

Unchained Melody





While Gretsch added its ultra-affordable Streamliner range at the tail end of 2015, its second assault for this year comes in the form of a re-jigged Professional Series for both vintage buffs and serious gigging players. Which are you?

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GRETSCH PLAYERS EDITION & REISSUE EDITION GUITARS £1,899 – £3,199

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What You Need To Know

1 More Gretsch guitars? What's different here?

Indeed. For this year, Gretsch has split its Professional Series into two distinct strands: 'Reissue Edition' and 'Players Edition'. The former are classics with a few concessions to the modern player; the latter are less vintage-specific, with numerous gigging-aimed upgrades.

2 I don't play rockabilly: what's the interest?

Many a player has used a Gretsch outside of its original style, and the Players Edition models are designed to 'rock out' with thinner bodies, pretty firm 'ML' bracing and, not least, 'string-thru' Bigsby's with locking tuners: a Gretsch without the hassle!

3 They're a bit pricey...

The Professional Series are the top-line Japanese-made models, but Gretsch also has its mid-price Electromatic range and the new-for-2016 Streamliner mini ranges, which all retail under £400.

Being a heritage brand in 2016 can't be simple. If Fender strays too far from its classics, we're not happy. Likewise, Gibson – or virtually any other brand that had a part to play back in the formative years of rock 'n' roll. Gretsch is certainly restrained by its past, even though its classic hollowbodies have been used in every mainstream musical genre from the 60s to the present day. So, what to do?

Well, keep that oh-so-classic aesthetic in place, but make changes under the hood to keep the modern player in mind. In a nutshell, that duality is Gretsch in 2016. If you want a pro-level 'reissue', we now have the Reissue models and if you want the look, but need something that's more giggable and usable for virtually any contemporary style, we have the Players Edition.

Broadly speaking, the 10-string reissue models stick to the various specs of yesteryear, with subtle concessions to the modern player: we get TV Jones pickups, aged binding and inlays, pinned bridges (where applicable), bone nuts, 'Squeezebox' paper-in-oil capacitors with a treble-bleed circuit (on the master volume only), and vintage thick pickguards. Price-wise, the range starts with the Anniversary at £1,999, moves through the Tennessee Rose (£2,099), a pair of Chet Atkins 6120s (£2,599), a trio of Country Gentlemen, including a 12-string (£2,399 to £2,699), a lone Country Club (£2,549), and pair of White Falcons (both £3,199).

The Players Edition models feature 'ML' bracing, pinned Rocking Bar bridges, 'string-thru' Bigsby's, strap locks, locking tuners and Tusq XL nuts, those Squeezebox

caps, a treble-bleed circuit, No-Load tone pots and thinner 2.25-inch body. These models start lower, with two colour choices of the Anniversary and a Tennessee Rose at £1,899, one 6120 at £2,199 (left-handed at £2,379) and a flame-maple version at £2,399. The lone Country Gentleman is £2,249, while the White and Black Falcons are £2,799 – the lefty White Falcon topping the range at £2,899. So, with a pair from each edition to feast on, let's get stuck in...

G6120T-55GE Reissue Edition Chet Atkins

Irrespective of its history, this nitro-finished beauty is superbly built. It's not aged in any way, and has none of the construction quirks and blips that you'll find on an original piece. As with all our models, it's entirely built from laminated maple, the top's facing slightly flamed, and there are even a few marks in the wood: one by the lower tip of the treble-side wide f-hole looks like an arrow – very in keeping with the control knob motifs and Western cattle-and-cactus inlays and headstock logo. The cream binding around the body, 'board and head is all remarkably clean and matches those aged block inlays to a T. The neck is two-piece maple, with a central thin contrasting veneer and additional headstock wings, and the see-through light-orange finish leaves nowhere to hide tooling marks and the like, though we can't see any.

It's perhaps a little heavier than some early examples we've played, although, like many instruments of this period, variation seems much wider than today's more consistent builds.



