

The City & Guilds

From a couple of floors of the brownstone Neumann Leathers factory in Hoboken, New Jersey, Alfred Dronge's Guild Guitar Company planted a significant marker in the musical landscape of the 1960s. But how do the company's first production electrics in a decade fare today?

WORDS **Chris Vinnicombe** PHOTOGRAPHY **Adam Gasson**







Guild Starfire IV & X-175 Manhattan £1,006 & £862

What We Want To Know

1 Didn't Guild stop making electric guitars a while back?

Guild was bought by Fender nearly 20 years ago, but now the company's electric models are back with a bang after a decade in the wilderness, thanks to Fender's Mike Lewis.

2 Are they slavish reissues, then?

Well, yes and no. Think vintage reissues with some sensible compromises here and there but the spirit of the originals intact.

3 Why should we care?

Lightnin' Hopkins. Dave Davies. The Grateful Dead. Jefferson Airplane. Muddy Waters. Dan Auerbach... Need we carry on?

Since its purchase by Fender in 1995, the Guild Guitar Company has rarely appeared to be a high priority for the biggest F-word in Guitarland. Acoustic guitar production has shifted from factory to factory, but it has at least been continuous; for nearly a decade now, Guild electrics have been out of production and all but invisible. However, at this year's NAMM show in Anaheim, the seeds of a revival were sown...

Alongside the top dollar US-made American Patriarch Series, NAMM 2013 saw Guild launch the Newark St Collection: eight classic Guild models from the 1950s and 60s reissued under a banner inspired by the Hoboken, New Jersey location of the company's factory before the whole operation was sold to the Avnet Corporation and relocated to Rhode Island in 1966. Although the Newark St Collection is manufactured in Korea, some 7,000 miles away from the address that gave it its name, a real effort has been made to get these guitars right when it comes to balancing vintage accuracy, the demands of modern players and the need to work to a price.



Unlike another famous thinline semi, the Starfire's body is laminated mahogany

Fender's Vice President of Product Marketing, Mike Lewis – a Guild owner himself in the 60s – masterminded the selection of a range of eight instruments that represent some of the most popular and sought-after guitars that Guild ever built. Using vintage examples for reference, the Newark St Collection features authentically proportioned

body and neck shapes, new pickups reverse-engineered from the originals and much more. Read what Mike had to say when we caught up with him earlier this year on p104.

X-175 Manhattan

It's easy to glance at our review guitars and think, 'Oh, it's just a jazzbox and an ES-335-alike,' but really, when considered as a

The X-175 Manhattan is absolutely a child of the 50s; this is a six-string with no mod cons and no safety net



The Starfire's 'Anti-Hum' pickups were reverse-engineered from originals

The Rivals

Gibson's ES-335 (from £1,699) is the king of centre-blocked electric guitars, but is in danger of looking pricey next to the very reasonable Starfire IV. Meanwhile, **Godin's 5th Avenue** is the happening place to be for great value hollowbody thrills. The **Composer GT** (£999) has a single humbucker and is from the old school. Also, be sure to check out the **Hagstrom** and **Eastwood** catalogues for an abundance of retro guitars



The 'harp' tailpiece is a striking visual motif on both guitars

pair, these instruments represent one of the most significant transitions in the history of not just the guitar but popular music – a sea-change that was in itself brought about in part by the evolution of electric guitars and amplification. The X-175 Manhattan is absolutely a child of the 50s; this is a six-string with few mod cons and no obvious safety net. The floating rosewood bridge seems arcane in 2013, but intonation compensation and thumbwheels for height adjustment at least allow some

degree of adjustment. Straight out of the box, it's a handsome beast, but tough to keep in tune. That said, even played acoustically, that bridge definitely imparts a woody character of its own and if you aren't hitting the guitar too hard it's possible to make it work.

At the headstock end, Grover Sta-Tite tuners stay tight and look the part, but we'd have to either pin the bridge base or use the Brian Setzer carpet tape method to keep it in place before we'd risk the X-175 in a live environment. A careless right hand or even an extreme

string bend can make it wander slightly, which tends to throw intonation and tuning out beyond acceptable tolerances. We can't help wondering why features such as jumbo frets have been incorporated to appease modern players only for the bridge to be left unpinned. That said, the combination of a 9.5-inch (241mm) fingerboard radius, a vintage soft U-shaped neck profile and big frets make for a really inviting playing surface – just be prepared to allow this guitar to dictate the way you play to some extent.

