked on the frontman's door to suggest a signature axe based on Floyd. Bandsaws whirled, sandpaper scrubbed, prototypes came and went, and almost two years later the design is finally ready for public consumption. Despite our busy schedule, TG decided that, yes, we definitely had the time to hear this guitar whine...

WHAT'S IT GOT?

When Gibson introduced the Junior in 1954, the basic concept was to flog a simple and cheap variation of the Les Paul to the student market. Back then the Junior retailed for just \$99. Half a century later, it's ballooned to a grand and a half. You'd expect a fair bit of inflation over half a century, of course, but we don't know many students (or indeed punks) who could stretch to that.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Principally Green Day fans, but any punk rocker should have a blast with this baby...

INFORMATION

ORIGIN: US
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, set, 1960s slim taper
FINGERBOARD: Ebony (rosewood on other models) with pearlloid dots
PICKUPS: 1x stacked double-coil H-90
HARDWARE: Nickel tuners (with white buttons), non-compensated wraparound bridge
CONTROLS: 1x volume, 1x tone
FRETS: 22
SCALE: 24.75"
COLOURS: Classic White [pictured], Vintage Sunburst, Ebony
LEFT-HANDERS: No
CASE: Yes [hard case]
CONTACT: Rosetti 01376 550033
WEB: www.gibson.com

ALTERNATIVELY

Epiphone Les Paul Junior – £139
 Gibson Custom 1957 Junior – POA
 Gibson Custom 1958 Junior – POA

It's a big investment (especially when you consider that the Epiphone Juniors start at £139), but it still costs less than the Custom Shop '57 and '58 reissues that are currently the only Gibson-made alternatives.

While he was slightly evasive that day we interviewed him in Dublin, Armstrong told us that if he did endorse a guitar, "it would be simple – one pickup, no switches, just one thing where you could crank it and it would be loud." And we're pleased to say that he's been true to his word. Although Gibson launched double cutaway Juniors in 1958, the Green Day man reckons

they "don't sound as good as the single cutaway" and has plumped for the original as the base of his signature model. The body couldn't be more simple; a slice of mahogany that looks like a Les Paul on the Atkins Diet. No contours. No maple caps. No embellishments. Nothing to interrupt the virginal white surface bar, a black pickguard and master volume/tone pots. Whether this is minimalist or just plain boring, it's totally your call.

If you have ever seen Armstrong up close, you'll understand why he's strayed from the blueprint when it comes to the Junior's set





Billie Joe's leopard skin-lined case has as much wow factor as his new guitar

mahogany neck. "This guitar is pretty much like Floyd," the fun-sized guitarist points out on the Gibson website, "apart from the neck. This is more of a 60s neck so it's easier to play and get your hands around, whereas the 50s necks were a bit thicker."

The Billie Joe Junior is available in three different finishes and it's a more important decision than you might think. TG's justification for reviewing the Classic White Junior is that you get an ebony fingerboard (both the Vintage Sunburst and Ebony versions use the more run-of-the-mill rosewood). At the same time there is the slight drawback that we're lumbered with black volume pots (the others have cooler amber control knobs). Ultimately, whichever finish you choose you get the same nickel hardware (like the original Juniors, the

hardware consists of a wraparound bridge and white-buttoned tuners) and a cool leopardskin-lined hard case (which looks a bit like Huggy Bear's coffin to us). As is signature model protocol, Armstrong has scrawled his moniker on the back of the headstock, which is the only real Green Day

"In a market where guitars are interchangeable in terms of tone and feel, this ballsy little instrument has character and attitude in spades, not unlike the man who helped design it..."

reference point. So good for non-fans.

So far, so 1950s. It's not until you check out the Junior's solitary pickup in the bridge position that you're dragged kicking and screaming into the new millennium. It might look exactly like the 'dog-ear' P-90s that

featured on the first Junior guitars, but the spec sheet reveals this is actually Gibson's latest wheeze: a stacked double-coil H-90 designed to iron out all the interference that was the achilles heel of the original model.

"It's kinda based on the P-90," confirms the Green Day man, "but it's hum-cancelling, so you can play it onstage and crank it with lots of distortion. You just get to hear what the guitar sounds like." Sounds good to us, Billie, but will the lack of tonal tweaking options spoil the party?

BUILT TO LAST?

As anyone from Mick Jones to Carl Barat will tell you, Les Paul Juniors aren't meant to look pristine (indeed, both of Billie Joe's own models look as though they have been used as a scratching post by a Bengal tiger). ➔

GREEN GIGBAG

TG REVEALS THE REST OF BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG'S ARSENAL...

The 'Floyd' Les Paul Junior might be his main squeeze, but it's not the only guitar you will see Billie Joe Armstrong rocking on the road. "I love all guitars," the Green Day frontman told one magazine. "Every guitar has its purpose. Even ones that sound like shit have something they do that's cool."