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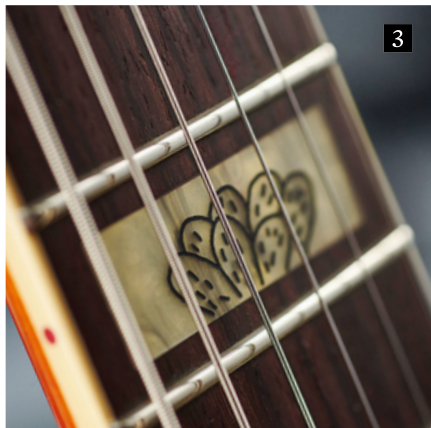
1 & 3. Chet Atkins never liked the cattle and cactus inlays of his original signature guitar. They had both been removed by the late 50s

2. The DeArmond-made DynaSonic single coils were replaced in 1958 with humbucking Filter Trons. Guild started fitting them to its electric hollowbodies soon afterwards

4. One of the many subtle concessions to the modern age, this Bigsby bridge would have originally been intonated for a wound third string

5. Gretsch loved its cartoon sketches. This Falcon graces the thick plastic pickguard, back-sprayed with gold paint

6. With its proprietary knurled metal knobs and strap buttons, original Gretsch guitars had plenty of unique features. Yamaha recently, er, borrowed the design for its Revstar guitars



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Hardware is gleamingly gold-plated, with the exception of the compensated aluminium bridge on its pinned base. Pickups are TV Jones's T-Armonds, faithful recreations of the original DeArmond single coils that pre-dated the Filter'Tron, while the 'Tone-Pot' circuit controls offer probably the most common Gretsch setup, certainly of contemporary times: a three-way toggle pickup selector, individual pickup volumes, a master tone and a master volume on the single horn.

G6136T-59GE Reissue 1959 Falcon

One of the showiest electric guitars ever conceived, even today, the White Falcon – although the nitro finish is slightly nicotine-stained – is not for the shy, retiring player. With its slightly larger body (430mm wide as opposed to the 400mm of our other three models), it also has a longer scale length and uses the quite robust Trestle-style bracing, no doubt contributing to its heavier-than-the-6120 weight.

Numerous new features were introduced by Gretsch in 1958, not least the Filter'Tron humbuckers, here replicated with TV Jones's Classics. We also get the Neo-Classic fingerboard (ebony, not rosewood) and those ultra-classy Neo-Classic half moon (aka 'thumbnail') inlays. Again, the binding is remarkably clean, and made from a gold metal-flake plastic, like the bigger logo on the elongated and huge headstock. Gold-plating is everywhere on this model, and we have the Space Control bridge with knurled wheel saddles and V cut-out 'Cadillac' Bigsby.

The electronics differ, too, with the 'Tone Switch' circuit that replaces the master tone control – with a three-way-toggle master tone switch placed below the pickup selector on the upper shoulder, plus two individual volume controls by the Bigsby and the single master volume on

the rounded horn. Control knobs are the later 'arrow-through-G' types, with added mother-of-pearl centre-dot and red-crystal position markers. The epitome of bling.

G6118T Players Edition Anniversary

After the Falcon, our first Players Edition model looks way less showy, but far from dowdy, in this new two-tone ivory top with metallic charcoal-coloured sides, back and neck-back polyurethane finish. Vintage buffs might get sniffy about that finish, but it's far from over-thick, and, like every other detail of these guitars, perfect in execution. Its more 'workingman' vibe is enhanced by the chrome and nickel hardware and, here, we have the rocking-bar bridge – intonated for standard 0.011s, as the guitars are shipped with, on its pinned wooden foot.

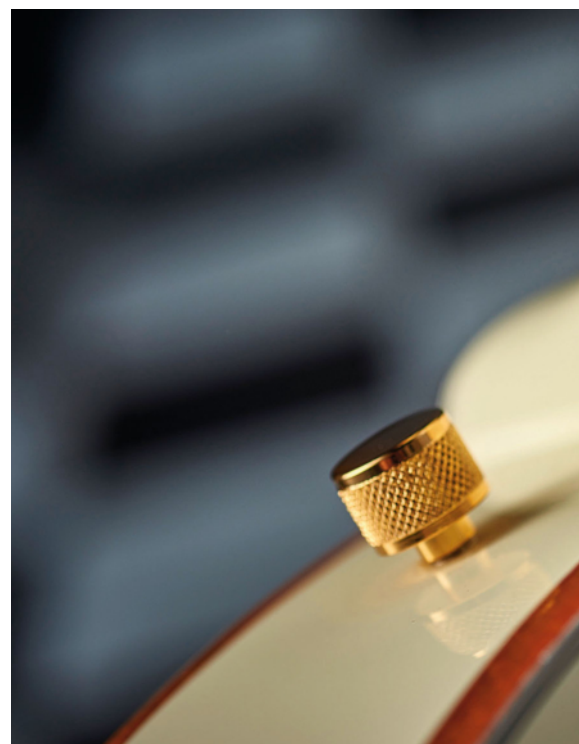
Locking tuners and a slippery Tusq XL nut help to keep tuning stable, while the string-anchor bar of the Bigsby, instead of featuring the usual pins onto which you hook the strings' ball-ends, is actually drilled through, so you simply thread the string through the bar and pull them into those rear-lock tuners. It's taken the Gretsch-owned Bigsby company a while, but, finally, here's a Bigsby that isn't a total pain to restring.

