

**REVIEWS**

Brian May Guitars, Treble Boosters, Deacy amp, Vox AC30 + GJ2, ESP LTD, Hagstrom, Panama, Taurus, Moog, Pigtronix, Neo Instruments, LD Systems, Wi-Digital, Studiomaster, AKG, PreSonus, Tascam, PRS, Guild, Art & Lutherie, Takamine, Mayones, MTD, EBS

# Guitar *Interactive*

ISSUE  
**40**

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# Brian May - *Star Quality*

Dr Brian May - astrophysicist, animal rights campaigner, songwriter, rock legend, above all the guitar voice of Queen - is one of most distinctive and gifted guitar players of the past 50 years. GI has put together our biggest ever tribute issue, featuring interviews with Brian and his long-serving guitar tech, Pete Malandrone, plus reviews of as many Brian May-related products we could get our hands on! First **Gary Cooper** offers an assessment of a career still very much in progress, then **Jamie Humphries** offers his unique insights.

## *Singularity - What makes Brian May unique*

‘**O**ne of the measures of a really great guitarist is that you can recognise him from just a few notes. It may not be universally true, but think of some of the players it works for - Jeff Beck, Django Reinhardt, Eddie Van Halen, Pete Townsend, Jimi Hendrix, Alan Holdsworth and Chet Atkins among them. As rules of thumb go, it isn't a bad one. One guitar player you can definitely add to that list is Brian May. Just a few notes from Dr May's fingers is all it takes to tell.

It isn't (just) about tone and it certainly isn't about the number of notes played per second. It's about feel and musicality and the ability to endow guitar playing with personality. If an aspiring guitarist is looking to do anything that will ensure a successful career, then sounding like him (or her) self is far more important than being able to argue scales and modes with a music theorist.

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That ability to be instantly recognisable is one of the qualities that sets Brian May's playing apart. Another is his sheer musicality - in fact it's that quality that I personally think makes him a 'great player'. When Queen first arrived on the scene, it might have been the amazing layering of vocals and bizarre juxtaposition of styles (one minute hard Rock, the next camp operatic extravaganza) that captured the public's attention, but for a guitarist it was listening to the finely wrought guitar parts, each perfectly complementing one another, that startled.

None of that came easily. Back in the 1970s, when Brian May was recording tracks like 'Good Company', 'Now I'm

Here' or 'Bohemian Rhapsody', the only way to do it was via slaved-up 24 track tape machines, with pass after pass after pass removing the precious oxide from its backing to such an extent that the tape ended up almost transparent. The hours of work that went into making a Queen album are unimaginable and the sheer determination taken to record a track like one of these is truly mind-boggling. But that, too, is a hallmark of Brian May - he is an extremely determined man, with a definite willingness to go completely against the flow if that is what he wants to do.

Take, for example, his idiosyncratic choice of gear, which undoubtedly helped him stamp his individuality on Queen's sound. Had



**Brian May Interview - Part 1**

## **And Freddie Mercury?** How would you even begin to describe his influences?

he played a Les Paul or a Strat through a Marshall or HiWatt he would have sounded very different - or, rather, much more like everyone else. By deliberately choosing a guitar made with his father in the family shed, plugged into a (by then pretty much completely out of fashion) amplifier (an AC30), a similarly antediluvian effects unit (the Rangemaster treble booster) and to cap it all, playing with the milled edge of a sixpence, he gave himself a head start in

the instant recognisability stakes. It may not be the first advice you'd necessarily give an aspiring guitarist, but 'do your own thing' - even to the point of stubborn idiosyncrasy - does have a lot to be said for it! Keeping those old AC30s on the road was hard work, as was all the money and love spent on the various Red Special replicas that have been made but it paid off handsomely, both creatively and commercially.



en



Brian May Interview - Part 2

Then there is the song writing. If there is a lot to be said for individuality, Queen certainly had it by the bucket load, and it equally certainly caused tensions in the band. Brian May and Roger Taylor could make an awesomely powerful sound at times (anyone who witnessed Queen at their peak will have heard a *very* hard Rock band!) and were pulling the band towards a heavier sound (I remember the penny dropping when May admitted to me (a fellow admirer) that he was a Tony Iommi fan. This was back in '76, when that was about as uncool as it could be. So much for fashion!). Brian's songs often (though not always!) reflected that hard Rock leaning.

John Deacon, on the other hand, though he didn't write much, wrote some of the band's biggest hits and he was a Tamla and Soul fan. And Freddie Mercury? How would you even begin to describe his influences? These differing styles tugged the band apart at times and various interviews reveal one member or another admitting they didn't like such and such a track. Sensibly, they played on them despite that and the result made Queen something far more important (and popular) than yet another 1970s/80s Rock band with a bag of riffs, a cloud of hair spray and not a lot else. In that sense, Queen had something in common with the Beatles - they were impossible to categorise and beyond prediction. Something for everyone, if you like.

Stubbornness had a lot to do with that. The band wasn't always the most popular in the business at its height - in fact the word 'arrogant' was occasionally used, though that's not a word anyone who has met him would ever use of Brian May, but I'd prefer to say the band was determined. After a rotten start with a terrible management deal (listen to 'Death On Two Legs'), and despite visceral opposition from a music press that had decided anyone who could sing in tune or play more than three chords was getting above himself, Queen knew what they wanted to do, knew how they wanted to do it and weren't prepared to let anything stand in their way. It takes that level of determination to reach the top.

And so to our Brian May feature. Inevitably, we relied on Jamie Humphries for the majority of it. Jamie has been with Guitar Interactive since we began (when he hasn't been on tour), has played in Brian's bands, worked on both the London West End and German productions of the *We Will Rock You* musical and was the only choice for both our interview with Dr May and the Tech features.

Our thanks to all those who helped finally make this feature possible: Jamie, Pete Malandrone, Andrew Guyton, Barry Moorhouse, Nigel Knight and, of course, Dr Brian May C.B.E.!



