



Words Jonathan Horsley / Photography Neil Godwin

CLASSIC ROCK OFFSETS

Taking flight from Gibson's Firebird and RDs of the 70s, there's something here for chicken pickers and heavy riffers alike



There's something exhilarating about seeing guitar companies take an idea and run with it. This month's round-up might want for a catchier title, but it has four guitars that embrace the asymmetrical promise of the Gibson's legendary Firebird and 70s cult favourite RD models and retool it for today's player. In the case of the Epiphone Joe Bonamassa 'Treasure' Firebird-1, today's player is one of the world's foremost bluesmen, and his signature 'bird has been engineered from some genuine Gibson DNA that's been preserved in amber since the 1960s.

Then there's the Hagström Fantomen, a guitar in the mould of the Gibson RD and designed for the Nameless Ghoulies of the Swedish metal band Ghost. We have the smooth contours of Bill Kelliher of Mastodon's LTD Sparrowhawk, a guitar not unlike Jackson's Mark Morton DX2 in profile, but more vintage-voiced than you might expect. Naturally, both feature dual humbucker pairings with the now-ubiquitous coil-split. Rounding out the lineup is Lee Malia of Bring Me The Horizon's Epiphany RD Custom Artisan Outfit, a limited-edition guitar with a gilded trim and walnut finish, and an intriguing P94 humbucker pairing. It ain't your typical metal guitar. But then none of these are...





LTD SPARROWHAWK BILL KELLIHER SIGNATURE

£1379

The Mastodon man's big beast

Didn't Bill Kelliher play Gibson?

Yes, but he's now hooked up with ESP/LTD for some signature models, the Bill Kelliher Eclipse and this Sparrowhawk. Both come in this Military Green Burst finish, with the Sparrowhawk a more subtle foil to his Eclipse, more vintage-minded, and was designed with Kelliher as a composite of his favourite guitar shapes. As such it kind of looks like a curvier, industrial strength, non-reverse Firebird.

Isn't it a bit pricey?

Well, it's the most expensive of the quartet, but it just feels and



sounds incredible. With LTD locking tuners, the gold hardware, the mahogany body with a maple top, set-thru neck construction, and those lovely Lace Sensor Divinator humbuckers, it is a pro-quality instrument.

Tell us about those pickups...

OK, they're Lace Sensor Divinators, designed with Kelliher, and are more subtle than you might imagine, boasting more of a classic rock tone. You might describe them as transparent; as they bring out the Sparrowhawk's natural wealth of rich, midrange tone. And there's a coil-split for single-coil versatility, too.



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Mahogany body with maple cap, three-piece mahogany neck (set-thru, 628mm (24.75") scale, 22 extra-jumbo frets, ebony fingerboard, 2 x Lace Sensor Divinator humbucking pickups w/coil-split, locking LTD tuners, TonePros locking tailpiece, gold hardware

FINISH: Military Green Sunburst

CONTACT: ESPGuitars.com / 01795 419460

EPIPHONE JOE BONAMASSA 'TREASURE' FIREBIRD-I

£679

The gold model

Looks lovely, but what makes this so special?

It's the attention to detail. You'd expect nothing less from a guitar bearing Joe Bonamassa's name. The Treasure is based on his '63 Gibson Firebird. With its Reverse Firebird body profile featuring a period appropriate neck-thru construction and bevelled Firebird headstock, plus the logo on the pickguard and the 'top hat' tone and volume knobs, the Treasure has heaps of vintage kudos.

What's the deal with the tuners?

We're glad you asked! Don't forget them. They are a street-tough



set of Kluson Reissue banjo-style tuners. Of course, they're super-stable; they're also heavy, which Joe says balances out the instrument nicely.

There's only one pickup; isn't this a one-trick pony?