We return to the 'Tone-Pot' circuit and have Gretsch's own Alnico-loaded High Sensitive Filter'Trons. The thumbnail inlays are retained, but the unbound fingerboard is rosewood, not ebony, and Schaller strap-lock buttons are fitted as standard – the locking elements for your strap are supplied, too.

G6119T Players Edition Tennessee Rose

Perhaps the most generic of our foursome, the Tennessee Rose is a dead ringer for the Anniversary, with the exception of the more conventional Deep Cherry

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7. The so-called Space Control bridge was designed by Jimmie Webster and was simpler than the previous Melita Synchro-Sonic bridge, although it doesn't offer individual intonation, just variable string spacing

8. The classic half-moon or 'thumbnail' inlays were part of Gretsch's 'Neo-Classic' fingerboard, which used bound ebony, as opposed to rosewood. Compare these with the inlays on the Anniversary and Tennessee Rose (picture 14)



What's Inside?

You thought your Gretsch was all hollow, right? Wrong. We investigate...

The term 'hollowbody' is one of those catch-all phrases used to describe a guitar's construction, but outside of the 'jazz-style' hollowbodies, guitars created before that new rock 'n' roll thing came along, most have some sort of internal bracing. Why?

There are variety of reasons, sustain and feedback rejection being paramount. Like the flat-top steel-string, the hollowbody archtop was designed before pickups and amplification transformed the instrument from a mainly rhythm instrument to a lead voice.

The large body, with its violin-inspired arched top and back, has – to generalise – quite a short sustain, with a mid-focus to the sound that helped it cut through ensemble settings. With the advent of pickups and amplifiers enabling the player to add these to his or her instrument, that sound was not only made louder, but the 'jazz' or 'plectrum guitar' became defined – as it still is today.

As the 1950s progressed, plenty of brands – Gretsch included – were experimenting with internal bracing and support. This initially took the form of dual braces and a post running from front to back, to damp the top and back but at the same time add some sustain. Of course, when Gibson combined its solidbody with its archtop heritage and created the ES-335, you'd have thought most others would follow. Plenty did, but not Gretsch. Despite requests from its key artist, Chet Atkins, the company refused to make a thinline with a centre block.

The so-called Trestle bracing appeared in the later 50s. This was a dual-bar system, which added mass and stiffness to the top, while two legs on each of the braces connected top to back close to the neck pickup and the bridge. That's the style used on our reviewed White Falcon, and you can see these supports are quite sizeable.

'ML' bracing, as used on the Players Edition guitars, is named after Fender/Gretsch veteran Mike Lewis, and is a much later addition to the Gretsch canon. Basically, this takes the Trestle concept, but removes the neck-placed feet, leaving quite a rigid top support, plus the dual feet by the bridge, to connect top to back.



Stain finish and clean white fingerboard binding that matches the body's binding. The chrome/nickel hardware is mirrored by the silver back-sprayed pickguard. It's a straightforward, modern player for the journeyman guitarist who doesn't want to upstage the singer – never a good idea if you want to keep your gig!

There are a lot of similarities with Fender's Telecaster and the sound we hear from the 6120: a quite steely bridge, soft mellow neck and a percussive mix that, as soon as you drop into a basic Chet Atkins-like picking pattern, produces a rubbery thwack to the basses with a hollowed textured bite from the high strings – glorious and hugely evocative. While it's true that Mr A might not have liked these DeArmonds, the entire sonic stew moves through the decades, just like a Tele – it ain't just for country!

That mix, for example, is a superb soul voice and the dynamic range of the

instrument... well, it's why many of us are so drawn to hollowbodies and semis. The aesthetic might not be right, but you can easily cover your jazz debs with this, too, although the neck has a slightly soft-nosed attack on the upper strings and real high-fret access isn't that easy. But, in anyone's book, it's just a quality voice with a slightly short old-school sustain and that hollowbody snap. Aside from the mix-pickup position, hum may be problematic on the solo pickups – they are single coils, after all.

The bigger body of the White Falcon is noticeable seated, slightly less so strapped on, but it feels a little more solid and chunky. The perception of its sound is that

Mr Atkins might not have liked these DeArmonds, but the entire sonic stew moves through the decades, just like a Tele – it ain't just for country, after all!