A photograph of Brian May, a bald man with a beard and tattoos on his left arm, wearing a dark blue t-shirt. He is smiling and shaking hands with another person whose arm is visible on the right. The background is a dark, blue-tinted stage setting with some light flares.

# Brian May - and me.

**Jamie Humphries**, one of GI's longest serving contributors, has worked for and with Brian May since 2006.

There is not much that can be written about Brian May that hasn't already been written. That's not surprising when you look at the facts: lead guitarist in arguably the biggest and most popular band in the world, composer of some of the biggest songs of all time, revered and respected lead guitarist, influence to some of rock's greatest, revolutionary guitar builder, successful solo career and countless collaborations. And that's not all! Add to this list animal activist,

a Doctor of astrophysics, author and an expert on stereophotography, you can see why Brian May is so popular today with all generations.

When I was asked to contribute to the text piece for the Brian May feature I wondered where I would go with it, and decided to look at how Brian has impacted on me as a musician, and to put forward the things that I feel make him so unique as a guitarist.



**Jamie Humphries; Brian May, Queen,  
WWRY and Queen  
related shows and tours.**

**2006-2014** We Will Rock You London guitar  
1 sub

**2009** We Will Rock You UK tour, guitar 1 sub

**2011-12** We Will Rock You Germany,  
Switzerland tour guitar 1 principle

**2014-2015** We Will Rock You Germany and  
Austrian tour guitar 1 principle

**2009** to present Champions of Rock Queen  
tribute Swedish concert tours

**2010** Brian May/Kerry Ellis BBC Proms Hyde  
Park

**2011** Brian May/Kerry Ellis “Anthems” UK tour

**2011** Queen performance for Freddie Mercury’s  
65<sup>th</sup> Birthday London; with Brian May, Roger  
Taylor, Jeff Beck and Mike Rutherford

**2014** We Will Rock You 2 workshop  
performances, principle guitar



Something that I loved about Brian's playing, **influences me** is his orchestration, and arrangement of a variety of tones.

My introduction to Brian May came at the tender age of four years old, when 'Bohemian Rhapsody' was number #1 in the UK charts in 1975. I was bought up on good music; my father always playing vinyl records in the house by the likes of Santana, Focus, Genesis, Pink Floyd and Led Zeppelin. Brian's memorable solo in 'Bohemian Rhapsody' forms the basis for one of my earliest memories, a Sunday visit to my grandparents in Putney, London. We would always listen to the Radio 1 top 40 show, whilst my grandmother prepared Sunday evening tea and sandwiches. Hanging on the wall in the kitchen, my grandmother had a chopping board that with its handle resembled the shape of a guitar body and neck. I would entertain my parents and grandparents by miming to Brian's solo on this chopping board.

This obviously was a precursor for a lifelong passion and career choice for me. My desire to play guitar was fuelled even more by the music video for 'Bohemian Rhapsody'. Seeing Brian May in his flamboyant stage clothes, shrouded in smoke made him appear like some kind of superhero. I knew from that point that I wanted to do that!

I was always into more progressive music in my formative years, and didn't start listening

to the more technical guitarists until I was about 14 or 15 years old. I was drawn toward guitarists that were different, and that didn't just play "stock" blues/rock licks. Brian's sound and style had a huge impact on me when I was first learning electric guitar, and still does to this day. I was drawn to his melodic style, with his solos being almost like extensions of the song; little musical pieces in their own right. I was also drawn to his sound; it was distorted and heavy, yet unlike the heavy metal that other kids at school were listening to the sound had space, a crispness, and a definition I hadn't heard before. His solo sound was so distinct, with a vowel like quality, and often harmonic over tones, which as hard as I tried I was unable to replicate. This was of course down to the fact that Brian had custom built his own guitar, the Red Special, with pickup switching capabilities unlike any other guitar.

Something that I loved about Brian's playing which still to this day inspires and influences me is his orchestration, and arranging of guitar parts; as well as his wide variety of tones. I often feel that Brian's unique virtuosity gets overlooked; listen to the beautifully arranged harmonies on 'Killer Queen', along with Brian's regal sounding phrasing and pre bends.

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anging of guitar parts; as well as his wide



For me the track that defines Brian's sound and virtuoso style is 'Good Company' from A Night at the Opera. This track is often over looked by guitarists, but as well as being a perfect example of Brian's very quirky composing style, includes one of the most ingenious, and revolutionary pieces of recorded electric guitar, especially when you

consider this was in the early '70s! Using only his home made guitar, a treble booster, and the John Deacon's homemade 'Deacy' amp he arranged multiple guitar layers to emulate a Dixieland style Trad Jazz band. Listening to the recording you hear flutes, oboes, trumpets and trombones, yet all of them are created on Brian's 'Old Lady'. And



it's not just the sounds, it's the arrangement, and how the individual lines play counterpoint melodies, weaving in and out of each other; the recording is a land mark in Rock guitar.

I began working as a sub/dep on the Queen musical We Will Rock You in London in 2006. This position lead me to perform as a cover on the 2009 UK tour, and eventually to hold the position of principle guitarist on the German touring production of the show. This show was a



challenge, with not only the task of emulating Brian's style, but also working with equipment very similar to what he uses, but in the controlled environment of a musical production. Getting use to the switching on the guitar, using the just the volume control to go between clean and dirty tones, using a sixpence. I really immersed myself in the role, modifying my guitar with more authentic parts, and really trying to get inside Brian's style and technique.



In 2010 a dream came true for me, when I was asked if I would join Brian's new band with singer Kerry Ellis. For me it felt like full circle, working alongside the man who as a child I mimed to. I got to spend time with Brian, working on learning the guitar parts closely with him. I learnt so much from these intimate up close guitar sessions. I was surprised at how lightly he played, gently brushing the strings with his first finger of his

right hand. I got to see how he manipulated the Red Special's controls; going from glassy cleans, brushing the sixpence across the strings, to cranking the guitars volume up for long sustained notes. I learnt so much about the value of a good note; letting the note breathe before adding a gently subtle vibrato. Watching and listening to Brian play so close up was such a privilege; I was overwhelmed by just how alive his guitar sounded! **END >**

A photograph of Pete Malandrone, a man with long, curly hair and a goatee, smiling broadly. He is holding a red electric guitar. The background shows a workshop or studio with several other guitars hanging on the wall.