While you can forget high-gain shred, there's plenty of range to that specially wound Epiphone ProBucker. Its natural tone is sharp and bite, plenty of treble, plenty of snap, but rolling back the tone takes some of that edge off. Blues specialists will love this, but likewise classic rockers, country cats, and those looking for a maverick tone for garage rock will love it.



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Mahogany body wings, nine-piece mahogany and walnut 60s C-profile neck, 628mm (24.75") scale, 22 frets, rosewood fingerboard, Epiphone ProBucker FB720 (bridge), Kluson Reissue Firebird/Banjo Tuners, Adjustable Wrap-Around 'Lightning Bar' bridge, nickel hardware

FINISH: Gold Polymist [as reviewed], Tobacco Sunburst

CONTACT: epiphone.com

HAGSTRÖM FANTOMEN

£869

Ghost with the most

This looks like something Paul Stanley would play...

Woah, settle down! The Fantomen is maybe a more sober, distant cousin of the Ibanez Iceman but it's more of a reinterpretation of the Gibson RD body shape, albeit with plenty of that Hagström playability. Pick it up and feel that skinny neck and it could only be Hagström.

What is a Resonator fretboard?

It's a typical feature of Hagström's guitars, and is a composite of woods that's said to be tonally consistent, not unlike a premium



piece of ebony. The company says it offers the "ultimate in playing surface stability and optimal tonal enhancement" and, certainly, it does its bit on what is a great-sounding guitar.

Isn't Hagström known for its skinny necks?

They are but the H-Expander truss rod is as stable as they come. Sure, the first impression you'll have of the Fantomen is that it's whip-quick, but the lasting impression is one of a solidly-built slab of mahogany. While we'd love to tell you whose signature model this is and the reason for their choice of neck, the Swedish occult-rockers Ghost are sworn to anonymity.



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Mahogany body with mahogany neck (set), 647mm (25.5") scale, 22 medium jumbo frets, resonator fingerboard, 1 x Lundgren Design AlNiCo-2 No 2 Humbucker (neck) and Lundgren Design AlNiCo-2 No 5 Humbucker (bridge), 2 x volume, 2 x tone with coil-split, tune-o-matic Roller Bridge, chrome hardware

FINISH: Black Gloss, White Gloss, Tobacco Sunburst

CONTACT: HagstromGuitars.com/
01376 550033

EPIPHONE LIMITED EDITION LEE MALIA RD CUSTOM ARTISAN OUTFIT

£679

Classing up the joint

Isn't this some vintage boutique guitar?

You'd think so, and it's certainly spec'd as such. But this is the latest Epiphone for Lee Malia of Bring Me The Horizon and, like his Explorer and Les Paul, it defies expectations of what a metal guitarist's signature model should look like. For a start, it has a clubby, 50s-style neck, super-comfortable but not the wafer-thin profile you'd find on most shred machines. His pickup choices are sweet, too, with a Gibson USA P-94 single coil in the neck, and a



USA 84T-LM humbucker in the bridge. The Gibson RD was ripe for reinvention and Malia has really made this his own.

What's a P-94 pickup?

It's just a P-90 but with the footprint of a humbucker, so you don't need to reroute the body to fit it. It has the same Alnico V magnets at the heart of its design, and all that hot soupy tone on tap.

That finish is incredible...

It's walnut and, yes it is. Allied to the gold hardware and the floral pearlloid inlay, it sure makes a statement.



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Mahogany body with maple top, mahogany neck (set), 628mm (24.75") scale, 22 frets, Rosewood fingerboard, Gibson USA P-94 single coil (neck) and Gibson USA 84T-LM humbucker Humbucker (bridge), 2 x volume, 2 x tone Control with coil-split, LockTone tune-o-matic bridge and stop-bar, gold hardware

FINISH: Walnut

CONTACT: Epiphone.com

HEAD TO HEAD

Which of the Firebird tributes burns brightest?