The Rivals

Outside of Gretsch's lower-spec Electromatic and Streamliner ranges, there are plenty of Bigsby-loaded semis and solidbodies designed with 'twang' in mind. Guild's Newark Street range has the thinline hollowbody Starfire III (£799) and the full-bodied CE-100D Capri (£796) with pinned bridges, Bigsby's and Guild's LB-1 'Little Bucker' mini humbuckers. Godin's Montreal Premiere P90 comes with or without Bigsby (£1,399 and £1,299), dual soapbar single coils and spruce 'breathe-through' centre block. D'Angelico's stylish range includes the single-cut EX-175 (approx. £1,300) with dual Kent Armstrong 'buckers and Bigsby. From the solidbody side, even brands such as PRS offer the S2 Starla (£1,179) with Bigsby and dual Filter'Tron-like Starla 'buckers





9. The Anniversary nameplate refers to the 1958 75th Anniversary of Gretsch – the company was founded in 1883 by Friedrich Gretsch

10. A distinctly modern feature of the Player's Edition guitars is these rear-locking tuners. Along with the lubricated nut and 'string thru' Bigsby's, they enable simpler re-stringing

11. The brass Rocking Bar bridge was an early Gretsch design that the modern Gretsch company believes is the best choice for the vibrato performance

12. Gretsch and Bigsby go hand in hand: the company is now owned by Gretsch, who purchased it from Ted McCarty in 1999. McCarty had bought the company in 1966 after he left Gibson

13. While the Player's Edition guitars feature these 'arrow-through-G' logo'd knobs, they dispense with the similar style strap buttons in favour of modern Schaller strap locks

14. On an unbound fingerboard, like this Anniversary, those thumbnail inlays act as both side and face markers. Neat



15. The famous G-brand body logo had already appeared on the Gretsch Round-Up in 1954, which also featured the 'cattle and cactus' theme. Yup, it was aimed at country players!

16. Designed by Ray Butts to primarily cure the hum from the DynaSonic single coil, the development of the Filter'Tron came at the same time as Seth Lover's humbucking design for Gibson

17. Over the top? The White Falcon's headstock is big, which reflects its larger body and longer scale length. Originally, it featured a vertical 'winged' Gretsch logo; this later spec has the classic Gretsch 'T-roof' logo and nameplate

it's slightly more forceful, a little higher in output, stronger and firmer, helped by the longer scale length. The tone switch is a very neat circuit that simply offers a slight high-end roll off when pushed up, and a darker, throatier sound when pushed down.

On a big guitar like this, not least with the Bigsby in play, those standard controls seem quite a way away, so you can set your individual volumes then control everything from the top of the guitar: master volume (which seems to retain the highs as it's reduced, while the individual volumes slightly soften the attack when reduced), pickup selection *and* tone control. The feedback threshold is raised, but it still remains, despite the firmer structure, essentially a hollowbody.

The Anniversary and the Tennessee Rose, on paper, are the same guitar and plugging in the Anniversary after the Falcon takes us slightly further still from the 6120. With everything full up, we feel the need to add a little treble from our amp to create that stingin' steely tone from the bridge, while both the mix and the neck sound a little clouded, a little thicker than the Falcon. Of the two, it might be splitting hairs a little, but the Tennessee Rose just sounded a little lighter, especially on the mix and

the neck pickup positions. Certainly, when we've tested the No-Load tone fully open on a Fender solidbody, we quite often back it off. Here, we kept it pretty much fully up. Gretsches for the more contemporary-minded player? Quite definitely.

Verdict

Beautifully made and with some lovely period-correct details mixed with more modern concessions, there's little we don't like here. Choosing your fit, however, may be a more difficult decision. At £3.2k, the White Falcon is a serious investment, although its sturdier build and longer scale (not to mention those Filter'Trons) give it perhaps the most versatile sonic palette. Considerably lower in cost, our two Players Edition models are close cousins and either would be perfect for those for rockier, less 'Gretsch-style' outings – the new string-thru Bigsby alone will cure what most of us find a chore: restringing.