# Pete Malandrone Interview

When it comes to a detailed knowledge of Brian May's guitars and rig requirements, Pete Malandrone is the fount of all knowledge. For more than 20 years he has been Brian's right hand man, responsible for keeping an idiosyncratic array of products working for some of the biggest shows in earth. **Jamie Humphries** met with Pete to look at some of Brian's guitars and discuss the fascinating development and history of the many Red Special replicas and derivatives.

[...>]



*From*



© Pic by James Masterton

**H**ow do you go from one day being a British Telecom engineer to the next being the guitar tech for one of the biggest Rock guitarist in the world? Well that's what happened to Pete Malandrone, who holds the title of having possibly the most coveted guitar tech gig in the industry. It's Pete's role to know exactly what Brian May wants when it comes to his guitar set-up and his rig so it goes without saying that he knows the world famous 'Old Lady' guitar inside out, and is responsible for taking care of what is probably one of the world's most instantly

.009 Optima Gold strings in case you were wondering), general maintenance, and the various guitar changes called for in a set. On top of this Pete is responsible for switching Brian's effects during a live performance, essentially becoming part of the performance himself.

Pete is kept busy working for Brian constantly. When he's not on the road he's working at Brian's studio on the outskirts of London. He's also involved heavily with Brian May Guitars, overseeing R&D, and production, and also looking at ways the guitars can be improved.

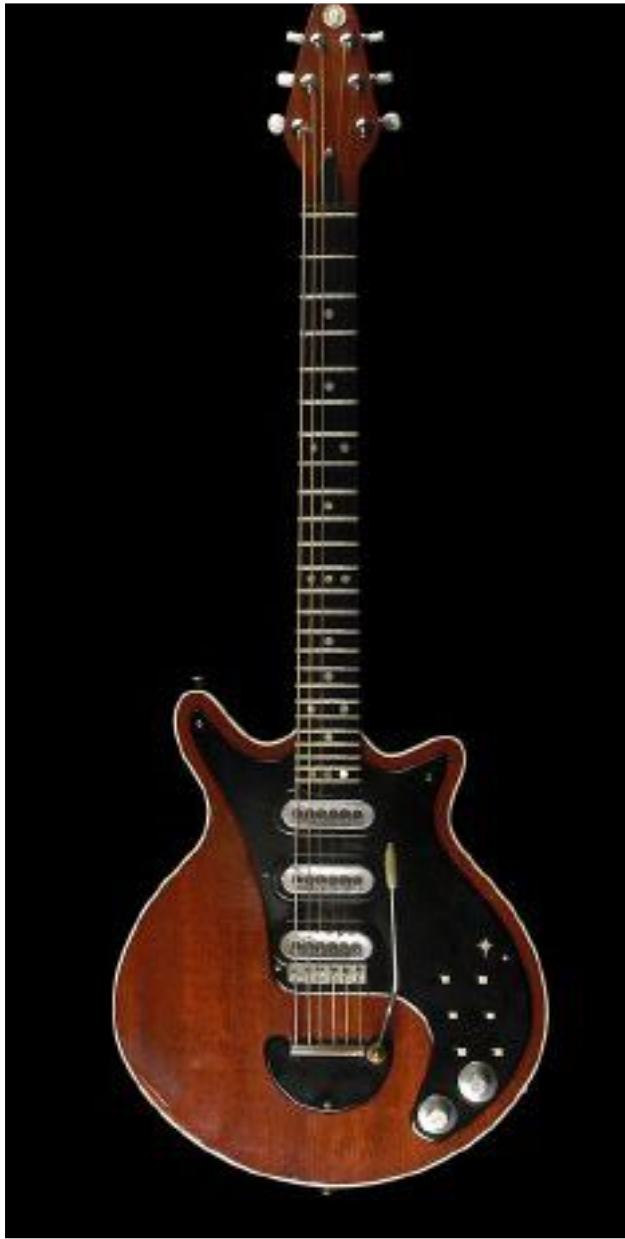
Andrew Guyton with Brian May and the doubleneck



recognisable guitars. Pete's role also includes setting up Brian's rig from show to show, as well as maintaining it, and also handling guitar teching duties; changing strings, (Brian uses his own signature set of gauge

On a personal note, I've known Pete for many years, and have toured with him when I was in the Brian May/Kerry Ellis Anthems band, and over the years I've been fortunate enough to have seen quite a few of Brian's guitars and play them. Brian even lent me his Green Guyton RS replica that I toured with for several months. After chatting with Pete about putting this feature together we decided it would be great to look at how the Red Special replicas have evolved over the years, and get as many of them out as possible for our video shoot. I also felt it would be great for readers to have a chance to hear the kind of things that a tech for a world-class guitarist has to do.

Before looking at the replicas let talk a little bit about the 'Old Lady' herself. We decided not to feature the original in our video, incidentally, as Brian spoke about the iconic guitar in his interview section. I felt it was important just to look at some of the key differences between the originals and the



reproduction guitars, albeit that the Fryer and Guyton guitars are pretty much exact.

The original Old Lady was constructed from a variety of woods; the body is built around a thick piece of oak that takes the strain of the neck, while the body shape is made from block board. The body is largely hollow, and was originally going to sport an "F" hole. The hollow body was a deliberate choice of Brian's, to make the guitar more "alive" and aid controllable feedback. The body was completed with a mahogany veneer, with the edge binding made from plastic shelf edging. The body was stained with a wood dye, and then coated with Rustin's Plastic Coating. Between coats Brian would polish it with fine sand paper, and eventually worked it to a high gloss finish. The three Burns Tri-Sonic pickups are mounted directly to the body, with the six switches, three on/off and three phase in and out switches mounted to a metal plate, fixed inside the electronics cavity. The scratch plate and tremolo spring cover plate are made from black Perspex, with the lathed aluminium volume and tone knobs mounted to the scratch plate, that covers the cavities.

