

THE JET SET

WHILE THE KINGS OF ROCKABILLY HAVE OFFERED REISSUES OF THEIR ICONIC 50S SOLID BODY GUITARS FOR ALMOST 30 YEARS, WE TAKE A LOOK AT A NEW RANGE THAT BRINGS THOSE INSTRUMENTS TO LIFE LIKE NEVER BEFORE...

Words Ed Mitchell Photography Joseph Branston

Gretsch G6134T-58 Vintage Select '58 Penguin, G6128T-57 Vintage Select '57 Duo Jet & Electromatic G5435T Pro Jet £3,199, £2,609 & £529





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his penguin shuffles into a pub, sidles up to the bartender and says, “Excuse me... has my dad been in?” “I dunno,” the barkeep replies. “What does he look like?”

Yeah, it’s funny cos it’s true. Penguins have this tendency to look the same as one another; and that conspicuous sharing of DNA doesn’t only apply to those flightless souls huddled together on the Antarctic ice with an egg jammed between their knees. With its new Vintage Select model, Gretsch has nailed its most accurate reissue of the iconic 50s White Penguin to date.

The Penguin first hatched back in 1954 but, as this latest model’s catalogue number reveals, our vintage white G6134T-58 is a doppelgänger for the 1958 edition. Although it was never designated as such, the White Penguin is basically a pimped up version of a Duo Jet, the black-topped model made famous by ‘Savage Young Beatles’ era George Harrison and Gene Vincent & His Blue Caps genius Cliff Gallup. You could think of the Penguin then as an identi-kit photo with a Duo Jet body wrapped in one of Elvis Presley’s Vegas jumpsuits and topped with the neck and headstock of its big brother, the White Falcon.

Like the ’57 Duo Jet in Cadillac Green, the Penguin is described by Gretsch as a ‘Solidbody’. That’s not strictly true and it misleads many into assuming the Jet is a takeoff on another iconic single-cut guitar: the Gibson Les Paul, which pre-dated it by a year when it was launched in 1952. The prosecution’s smoking gun might be the mahogany/maple construction of the Duo Jet’s single-cutaway body – all classic Les Paul, of course. The jury would be advised to dismiss the twin pickup layout and three-a-side tuner format as purely circumstantial. Gibson can’t claim ownership of that stuff...

The defence would justly counter that, beneath its skin, the Duo Jet is a very different beast to legendary Gibson president Ted McCarty’s first solidbody design. You see, the reason the ‘Solidbody’ description becomes evident the moment you pick up the ’58 Penguin and ’57 Duo Jet. Just like their illustrious ancestors, both guitars feature a chambered mahogany back paired with an arched laminated maple top. When you consider that even

a weight-relieved Les Paul won’t give you much change out of 10lbs, the Penguin and Jet’s average of 8lbs makes for happier shoulders. The chambered construction has a huge effect on tone, too, and while there are some significant spec differences despite being reissues of consecutive model years, the ’57 Caddy Green Duo Jet and ’58 Penguin do have a lot in common.

The big news for Gretsch geeks is that these guitars feature period correct 2-inch (50.8mm) deep bodies – just like the G6128T-GH George Harrison Signature Duo Jet which has been around for a while. Non-Vintage Select Jet and Penguin reissues ship with a 1.75” (44.45mm) body depth. Aside from the chambered mahogany and maple chassis both guitars come spec’d with gold hardware, including

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“If the Penguin and Cadillac Green Duo Jet were in first class sipping champagne the Chinese-made Pro Jet would be in economy”

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a banjo-style armrest, a 625mm (24.6”) scale set mahogany neck, a 305mm (12”) fingerboard radius, 22 medium jumbo frets and a bone top nut.

As for the differences, the ’57 Duo Jet has classic period correct features like a rosewood ‘board punctuated by pearloid ‘hump block’ inlays, aged white body and neck binding, G-Arrow control knobs and open back Grover Sta-Tite tuners. You get a Bigsby vibrato too, of course, and while it’s basically the same model fitted to the Penguin, the ’57 features a beautifully sculpted arm, attached to the Bigsby body with a big slot-head bolt. The Penguin comes spec’d with the more familiar flat Bigsby arm secured with a rounded smooth-top bolt.

Moving on, the ’57 Jet’s beautiful polyurethane Cadillac Green finish is

partly occupied by a pair of single coil TV Jones T-Armond pickups each boasting a dedicated volume control, a shared master tone and master volume, and a three-way pickup selector switch.

Befitting its top-of-the-line status, the ’58 Penguin comes with a nitrocellulose finish, ebony fingerboard, oodles of gold sparkle binding – with matching back plates and a truss rod cover – plus G-Arrow knobs studded with a little ‘jewel’ and pretty Grover Imperial tuners, too.

The ’58 also documents some key spec changes that occurred to solidbody guitars that year. You’ll find mother-of-pearl neo-classic thumbnail fingerboard inlays on show now but it’s the wiring loom that garnered the most attention. This was the year that Gretsch switched to its Filter’Tron humbuckers – here replicated with TV Jones Classics. There’s a volume knob for each pickup, plus the master volume near the Penguin’s cutaway. The loom is completed with a three-way pickup switch. The old master tone control is replaced with a pre-set switch with a trio of options.