When you lay these guitars side by side it's noticeable that there's a sliding scale of modernity in looks and tone. Bonamassa's Firebird is the most vintage-accurate model. With its single ProBucker FB720 and the minimalist Lightning Bar Wrap-Around bridge, the Firebird recreates the look, feel, and tone of an older instrument.

While Lee Malia's RD might not be explicitly referencing an older model, he too has taken a cult favourite and added some ornate pearloid detail and a thick ol' log of a neck to build a modern guitar your grandfather would approve of. Some of the original Gibson RD models featured active circuitry, but Malia's pickup choice is much more restrained. We love the P94/humbucker combo with the bridge 'bucker all throaty mids. It doesn't need a 9V battery to sparkle, and while it's in no way super-hot, it handles everything from classic rock to metal.

THE FIREBIRD HAS A SHARP TREBLE BITE: PERFECT FOR BLUES & GLAM-ROCK RHYTHMS

Having some on-tap single-coil sparkle is a great option, one shared across the LTD Sparrowhawk and Hagström Fantomen alike. Similarly, there is plenty of tone to work with on the RD's neck pickup, rolling back the volume it cleans up beautifully, but there's that hot P-90 broth when you roll on a little more gain. You'll be amazed at how bright the Firebird sounds; it has a sharp treble bite that's perfect for blues but it also sounds great for skronky glam-rock rhythms. Its sustain is incredible, but that's a quality they all share.

Likewise, all are eminently playable but you'll go far to beat the Hagström Fantomen or the LTD Sparrowhawk for feel. It's a coin toss as to which feels better but with its quicksilver neck the Fantomen probably sneaks it. While the LTD Sparrowhawk looks and feels modern its tone has a rich mahogany midrange that makes it as capable of dispensing blues as it is down-tuned metal. You needn't be a Mastodon fan to get plenty joy from it.



There's enough regal feel on the Lee Malia RD to balance its modern details



The Sparrowhawk's Lace Sensor Divinator 'buckers are ideal for blues as well as metal

FINAL VERDICT

Which offset is the right one for you?

Blues players have an easy choice to make here. You've got to go with the Firebird. It is an incredible guitar for the price, and whether you're going for a classic Johnny Winter tone or fancy yourself as the next Bonamassa, it'll make those licks sing. Like the others, it too will take a bit of getting used to; even though Bonamassa insists the Kluson tuners help balance the guitar, you're still dealing with a big slab of wood, and without the perfectly

centred waist of say a Strat or SG, these can sit a little funny when playing seated.

While the other three guitars are built on spec for metal players, none are exclusively metal, and you will find that all are subtle and dynamic enough to play a variety of styles. Some might find the Lee Malia RD a little overdressed – a little House of Windsor – but others will love the gold, the binding and pearloid inlay, while its versatile tone and comfortable ride will make it a big favourite

for Bring Me The Horizon fans and classic rock players alike. Heck, it can even do jazz.

As for the Fantomen and the Sparrowhawk? That's tough. We love the retro-futuristic cool of the Fantomen and the modern thin-U profile of the Sparrowhawk's neck, which with extra-jumbo frets lends it a contemporary shred guitar feel, but both are harmonically rich and powerful in high-gain situations, and, typical of this round-up, offer plenty of guitar for the price.

**LTD SPARROWHAWK
BILL KELLIHER
SIGNATURE**



TOTAL Guitar
BEST FOR METAL

TOTAL Guitar
BEST BUY AWARD

**EPIPHONE JOE
BONAMASSA
'TREASURE' FIREBIRD-I**



TOTAL Guitar
BEST FOR BLUES

**HAGSTRÖM
FANTOMEN**



TOTAL Guitar
MOST SHREDDABLE

TOTAL Guitar
BEST BUY AWARD

**EPIPHONE LIMITED
EDITION LEE MALIA RD
CUSTOM ARTISAN OUTFIT**



TOTAL Guitar
BEST ALL-ROUNDER

TOTAL Guitar
BEST BUY AWARD

SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

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