The tremolo features a knife-edge floating design that made use of two motorbike valve springs that are balanced against the pull of the strings. The straight string pull resulted in zero friction, giving fantastic tuning stability. Brian designed and hand tooled a roller bridge system that eliminated friction at the bridge end.

The neck is made from a thick piece of mahogany sporting a painted oak fingerboard, with mother of pearl hand-filed shirt buttons as dot markers. The headstock and nut design were also an integral part of a low friction based design at the opposite end of the guitar. Brian designed the placement of the machine heads and designed a nut where the strings pretty much floated in the slots, all to minimise friction. The truss rod was fixed to a large bolt

that was screwed through the guitar body. The neck joint at the body included a “hoop” shape carved into the wood that the “hooped” end of the truss rod slotted into. The only production shop bought parts of the guitar were the machine heads and the replacement Burns pickups; Brian originally wound his own pickups.

As you can see from this very brief overview, the guitar was designed with performance, tone, and tuning stability very much in mind. You can also see how unique it is, with pretty much everything being made from whatever Brian and his father Harold could lay their hands on. With this in mind

you can now appreciate how hard it is to produce a cost effective replica. Sourcing exact materials would be pretty much impossible. There are some very close and incredibly impressive replicas available, however. Andrew Guyton, for example, produces incredible official replicas, but they carry a price tag for the serious Brian May connoisseur!

Andrew very kindly supplied us with superb quality photographs of the original Old Lady as well as the replicas and developments of the original theme he has made and receives a major round of thanks for having done so!



**Pete Malandrone Interview - Part 1**

If your appetite has been whetted for even more detail, I highly recommend the official “Brian May’s Red Special” book by Simon Bradley.

Now let’s take a look in order at the RS replica “timeline”, with a brief overview, as a more in depth look is featured in the accompanying video.

## John Birch Red Special

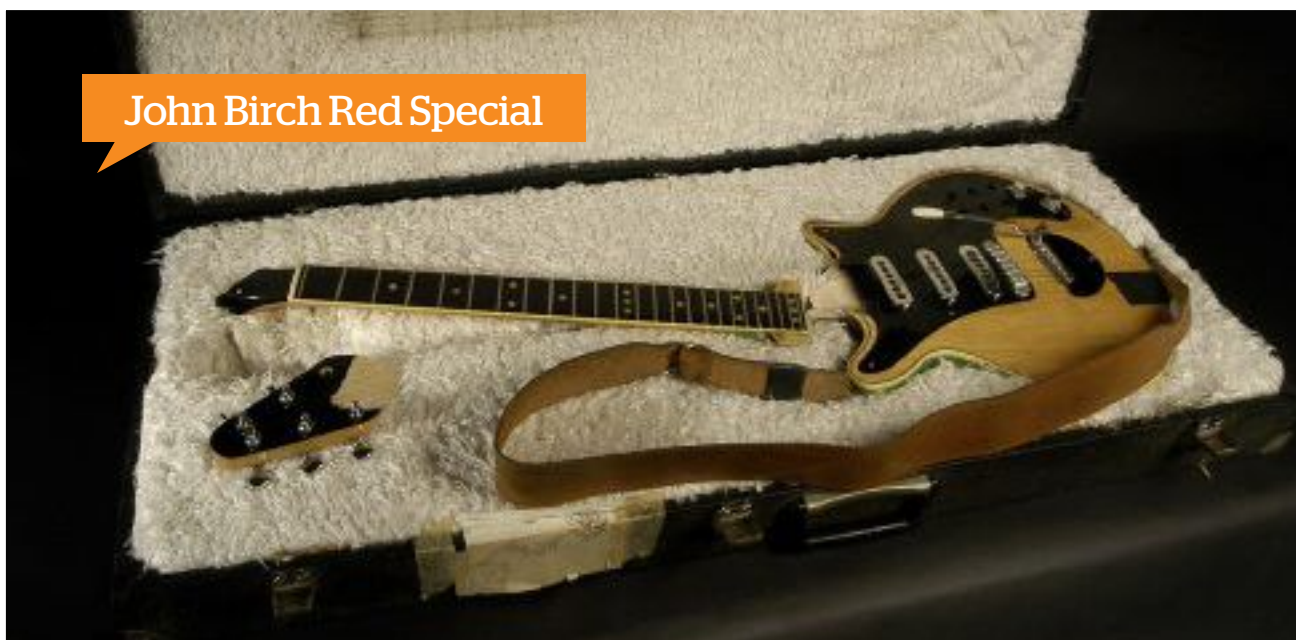
Although there was an earlier unofficial RS replica produced by Greco, (you can see Brian using one on the “Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy” Top of the Pop’s performance) the first official replica commissioned by Brian was the famous John Birch RS. This guitar can be seen in the “We Will Rock You” and “Spread Your Wings” music videos (YouTube is your friend!). It featured a solid maple body and neck construction, and although it resembled the

Old Lady, it fell short in performance, and suffered from dreadful tuning instabilities. The guitar met its end during Brian’s solo spot on a show in Chicago on the “Hot Space” tour. Brian threw the guitar in anger, resulting in it snapping in three places. Andrew Guyton eventually fixed the guitar. For some inside info on this instrument; you can read more at <http://www.guytonguitars.com/brian-mays-john-birch-guitar.html>

## Guild RS Replica

For a long while Brian’s only backup that resembled the Old Lady was the John Birch, which was now in pieces and in the hands of John Page, who worked for Fender. There was talk of Fender producing a replica, but this never materialised. Brian experimented with a Strat, a Les Paul and a Flying V as backup solutions, but none of them came close to his beloved Old Lady.