One aspect of both guitars that may divide opinions is the bridge. The ’57 offers up the epically over-engineered Synchro-Sonic (aka the Melita), while the Penguin is harbouring the equally maligned Space Control bridge. Both are usually dumped by Gretsch-heads for the simpler bar bridge made by Gretsch and artisans like Tru-Arc. Personally we like the look and performance of the stock items. Some bemoan the fact they can’t palm mute with the Melita and Space Control but we managed just fine.

However, there’s obviously another, way more affordable, guitar that may be worthy of attention. If our Penguin and Cadillac Green Duo Jet were kicking it back in first class with a glass of Dom Perignon and a plateful of vol-au-vents, the Chinese-made Electromatic G5435T Pro Jet might be slumming it in economy with complimentary nuts and a plastic cup full of Tizer. So, how did this budget Jet manoeuvre its way into such esteemed company? Well, the Electromatic range has picked up a cult following over the past few years. ‘Matic fans love pimping these things.

Electromatic tweakers can also be somewhat cynical of the price tags on the

The lively TV Jones Classics on the '57 Duo Jet replace the Filter'Tron humbuckers that were introduced to the original model 60 years ago





Professional Series guitars, which includes our Vintage Select Editions. In recent years, it's the sub-£1,000 guitar sector that has seen the biggest shift in build quality, and bang for your buck, with the Electromatic range playing an important role in that growth by offering iconic designs at affordable prices. Our G5435T Pro Jet features the same scale length, fingerboard radius and fret count as the Vintage Select guitars. Costs are kept in check with a chambered basswood body but you get the laminated maple top, a pair of Black Top FilterTron pickups and a licensed Bigsby.

The question is, how well will our Pro Jet hold its own in this illustrious company? There's only one way to find out...

SOUNDS & FEEL

While the Electromatic Pro Jet has a super slim neck that's obviously aimed at modern players, the Vintage Select guitars are packing a bit more meat. That said, we were expecting them to be a bit fatter given the spec list's boast of a 'U' profile. You actually get closer to a chunky 'C' feel with a bit less

beef than you'd find on, say, a Gibson R8 Les Paul reissue.

But what's the deal with that extra quarter inch in the body depth? Well, we were taken aback by how the Vintage Select guitars beat our own 10-year-old '57 Duo Jet 1.75-inch deep reissue in acoustic volume and twang. Plug in, crank the reverb, flick on the neck pickup and manhandle the Bigsby arm, and it sounds like someone just dropped your amp down a well. The chambered two-inch body gives you a semi-acoustic tone that's bigger than, say, a Gibson ES-335. It's almost like they managed to squeeze a big ol' G6120 into those little bodies.

Like the DeArmond-made DynaSonic originals, the TV Jones T-Armond singlecoils on the '57 Duo Jet are bright, lively and give their best through a clean or lightly driven amp. The middle position on the pickup switch is just wonderful for 50s country jazz and rockabilly picking. The neck pickup is warm but there's still bags of definition. Again, it's much happier with cleaner tones.

The '58 Penguin offers much more grunt. The FilterTron humbucker is

one of the great rock pickups. It's the rhythmic backbone of AC/DC, the sound of Beatlemania-era George, Steve Marriott on Small Faces 45s like *All Or Nothing*, Pete Townshend's tone on The Who's mod opera *Quadrophenia* and almost everything Brian Setzer ever recorded.

The TV Jones in the bridge is bright and punchy. It jangles on a clean setting, and thrives with a touch of valve compression. Dish the dirt and you get some of Malcolm Young's immortal rhythm tone from *It's A Long Way To The Top (If You Wanna Rock 'N' Roll)*.

Thanks to Mr Setzer the FilterTron has become to go-to pup for rockabilly hound dogs despite the fact that original cats like Cliff Gallup, Chet Atkins and Eddie Cochran did the business with Dynasonics. Gretsch has almost become typecast by the rockabilly thing but the truth is that Penguin absolutely kills at that stuff.

Despite its more modest price tag, the Pro Jet can swing from classic 50s rock 'n' roll to hard rock and just about anything else. These Black Top FilterTrons are not just generic humbuckers. You actually get some Gretsch mojo wrapped around



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1. The dazzling headstock and Grover Imperial tuners are part of the OTT charisma of the ice-cool Penguin

2. A licensed Bigsby vibrato helps the far cheaper Electromatic achieve an authentic Gretsch shimmer

3. One of the most recognisable Gretsch features, the master volume, allows you quick access to either tone down the Jet's intensity or kill the sound completely

those bobbins, boosted no doubt by the chambered body.