Another pragmatic departure from the original 1950s spec can be found in the shape of the peghead. For almost the first decade of production, Guild used an 'open book'-style headstock silhouette very close to that used by Gibson and Epiphone. It's no great surprise given that many members of Guild's early workforce and indeed co-founder George Mann were formerly on the Epiphone payroll. The only exception to this rule in the 1950s was the Johnny Smith Award Model in 1956, which included a raised section at the





Heavy-handers beware: that bridge isn't pinned, so you'll have to be careful...

centre of the top in order to denote the guitar's high-end status. A slightly softened version of this headstock shape was rolled out across other models in 1962 and became the standard within two years, and it's that shape that you see here. All Fender-era Guilds, including the Newark St Collection and the high-end US-built American Patriarch Series reissues have stuck to this 'raised' design, presumably to avoid having an awkward conversation with Gibson, which owns the trademark for the 'open book' shape.

Starfire IV

If the X-175 is the 1950s model that's a little bit stiff, uptight and wants to impose its own agenda on you, the Starfire IV is a true child of the mid 1960s built for free love, or more accurately, freedom from unwanted feedback and single-coil hum. An obvious attempt to wolf down a slice of the ES-335 market, Guild's double-cut semi does bring some of its own identity to the table, including a laminated mahogany – rather than Gibson's favoured maple – top, back and sides with a solid spruce centre-block.

A bridge that's a flight risk is the only thing stopping the Starfire IV from being damn near perfect

The Starfire IV is somewhat heavier than its sibling but no chunkier than many modern ES-335s, despite the additional weight of mahogany. If the floating bridge is a quirky throwback on the X-175 Manhattan, it's a little more of an issue here; anyone who might reasonably plan to use this instrument for rock in a live

environment is strongly advised to make their bridge secure at the earliest opportunity. The Starfire's tuning stability is much more impressive than the X-175 but it only takes one over-excited downstroke to make contact with the bridge to send it sliding out of alignment.

All that said, for this price, a bridge that's a flight risk is



Collect them all

The rest of the Newark St Collection from Guild



A-150 Savoy

£958

With a DeArmond 1000 floating pickup this is about as old-school as the electric guitar gets.



X-175B Manhattan w/Bigsby

£958

Like our review X-175, but with a Bigsby and an adjust-o-matic bridge. Less jazz, more rockabilly.



Starfire III w/Bigsby

£862

The fully hollow single-cut Starfire was a favourite of Kinks guitarist Dave Davies and Grateful Dead frontman Jerry Garcia.



M-75 Aristocrat

£910

This classy single-cut is another hollowbody, while its pickups are 'Frequency Tested' single-coils like those on the X-175.



S-100 Polara

£742

Kim Thayil likes them, and so should you. This solidbody is Guild's rock machine.



Starfire Bass

£958

There's even a bass. More for retro thumpers than funk slappers, we suspect. Super cool.



The X-175's 'Frequency Tested' single coils are wonderfully retro and authentic

actually the only thing stopping this guitar being damn near perfect straight out of the box. Like the X-175 Manhattan, it feels like a proper guitar with a personality, is neatly and attractively finished and features some pleasing retro details such as the scratchplate logo. Given the choice, we'd replace the custard-yellow pickup selector switch tips. Off-white would be a better match and more in keeping with the otherwise pristine appearance of both instruments.

Sounds

It might look like a pure jazzbox, but during recording sessions with the X-175 we managed to unearth a secret rock 'n' roll and R&B voice that's to die for. Dial in some suitably bright EL84 break-up, add lashings of spring reverb and take it to the bridge (pickup,

that is), and it's the kind of sound that begs for stabbing blues licks from the pre-*Satisfaction* Stones catalogue. Play down near the bridge with a hard pick for best results.

If your tastes are altogether smoother, keep it pretty clean and the X-175 has a real authenticity in the context of jazz, gypsy jazz and Western swing, and we'd bet that the rosewood bridge is a significant contributing factor. There's something deliciously primitive about the 'Frequency Tested' single coils, too.

If you need something a little more mid 60s to handle the torn speaker sound of The Kinks or Pacific North West garage bands, that's where the Starfire IV comes in with its spruce centre-block and humbucking pickups. The Starfire's Anti-Hum Dual Coils aren't voiced like PAFs, but neither do

The X-175 might look like a pure jazzbox, but we unearthed a secret rock 'n' roll voice to die for



Both guitars use Guild's 'raised section' headstock design, first seen in 1956

they sound like mini-humbuckers. There's plenty of brightness and airy top-end zing, but it's no eyeball-slicer; for instance, where the Gordon-Smith Ghost Rider reviewed elsewhere in this issue had the capacity to make us wince, with the same amp settings, the Starfire IV's bridge pickup does a fantastic *Revolver*-era Beatles impression. Sure, the lower output of these Guild pickups makes them a little less in-your-face than many 'buckers, but this, in combination with just the right amount of smoothness and sparkle, amounts to a seriously versatile sonic palette. Both instruments offer convincingly fat blues lead tones in their respective neck pickup positions, but as you might expect, it's the Starfire that's built to travel further forward through time via Cream, Jimi and beyond into muscular hard rock territory. A very impressive range.