John Birch Red Special



Eventually, Guild collaborated with Brian during the early 1980s, releasing the BHM1, the first official production Red Special style guitar. This guitar was produced in a limited run (around 330 of them) and featured a solid mahogany body, ebony board, Kahler tremolo and Brian May signature DiMarzio pickups. This guitar is famously featured in the "One Vision" video, and was Brian's backup for a number of years. The production models featured a slimmer neck profile, although Brian's featured a large neck. I myself play a replica of one of these guitars, and although this Guild wasn't featured in this video, I have played one of Brian's prototypes.

Around 1993 Guild released the BMH01, a more authentic replica of the original, featuring a chambered mahogany body, a closer replica of the trem, and Tri-Sonic style pickups produced by Seymour Duncan. Around 2,000 of these guitars were made. These models featured a slimmer neck and Brian occasionally used these live. Both the '93 and the '84 Guilds were used until the Fryers were built.

## **Fryer RS**

Brian was approached by Australian luthier Greg Fryer about building him a replica RS. Brian gave Greg the go-ahead, and he produced three exact replicas of the Old Lady - John, Paul and George! Brian kept two, one of which is his main backup. These guitars were produced around 1995, with Greg spending time measuring the original to get the replica as close as possible. Greg

tried to match the woods as best as he could, and only made one modification to the roller bridge. With the introduction of the Fryer Brian had a much more authentic backup and drop D guitar, producing the same sound, and offering pretty much the same feel.

## **Burns BM Guitar**

The Burns BM model was introduced around 2001, and offered a more cost effective version of the famous Old Lady. Alterations were made to make the guitar more affordable, but for the first time a good quality affordable instrument was available. Constructed from mahogany, the Burns featured acoustic chambering, three Burns Tri-Sonic pickups, a slimmer profile neck, and an ebony board. The main difference was this guitar was fitted with a Strat style tremolo. The body dimensions were similar to the original, with Burns working closely with Brian to produce a high quality guitar with an attractive price. The Burns BM was a highly successful guitar, winning various awards.

## **Brian May Guitars**

Around three years later, production of the Brian May Special swapped over to Brian May Guitars; a company set up by Brian May, Barry Moorhouse of House Music fame and Pete Malandrone. The idea was to prioritize production, as well as make some changes to the instruments in looks and performance. Check out the guitar in this

video, and compare it to our review BMG Special in this issue; you can really see how the guitar has evolved. BM guitars continue to grow and flourish as a company, with many variations on the famous Old Lady available. See our reviews in this issue!

### **Andrew Guyton RS Green**

The next guitar of Brian's I am very fond of! When I toured with Brian May/Kerry Ellis, Brian actually lent me this guitar. I took it home with me and used it to practice on for the run up to the tour, and subsequently used it for much of the tour. Andrew met Brian when Pete approached him to restore his old Egmond acoustic. Work began on building a replica of the Red Special, which resulted in a limited run of production guitars. Not only did Andrew measure and photograph the original, but he had it X-Rayed at St Barts Hospital in London. The result was the most authentic reproduction of the Red Special to date. Brian now has a variety of Guyton Specials in his collection, with a new archtop version now available.

### **Andrew Guyton Scalloped Neck**

Like Brian, Andrew is a very clever and inventive individual, always striving to come up with new ideas to aid and inspire Brian, as well as complete tasks that Brian never completed. These include a Red Special with an F hole - something the original was intended to have - and the space age Spade Guitar, a guitar that Brian and his father Harold designed but never

built, that was meant to follow the Red Special.

Andrew experimented with a stunning RS style guitar but included a scalloped fretboard. Scalloped boards are renowned for a lighter touch, and are fantastic for speed, string bending, and vibrato; not to mention access to the higher frets. This stunning guitar uses the same woods and construction techniques as the other Guyton RS guitars, with the exception of the scalloped

### **Current BMG Super**



## Brian with his Andrew Guyton rebuilt original Egmond



fingerboard. Brian first showed me this guitar backstage at a Queen gig in Vienna, Austria in 2015. He favours this guitar for warming up before a show.

### **Andrew Guyton Badger Guitar**

The Badger guitar was built for Brian to use on the Queen and Adam Lambert tour. This guitar followed the original drawings produced by Brian and Harold May, to include the original F hole design that never made it onto the Red Special. Something that was new to the design was the stunning Archtop, and the way Andrew managed to shape the Perspex scratch plate to follow the Archtop's contours. This guitar features a piezo bridge, producing authentic acoustic sounds, with the magnetic and piezo signals sent out of two separate outputs. The guitar also features a small mother of pearl badger on the scratch plate.

### **BMG Super**

The BMG Super was introduced as Pete says to “bridge the gap” between the BM Special and the Guyton. The Super was the result of a collaboration between Fryer and KZ guitars. The Super was a close BMG replica, to satisfy the fans that wanted something more authentic than the Special but without being a handmade custom instrument. Some compromises were made in terms of wood, and some of the hardware, but this was a much closer affordable replica. The guitar in the video was actually used by Brian on the Queen and Paul Rodgers Tour. The Super is no longer built by KZ, and is now produced by a Czech company for BMG.

### **Guyton Double neck**

Here's another example of Andrew Guyton's vision for pushing the boundaries - a double neck RS! This guitar came about after