VERDICT

We can just picture the Electromatic faithful, arms folded and eyebrows raised, daring us to justify the price tags of the Vintage Select models. We agree that the Electromatic Pro Jet is a solid bit of kit. It looks the part, punches above its weight in terms of build quality versus price, and it puts out some convincing tones. It's actually more versatile than the Vintage Select '57 Duo Jet simply because it can straddle the old school and modern tonal divide.

That said, if you want a classic tone machine that'll transport you back to a time when amplifier distortion was still regarded as a fault, the '57 is a dream. In terms of presentation, this Duo Jet is as good as it gets. The fit and finish are flawless; the playability is perfect. Aside from the fact you don't get a nitro finish, the ointment remains fly-free in every other regard.

Which brings us to the '58 Penguin. Yes, it's about as subtle as Liberace's piano but it's a masterpiece of guitar craft. We love the

fact that Gretsch fattened up the Penguin – and the rest of the Vintage Select flock – with a two-inch gut and sprayed it in a vintage white nitrocellulose. We love the TV Jones Classics: a pair of humbuckers don't tie you to a specific era in quite the same way as the T-Armonds. Short of the heaviest of metal there's little these pickups can't handle.

Our only gripe? Believe it or not, it's the hard case. You get the same black shaped quality number that comes with the '57 Duo Jet. Hiding grade A guitar porn like this in a plain wrapper may be good for inconspicuous transportation but the Penguin deserves better. Opening the Penguin's case should be accompanied by smoke, flashing lights, maybe an epic tune like Aaron Copland's *Fanfare For The Common Man*.

Original White Penguins are rarer than a X-Factor hopeful without a sob story. The fact that you can own a vintage spec, nitro blasted clone is the best thing that's happened to us Gretsch addicts for years. Some might think that the price tag takes the biscuit but we reckon there's never been a better time to p-p-pick up a Penguin. **G**

4. The DNA of the classic Gretsch Jets of the 50s and 60s is there to see in the G5435T Pro Jet's slim headstock. The small button machineheads are another nod to the past

5. Gretsch die-hards tend to get rid of the stock Synchro-Sonic bridge on the '57 Duo Jet but we like it just the way it comes

6. In classic style both master volumes are manipulated via a metal G-Arrow knob



GRETSCH G5435T ELECTROMATIC PRO JET

PRICE: £529

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Single-cutaway electric guitar

BODY: Chambered basswood back with laminated maple top

NECK: Maple, set-in

SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.6")

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22 medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Chrome anchored tune-o-matic bridge, licensed Bigsby vibrato, vintage style tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm (2.04")

ELECTRICS: 2 x Black Top Filter'Tron humbuckers, 2 x volume, master tone and three-way pickup selector toggle switch

Weight (kg/lb): 3.6/8.1

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: G5265 Electromatic Baritone Jet £569, G5439LH Electromatic Pro Jet £445

LEFT HANDERS: G5934LH Electromatic Pro Jet Lefthanded (hardtail)

FINISHES: Black

7/10

PROS It definitely looks the part and this affordable beastie carries a discernible load of classic Jet DNA

CONS The neck might be a bit of a slim some...



GRETSCH G6128T-57 VINTAGE SELECT '57 DUO JET

PRICE: £2,609 (including hard case)

ORIGIN: Japan

TYPE: Single-cutaway electric guitar

BODY: Chambered mahogany back with laminated arched maple top

NECK: Mahogany, set-in

SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.6")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22 medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Chrome Synchro-Sonic (Melita) bridge, Bigsby B5 True Vibrato, Grover Sta-Tite tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm (2.08")

ELECTRICS: 2 x TV Jones T-Armond singlecoil pickups, 2 x volumes, master volume, master tone and three-way pickup selector toggle switch

WEIGHT: (kg/lb): 3.2/7.10

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: G6128T-53 Vintage Select '53 Duo Jet £2529, G6128T-59 Vintage Select '59 Duo Jet £2529, G6129T-59 Silver Jet £2609,

G6131T-62 Jet Firebrd £2609

LEFT HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Cadillac green

8/10

PROS Killer build-quality and tone, plus the Caddy Green makes a nice change from the classic black Jets

CONS It would have been good to see a nitro finish in the '57



GRETSCH G6134T-58 VINTAGE SELECT '58 PENGUIN

PRICE: £3,199 (including hard case)

ORIGIN: Japan

TYPE: Single-cutaway electric guitar

BODY: Chambered mahogany back with laminated arched maple top

NECK: Mahogany, set-in

SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.6")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Ebony 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22 medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Gold Space Control bridge, Bigsby B5 True Vibrato, Grover Imperial tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm (2.08")

ELECTRICS: 2 x TV Jones Classic Filter'Tron humbuckers, 2 x volumes, master volume, three-way tone switch and three-way pickup selector toggle switch

WEIGHT: (kg/lb): 3.8/8.5

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: No

LEFT HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Vintage White nitrocellulose

Fender GBI

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www.gretschguitars.com



9/10

PROS A rock 'n' roll icon with immense curb appeal but beneath that nitro finish and gold sparkle lies exceptional tone and feel

CONS Not everyone will like those jukebox looks, and the hard case is a bit vanilla