That just leaves the Chet Atkins G6120T-55GE hollowbody, which, with its lighter build and those DynaSonic-style single coils, really gets to the essence of the 'Gretsch sound'. If you haven't played a Gretsch for a while, you might be very surprised. These are some serious guitars. **G**



GRETSCH G6120T-59GE REISSUE CHET ATKINS

PRICE: £2,599 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: Single-cutaway hollowbody electric
BODY: Laminated maple back, top and sides w/ parallel tone bars
MAX WIDTH: 400mm
RIM DEPTH: 70mm
NECK: Maple, standard 'U' profile
SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.6")
NUT/WIDTH: Aluminium/42.6mm
FINGERBOARD: Aged white bound rosewood, aged pearloid blocks with western motif inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Pinned aluminium compensated bridge, Bigsby B6GBVF vibrato, Grover Sta-Tite tuners – gold-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51mm
ELECTRICS: 2x TV Jones T-Armond single coils, 3-position pickup selector toggle switch, master volume, master tone, 2x pickup volume controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.19/7
OPTIONS: The '59 spec G6120T-59GE Chet Atkins Hollowbody (£2,599)
RANGE OPTIONS: There are two 6120s in the Players Edition: G6120T Nashville (£2,199) and the G6120TFM Nashville, Flame Maple (£2,399)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model, only the Players Edition G6120TLH Nashville (£2,379)
FINISHES: Western Orange Stain – gloss nitrocellulose



9/10

PROS A classic guitar with high build quality, great playability and huge 'twang' factor

CONS Not the best choice for playing at high volumes



GRETSCH G6136T-59GE REISSUE 1959 FALCON

PRICE: £3,199 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: Single cutaway hollowbody electric
BODY: Laminated maple back, top and sides w/ 1959-style Trestle bracing
MAX WIDTH: 430mm
RIM DEPTH: 70mm
NECK: Maple, standard 'U' profile
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.56mm
FINGERBOARD: Gold sparkle ebony, m-o-p thumbnail inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Space Control bridge, Bigsby B6GVT vibrato, Grover Imperial with 'stair-step' buttons – gold-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: 2x TV Classic humbuckers, 3-position pickup selector toggle switch, master volume, 2x individual pickup volume controls, 3-position master tone switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.89/8.5
OPTIONS: G6136-55GE Reissue 1955 Falcon with Cadillac tailpiece and TV Jones T-Armond single coils (£3,199)
RANGE OPTIONS: G6136T Players Edition Falcon with string-thru Bigsby and Filter'Trons (£2,799)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model, only the G6136TLH Players Edition Falcon with Bigsby, with Filter'Trons (£2,899)
FINISHES: White – gloss nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS Beautiful repro with sensible upgrades and TV Jones's best-selling Filter'Tron recreation

CONS Not for the meek; it's also a big and quite heavy ol' bird



GRETSCH G6118T PLAYERS EDITION ANNIVERSARY

PRICE: £1,899 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: Single-cutaway hollowbody electric
BODY: Laminated maple back, top and sides w/ ML bracing
MAX WIDTH: 400mm
RIM DEPTH: 56mm
NECK: Maple, standard 'U' profile
SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.6")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone Tusq XL/43.25mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid thumbnail inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Nickel-plated secured Rocking Bar bridge, 'String-Thru' Bigsby B6CP vibrato, Schaller rear-locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: 2x High Sensitive Filter'Tron humbuckers, 3-position pickup selector toggle switch, master volume, master tone (No-load), 2x individual pickup volume controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.48/7.7
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: The G6118T-60GE Reissue 1960 Anniversary (£1,999)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: 2-Tone Lotus Ivory and Charcoal Metallic (as reviewed), Smoke Green – gloss urethane

9/10

PROS Workingman's Gretsch with great upgrades, not least the locking tuners and String-Thru Bigsby

CONS Might need a treble lift to obtain true twang



GRETSCH G6119T PLAYERS EDITION TENNESSEE ROSE

PRICE: £1,899 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: Single cutaway hollowbody electric
BODY: Laminated maple back, top and sides w/ ML bracing
MAX WIDTH: 400mm
RIM DEPTH: 56mm
NECK: Maple, standard 'U' profile
SCALE LENGTH: 625mm (24.6")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone Tusq XL/42.9mm
FINGERBOARD: White bound rosewood, pearloid thumbnail inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Nickel-plated secured Rocking Bar bridge, 'String-Thru' Bigsby B6GP vibrato, Schaller rear-locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: 2x High Sensitive Filter'Tron humbuckers, 3-position pickup selector toggle switch, master volume, master tone (No-load), 2x individual pickup volume controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.45/7.6
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: G6119T-62GE Reissue 1962 Chet Atkins Tennessee Rose (£2,099)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Deep Cherry Stain – gloss urethane

8/10

PROS Ditto the Anniversary – great upgrades, including the locking tuners and String-Thru Bigsby

CONS A very close cousin to the Anniversary... a model too far?