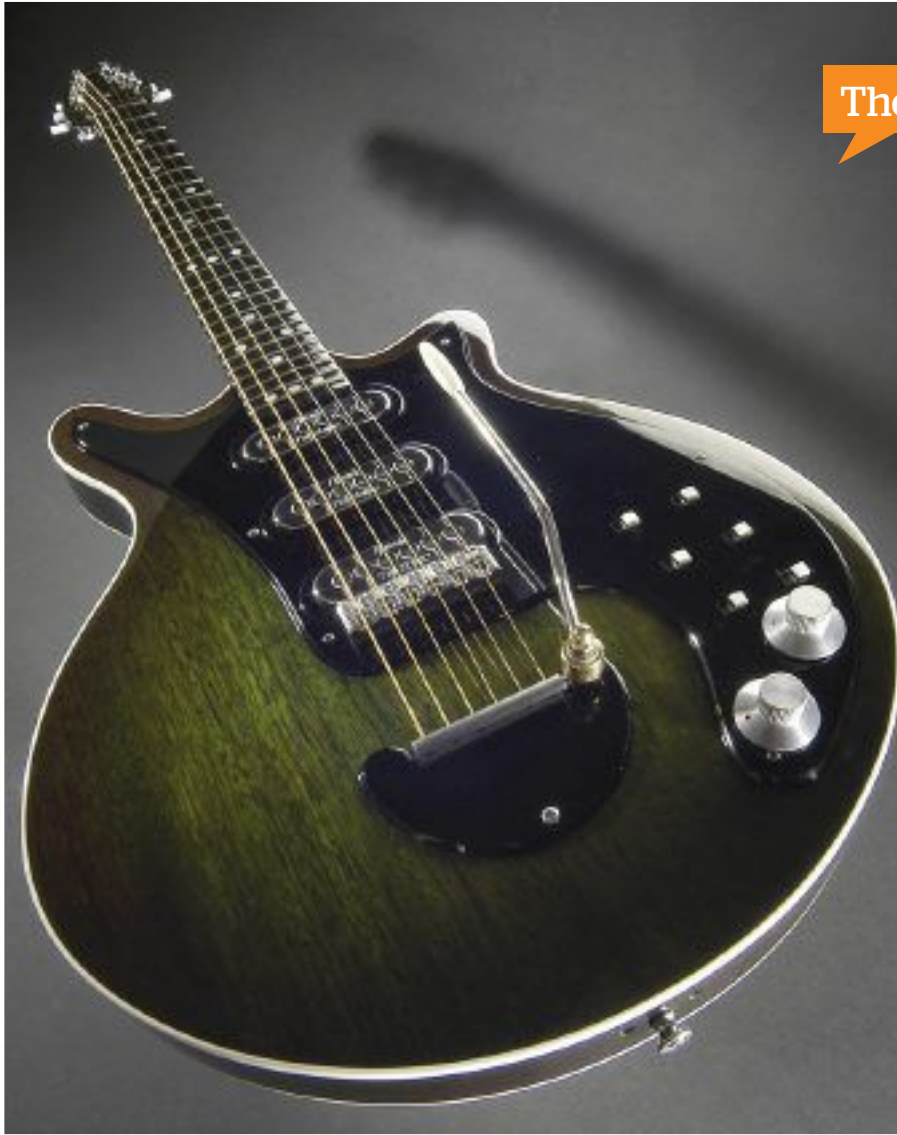


Andrew showed a design to Pete that was finally put together in time for the first Queen outing with Adam Lambert. This guitar uses the same construction materials, oak and block board body, mahogany veneer, and large profile mahogany neck with an oak board. Like the other Guyton RS guitars it features the Adrian Turner custom wound Adeson Burns Tri-Sonic pickups. Brian originally used this to perform "Under Pressure".

Our grateful thanks to Pete Malandrone and Andrew Guyton, who provided the pictures as well as information - <http://www.guytonguitars.com>



**Pete Malandrone Interview - Part 2**



The Green Guyton



The 'Badger' g

guitar



BMG Super



Scalloped neck Guyton









# TONE ON A BUDGET

Searching for that unique Brian May tone? Want to do it without breaking the bank? After countless hours spent with the We Will Rock You show, **Jamie Humphries** probably has more experience than anyone at getting the perfect sound. Here's Jamie's guide to doing it the affordable way.

[...>]



# The origins of ‘that sound’

**B**rian May’s tone is without a doubt one of the unique voices in Rock guitar. It’s almost like a mystical chain of events resulted in the equipment that came together to produce his sound. Although that sound has evolved and changed slightly over the years, it has always stayed faithful to Brian’s initial vision of how he imagined his tone to be. I think that in itself is a very interesting fact that, from the very conception of the Red Special, he knew

in his mind how he imagined his voice on the guitar.

Right from the outset, he wanted a rich smooth distortion that would produce feedback, inspired by Jimi Hendrix and Jeff Beck. Originally, in fact, the Red Special was going to have an “F” hole, a design that was actually used by Andrew Guyton when building Brian’s “Badger” guitar. He also wanted to produce a wide array of



[...>]



tones, from thick resonant crunch, to screaming overtones. This came from experimenting with the pickup selection and phasing options.

When it came to producing the distortion and amplifying it, he chose the Dallas Rangemaster treble booster; a unit that produced gain boost fed into the front end of the amplifier. Additionally, the treble booster cut bottom end, while simultaneously

boosting upper midrange frequencies, producing a clean, cutting distorted tone.

Brian's two major influences when he started out were Hank Marvin and Rory Gallagher, both of whom were Vox AC30 users. Brian loved the clean loud sound of the Vox, but found that when he drove the amp hard, the overdrive it produced was too thick and muddy. Driven with the treble booster though (as Rory Gallagher had proved) the Vox amp reacted perfectly, producing a defined clear distortion.

# When it came to his live rig, for a long time Brian had looked for a way of **reproducing his studio sound live.**

But there was a lot more than just a desire for a certain sort of distortion going on in Brian's head at the time. He was also inspired by classical music, as well as traditional "seaside" Trad Jazz played by the likes of the Temperance Seven that had been briefly popular in the UK during the early 1960s. He found that he could create those using the pickup phase switches on his Red Special, along with a wah pedal being used purely as a tone control. Running his guitar into a treble booster and then into the home made "Deacy" amp, built by John Deacon (see our review of the Deacy amp in this issue - Ed) he was able to create an array of imitation brass and woodwind sounds and an example can be heard on the classic Queen recording "Good Company". This studio approach became very much a part of Queen's voice, with

Brian arranging multiple guitars performing contrapuntal melodies and harmonies.