Verdict

Grappling with the X-175 feels a little like guitar archeology, but for

a player used to more mainstream solid and semi-hollow electrics it's a really interesting left-turn and a very rewarding experience. Indeed, its very quirks and limitations become a source of great inspiration in a studio context.

The Starfire IV, meanwhile, could have been a contender for a Gold Award if they'd only pinned the bridge at the factory. As it is, it's still a serious ES-335 alternative that's just one mod away from greatness, especially when you consider the fact that current street prices mean that you can get two Guilds for the price of one Gibson. Sure, it's made in Korea, and the siren song of an American-built guitar will forever drag many of us into troubled financial waters, but the reality is that it would be impossible for Guild to bring a guitar of this quality in at this price point were it crafted in the USA. Instead, the company has breathed new life into old designs that still have much to say in a contemporary context and are better value than ever. Welcome back! ☑



Guild X-175 Manhattan

PRICE: £862 (w/ hard shell case)
ORIGIN: Korea
TYPE: Hollowbody single-cutaway electric
BODY: Laminated spruce top with laminated maple back and sides
NECK: 3-piece mahogany/maple/mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 24.75" (628mm)
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20, jumbo
HARDWARE: Compensated rosewood bridge with floating rosewood base, nickel-plated 'Harp' trapeze tailpiece, Grover Sta-Tite die-cast tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Guild 'Frequency Tested' Single-Coil pickups, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 3.2/7.0
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Antique Burst gloss urethane only
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.guildguitars.com

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

Guitarist says: Purists and musical tourists alike can find inspiration in limitations. Less is definitely more!



Guild Starfire IV

PRICE: £1,006 (w/ hard shell case)
ORIGIN: Korea
TYPE: Semi-hollow double-cutaway electric
BODY: Laminated mahogany with spruce centre-block
NECK: 3-piece mahogany/maple/mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 24.75" (628mm)
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 22, jumbo
HARDWARE: Nickel-plated adjust-o-matic bridge with floating rosewood base, nickel-plated 'Harp' trapeze tailpiece, Grover Sta-Tite die-cast tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Guild 'Anti-Hum' Dual Coil humbucking pickups, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 3.8/8.4
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Cherry Red gloss urethane only



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

Guitarist says: A grand to spend? Put this straight at the top of your double-cut semi shopping list





The Lewis Method

Fender's VP of product marketing, Mike Lewis, was instrumental in reviving Guild's electric guitar line. Here's his take on things...

BACK IN January, we caught up with an enthused Mike Lewis who talked and played us through the new 2013 Guild instruments. Here's what he had to say: "There are two different families," Mike explained. "The Patriarchs are US-made in the Guild Custom Shop in Connecticut, and are built to order. The Newark St Collection is kind of spread across from the 50s up to 1970. A lot of great music was written on these models and recorded by various bands like The Grateful Dead, Jefferson Airplane, even Buddy Guy played some Guilds during the seventies. The arches, the shapes, are exactly like the originals. There's no corners cut. We tooled up for all of it."

We noticed that the X-175's pickups don't sound much like P-90s, despite the look...

"The original pickups were made by Franz in Europe, because Guild never made its own pickups until much later. I bought vintage examples of all of these guitars, every single one, and also extra pickups and things and we reverse engineered them and replicated them exactly. Even the covers are slightly transparent, you can see the pickup under there."

"They are very single-coil sounding; they don't sound anything like regular P-90s. The X-175 was designed to sound like a jazz guitar, and it sure does. But you can also get that 'woman' tone out of it if you set it just right. The Manhattan comes with a plain G string, and the bridge is compensated for a plain G, but it also comes with another saddle in the package, that's compensated

for a wound G, in case you want to put heavier strings on it."

Similarly, Guild's humbuckers are a little different from the average PAF-style pickups. It seems that these reissues are pretty authentic recreations...

"Those pickups don't sound like regular humbuckers. There's a different tone to them. One thing we did differently from the originals was we put bigger frets on it. A lot of guys today don't like those vintage-style really low, skinny flat frets. And all of the original models that we found, except for the bass, had 7.25-inch (184mm) radiuses. I've seen some others with 10-inch radiuses, so we decided to make it 9.5 (241mm), which is still kind of vintage-feeling, but it's sort of the threshold of where you can start using tall frets; if it's even more round it will fret out when you play it."

So, it's the perfect radius for a tall, 6105-type fret? "I would say these guitars are 95 per cent accurate to the originals, the other five per cent – the radius, the bigger frets, the adjust-o-matic on certain guitars – is just to make it playable for today, and repeatable and consistent. A lot of the old ones were so inconsistent. It was really hard to find a good one." **G**