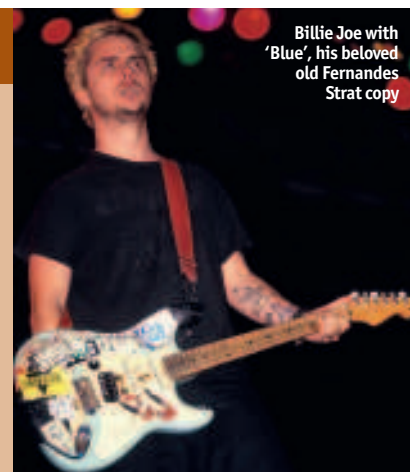
For the Green Day faithful, the most iconic axe in Armstrong's collection is undoubtedly 'Blue', the powder-blue Fernandes Strat copy that was given to the frontman shortly before his father died of cancer, and also used for much of Green Day's early career. Unsurprisingly the original has now thrown in the towel, but Armstrong still plays a series of replicas with the same stickers and pickup configuration (Blue has three pickups but Billie only uses the Seymour Duncan JB bridge humbucker).

For a punk, Armstrong has a wandering eye. In the studio he has previously used the Gibson Les Paul, ES-335

and ES-135, while Green Day world tours have seen him use a Fender Jaguar for the harder numbers and a Guild acoustic guitar for the more delicate chording of *Good Riddance* (although when pushed for an actual model number he could only venture that it had "strings and a hole in the middle").

Aside from a Dunlop Cry Baby wah pedal, a Coloursound tremolo and various other pedals made by the American manufacturer Zinky, Armstrong views effects with absolute distrust. Instead he prefers to plug straight into a modified '59 100-watt Marshall Plexi head and 4x12 cabs, then push the volume, treble and mid to breaking point.

Finally, Armstrong uses a bit of good old-fashioned brute force. "I just do what I'm capable of," he says, "which is not much. I just play with my shoulder and hit it really hard."



Billie Joe with 'Blue', his beloved old Fernandes Strat copy

MICK HUTSON/RED PEARNS

GEAR GIBSON BILLIE JOE ARMSTRONG LES PAUL JUNIOR



The Les Paul Junior: a cinch to re-string and a real joy to play. Sold!

➔ This guitar is a staple of punk-rock and should be played in sweaty basements and carried home in a binliner. The good news is that whether you choose to chip a bit of paint off the Billie Joe Junior for authenticity or stick with its immaculate US finish, we don't see any structural problems in the pipeline.

For one thing, the neck is set too deep into the body (it hits at the 16th fret) to warp or snap under normal playing conditions. And for another, the bridge configuration is too simplistic to go wrong. The only potential deathtrap we can envisage is the combination of the angled headstock and the tiny strap nubbins (we were using a fairly standard strap and the guitar fell off a couple of times during our review). So avoid tears before bedtime by investing in a couple of strap locks.

HANDS ON

Despite being launched the same year as the none-more-comfortable Fender Stratocaster, the Les Paul Junior has never been too arsed about ergonomics. It's a chunk of wood, it hangs round your neck like a bloody great floorboard and it makes no apologies for its lack of airs and graces. TG approves of this. Playing guitar shouldn't be like taking a hot bath, it should be about blood, sweat and bruised ribs. At least the Junior is one of the lighter members of the Gibson family, especially when compared to its Les Paul sibling. We played it for two hours without taking a break and, unless you're

The Mars Volta, that means you should be able to make it through a proper gig without bugging up your spinal column.

Besides which, the Billie Joe Junior is comfortable where it counts – up and down

“As anyone from Mick Jones to Carl Barat will tell you, Les Paul Juniors aren't meant to look pristine. They're staples of punk rock that are meant to be played in sweaty basements”

the length of its neck and fingerboard. Punk munchkins across the land will rejoice when they feel the slim-taper 60s profile, which superbly combines with a narrower than standard nut profile (1.687”) and a gorgeous

fretboard to make fast runs easier than choking a chicken. Thanks to a standard Gibson 24” scale length, bending, squeezing and adding vibrato to the Junior's strings also feels natural and allows for more than Armstrong's trademark powerchords. OK, so the Les Paul Junior has never been a shred machine, but it plays fast enough to be used by Billy Corgan and Gary Moore, and they're more technical than you will ever be.

When it comes to tone, the Gibson Les Paul Junior has always enjoyed a reputation as an uncomplicated rock 'n' roll workhorse, best played through a high-gain valve amp. In our experience these guitars sound crunchy, brittle and rasping; the kind of tone that Libertines fans would kill for and Eric ➔

JUNIOR SCHOOL

TG TUTORS YOU IN THE HISTORY OF A LEGEND

Arriving on the heels of the Gibson Goldtop in 1954, the Les Paul Junior was a masterpiece of brutal simplicity. Like their modern equivalents the first Juniors had mahogany bodies, unbound rosewood fretboards, dot inlays, wraparound bridges, Kluson strip tuners and a single 'dog-ear' P-90 pickup whose throaty crunch made these guitars a big hit with the rough 'n' ready rock bands of the day.