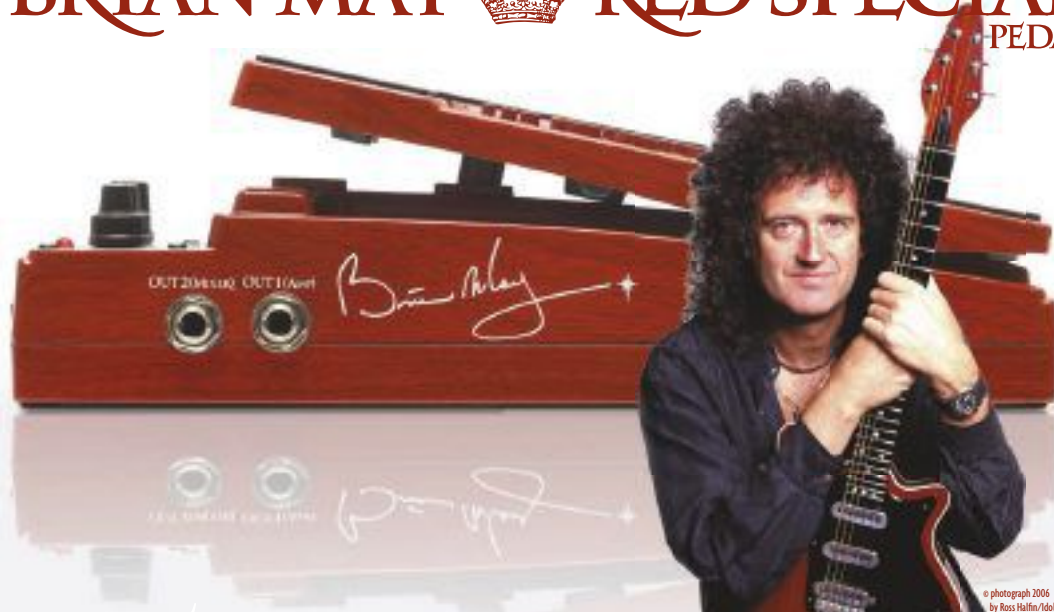
When it came to his live rig, for a long time Brian had looked for a way of reproducing his studio sound live. He introduced a second amp to which he fed tape echo delay from an Echoplex and eventually a third amp; the two outer amps with different delay times, and the middle amp dry. He even rebuilt his tape echo units, to enable him to get longer delays. The result was that Brian could perform a "canon" whereby he would play a musical phrase which would then be repeated by both amps at a set different time. This would also provide Brian with three part harmonies live.

I should also point out that at different points in his career Brian has used different types of

[...>]

DigiTech® Artist Series

# BRIAN MAY RED SPECIAL PEDAL



© photograph 2006 by Ross Halfin/Idols

## WE WILL ROCK YOU

Seven signature sounds with fourteen unique variations, spanning over thirty years of tone. From the unmistakable solos of “We Will Rock You” and “Bohemian Rhapsody” to the one and only “Deacy” amp, the Brian May Red Special Pedal lets you walk in the footsteps of one of rock’s most influential guitar masters and achieve one of guitarists’ most sought-after tones.



**Keep Yourself Alive**  
Rich tape-flanged intro or solo with flanging.

**Bohemian Rhapsody**  
Vocal-like tone with tons of sustain or Heavy Rock Rhythm and Finale Orchestral Fanfare with “Deacy” amp.

**Tie Your Mother Down**  
Intro with moderate sustain and distortion or solo close-miked with higher gain for more sustain and distortion.

**We Will Rock You / Champions**  
Creamy distortion with a churning phaser effect.

**Crazy Little Thing Called Love**  
Acoustic guitar model with delay, or clean rockabilly tele tone with reverb and delay.

**Brighton Rock Solo - Live**  
Solo with delay (3 amps) and tight chorus or with 3-part Orchestral Harmonizer effect.

**Deacy Tone / Winter’s Tale**  
Raw tone through treble booster and Brian’s “Deacy” amp or delay and reverb added as a post effect.



[www.digitech.com](http://www.digitech.com)

**DigiTech**  
The Power to Create

modulation. Originally he favoured phaser effects, mainly the Foxx Phaser, but later he moved to using chorus, which was very apparent during the mid '80's.

Brian's rig nowadays includes three modified Vox AC30 TBXs, although he has nine on stage the remaining six are spares. The two outer amps are all effect, delay and chorus, while the middle amp is totally dry. This creates a very wide stereo tone, but at the same time it's very direct and punchy; the advantage of running a wet, dry, wet rig. The guitars are all fitted with KAT strap treble boosters (also reviewed in this issue - Ed), with the exception of the semi acoustic Guyton "Badger" Special. From the strap booster the signal goes into the wireless pack, and is driven hard by the booster. The rack contains the wireless receiver, two TC Electronics G Major 2 effect processors, and a Dunlop rack wah. There is a Mike Hill custom built switcher that routes the signal to various sources; the effects to the outer amps, plus a main signal feed to the dry centre AC30 or the Deacy amp. There is also a KAT treble booster in the rack for the "Badger" Guyton guitar, as this guitar is on a double lead. Also in the rack is an Avalon pre-amp for the piezo acoustic pickup on the "Badger" guitar. There is also a power unit that could power a small village, supplying clean spike free power to the rack wherever in the world Brian is!

The entire system is operated by a KAT MIDI switcher which sits on top of the

rack; the rack is like a work station for Pete Malandrone, Brian's long serving guitar tech, as he is as much a part of the performance as Brian, switching in and out Brian's effects, and routing his signal to any desired amp or effect in the rack. The final piece of the puzzle is the sixpenny piece - the sixpence. Brian loves the sound of the serrated edge of the coin against the strings, which is especially apparent during clean passages when the guitar volume is backed down. For younger readers and those abroad who are scratching their heads over this, the sixpence was a legacy from Britain's pre-decimal coinage, replaced in 1970. Uniquely, Brian has always used these as picks.