It was initially marketed as an entry-level model, but the Les Paul Junior soon proved a commercial heavyweight. By 1955 it was Gibson's best-selling design and punters were being given the choice between a yellow finish (known as 'TV Yellow' because it stood out on black and white television) or a sultry cherry equivalent. In 1958, the first double-cut Juniors rolled off the production line.

The 1960s were high times for the Junior as luminaries of the times discovered both the ballsy power

these guitars had when combined with a valve amp and the bright shimmer they offered when you backed off the volume. One of the highest-profile users of the age was Keith Richards of The Rolling Stones (he would later nail the classic *Tumbling Dice* on a TV Yellow Junior), while Mott The Hoople guitarist Mick Ralphs used the model for the cascading opening lick of *All The Young Dudes*.

During the 1970s, the Junior was thrashed by punk's most iconic guitarists (Mick Jones and Johnny Thunders were both early advocates) and as the decades rolled on, Replacements frontman Paul Westerberg and Billy Corgan of the Smashing Pumpkins were two of the celebrity axemen to rock the Junior on the stage and in the studio.

The Junior hasn't been quite so prolific in recent years, but you can expect that to change with the patronage of Billie Joe Armstrong, whose global celebrity in the wake of *American Idiot* is the kind of advertising that money just can't buy.

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ALLEN KEE/WIREIMAGE



Billie Joe owns over 30 vintage Gibson Les Paul axes

It may be a signature model, but Billie's mark is hidden on the back of the headstock



→ Clapton would run a mile from.

Armstrong has his own description: "The sound I go for is that real punchy mid-range kinda sound," he explains. "The first time I picked up a Junior, which was the guitar I now call Floyd, I plugged it in and it was the sound I'd heard in my head for so many years. They just have a real rock 'n' roll sound. You can really hear the sound of the wood."

Upon cranking the Billie Joe Junior through a Marshall (the frontman's amp of choice), that explanation makes a lot more sense. When you dial up a mild distortion

eyed swan (and got himself a decent guitar to boot), he fully deserves the signature model treatment. The strange thing is that the Billie Joe Les Paul Junior actually gives surprisingly few tips of the hat to the Green Day frontman and his band. Indeed, unless you solo with it behind your head (thus showing off Armstrong's autograph on the back of the headstock), your audience might not even realise that you're rocking a signature model. To the naked eye it's a textbook Les Paul Junior. Very cool, of course, but hardly the stuff of revolution.

"Whichever finish you choose, you get the same hardware and leopard-skin hard case, which looks a bit like Huggy Bear's coffin"

there's an organic sound to this guitar that seems to bypass the H-90 pickup and give you the unadulterated tone of the mahogany body and neck instead. Push the gain dial a little harder, meanwhile, and you will bring in the ragged quality that Junior nuts have always raved about. Granted it's not a smooth or subtle tone, doesn't get close to the sustain of the full-size Les Paul and wouldn't be much use to anyone interested in starting up an Allman Brothers tribute band. But for making a sweatbox venue in Kings Cross mosh its bollocks off, or slicing through a murky mixing board, you won't find anything better.

Let's not pop the champagne quite yet, though. As we feared, the Billie Joe Junior is not a particularly versatile guitar. The tone control tries its best to add diversity (and a decent amp helps in this respect), but the lack of a neck pickup inevitably means that you will find other axes 'fill the room' more convincingly. No problem if you've got Mike Dint stood next to you laying down the low-end, of course, but it does mean the Billie Joe Junior probably isn't the best choice for unaccompanied troubadours.

THE BOTTOM LINE

Now that Billie Joe Armstrong has made the transition from ugly punk duckling to kohl-

We know that might disappoint hardcore Green Day fans (who might well prefer a model based on the more readily identifiable Fernandes), but it did allow TG to strip away the starry-eyed bullshit and judge the Billie Joe Junior as an instrument rather than a fashion accessory. Here, we're happy to report that it cleaned up with a level of tone, build and comfort that you'd have to be a basket case not to appreciate. And don't let our guide price put you off. Yes, £1,600 is a lot of lolly for a single pickup axe, but anyone who has ever shopped around for a Gibson will know just how wildly prices can differ from store to store. Do your research!

The Junior is not a perfect design. It's not as refined as the Strat, as powerful as the Les Paul Standard or as versatile as the average Paul Reed Smith. But in a market where most guitars are fairly interchangeable in terms of tone, feel and appearance, this ballsy little instrument has character and attitude in spades. Not unlike the man who helped design it, then...

FOR: Vintage kudos combined with cool modern embellishments

AGAINST: It's slightly unrefined and not desperately versatile

TG RATING:



The Junior's headstock is a 1950s design that has become a classic