## The budget approach

When I was given the task of creating this Tone on A Budget I knew it was going to be tricky and had to make some decisions about the type of guitar I was going to use. Also, would I use an amp, stomp boxes or a modelling unit? There are several things we need to consider when creating Brian's tone:

- Single Coil pickups
- Versatile pickup switching/phase reversal
- Smooth overdrive/distortion

[...>]

- Reduced low end, boosted upper midrange
- Two independent delay times
- Modulation; chorus/phaser
- Wah pedal (tone only)
- Sixpence

I would favour a single coil pickup guitar over a humbucker to achieve Brian's tone. Although it doesn't switch in the same way, with a Strat you can have both the bridge and middle pickups engaged. To my mind, other than a Brian May guitar, the only other guitars I know of that are capable of the unique switching are the Fender Elite Strat, The Musicman Reflex Game Changer and the Gibson Nighthawk.

I have chosen to use the BMG Special for this demonstration, as I feel it is an affordable guitar, and is obviously based on the original, albeit it has a few variations to make it more wallet friendly. This is a great guitar; visually authentic, it captures the correct sound and feel, and with such hardware as a Wilkinson trem, Brian May branded pickups, it performs superbly. That said, if you were trying to get somewhere near the right sound and couldn't afford want to buy a BMG, then a Strat would do as well as just about anything.

Now for amp choice. With the rate that technology is being developed, it's

now possible to get a great guitar sound using your smart phone! Companies such as IK Multimedia, with Amplitude, and Positive Grid with Bias, Bias FX and JamUp, make apps that really will enable you to choose authentic amp and pedal models. I have apps for both my Mac and my iPad by both of these companies and I've successfully managed to produce great Brian May tones with them. This approach is seriously worth trying for bedroom use.

But for our first rig I've chosen to go the secondhand eBay route for a quite brilliant modelling solution that bears Brian's signature: The DigiTech Red Special pedal. This pedal has been discontinued, but they can be picked up pretty cheaply on the secondhand market and they are fantastic. With the help of producer Eddie Kramer, who was the consultant for the modelling, and Brian May, DigiTech produced a modelling pedal that replicated Brian's AC30/treble booster tones, his Deacy, and his Red Special and Trisonic pickups. For the money, this is by far the best BM tone solution I have seen. This pedal is designed to be used with a Red Special, but the Old Lady has also been modelled. Depending on whether you use humbuckers or single coils, the guitar control will transform the sound of your regular guitar into the sound of the Red Special! It sounds totally authentic, and if you are on a tight budget it means you don't have to trade

in your favourite Fender for a BM! The amp models are brilliant; The Vox tones are authentic, and the Deacy sound is uncannily accurate. As well as this the pedal offers multiple delays, and modulation, and an acoustic emulator for those “39” moments. The delays sound great, the more you push down the pedal the more delay is increased, giving you the perfect “Brighton Rock” tone. Check out the modulation at the start of the video lesson; straight off of “Keep Yourself Alive”, fantastic stuff. The pedal is fully programmable, and the heel/toe footswitch also activates other effect combinations. The pedal comes with selected BM tones based on a handful of classic Queen songs. If you are serious about a BM tone, and even if you don’t own a BM guitar I would start scouting for one of these. Check out the video to see why!

For our final rig selection I went the analogue route, and based my choice on a similar idea to what we use at We Will Rock You, but with a twist. Buying a Vox AC30, or another brand of EL84 loaded amp is going to push your budget through the roof. With that in mind I have replaced our amp with a wonderful pre-amp pedal, the Thundertomate TAE pedal, ([www.taefx.com](http://www.taefx.com)) (a review is planned for the near future - Ed). This pedal is basically a Brian May Vox in a pedal, all analogue. It can be placed in front of your amp, or in the effects loop, turning your

existing amp into a close replica of a Vox. You can also run it with a power amp into a cab, or as I did direct to the desk, as the output is a beautifully voiced speaker emulator. I used a BMG Special, into a Fryer treble booster, and also added an MXR chorus, then into the TAE and straight out to the desk. This is essentially what we used at Rock You, but with a Vox instead of the TAE.

The final piece of the tone puzzle is a sixpence piece coin. These are vital in achieving that rasp across the strings, as well as the correct pick attack. These can be bought in bags of 100 via eBay.

Finally if you rather go a route not covered here, either with your own existing equipment, or an app, try opting for a light classic crunch and boost the front end. You don’t want to add distortion from the pedal, just boost to drive the amp. Roll off bottom end and boost the mid range, and some top end presence, but avoid making the tone thin and fizzy. Adding some chorus or phaser will also add to the authenticity of the tone. Finally remember, if you are going to get a clean tone, don’t touch the pedals or an amp switcher; to achieve clean tones, back off the guitar volume. Good luck!

END >

[...>]

# BMG Super

**Jamie Humphries** assesses the top of the range Super crafted replica of the Red Special one for the dedica

**F**or many years guitarists have been asking for a totally authentic replica of Brian May's legendary Red Special guitar. A very early attempt at this was by luthier John Birch, who famously built Brian a blonde/gold replica of the Red Special as a back-up. The guitar never worked for Brian, suffering from terrible tuning issues, and eventually was snapped during a frustrating solo spot at a Queen concert. The next attempt at a more authentic replica came in the early 1990s when Guild released the BM01. This was a more accurate version than the first run of Kahler loaded Guilds produced around 1984, in both construction and styling. But although the new Guild featured a more authentic tremolo and a chambered body, it still fell short of the fans' expectations, with a lack of attention to detail being betrayed by unauthentic features including a smaller neck, edge binding

on the scratch plate and Seymour Duncan replica Tri-Sonic pickups.

Later came the release of first the Burns Special and then the BMG Special, so it seemed that a totally accurate production model was never going to be. Some individual luthiers built Red Special guitars with Brian's endorsement, including Greg Fryer, and Andrew Guyton. These builders offered exquisite totally accurate replicas that Brian himself played, but they were restricted to limited numbers, and would cost you as much as a small new car if you ordered one. So the fans turned to unofficial



## STAR RATING

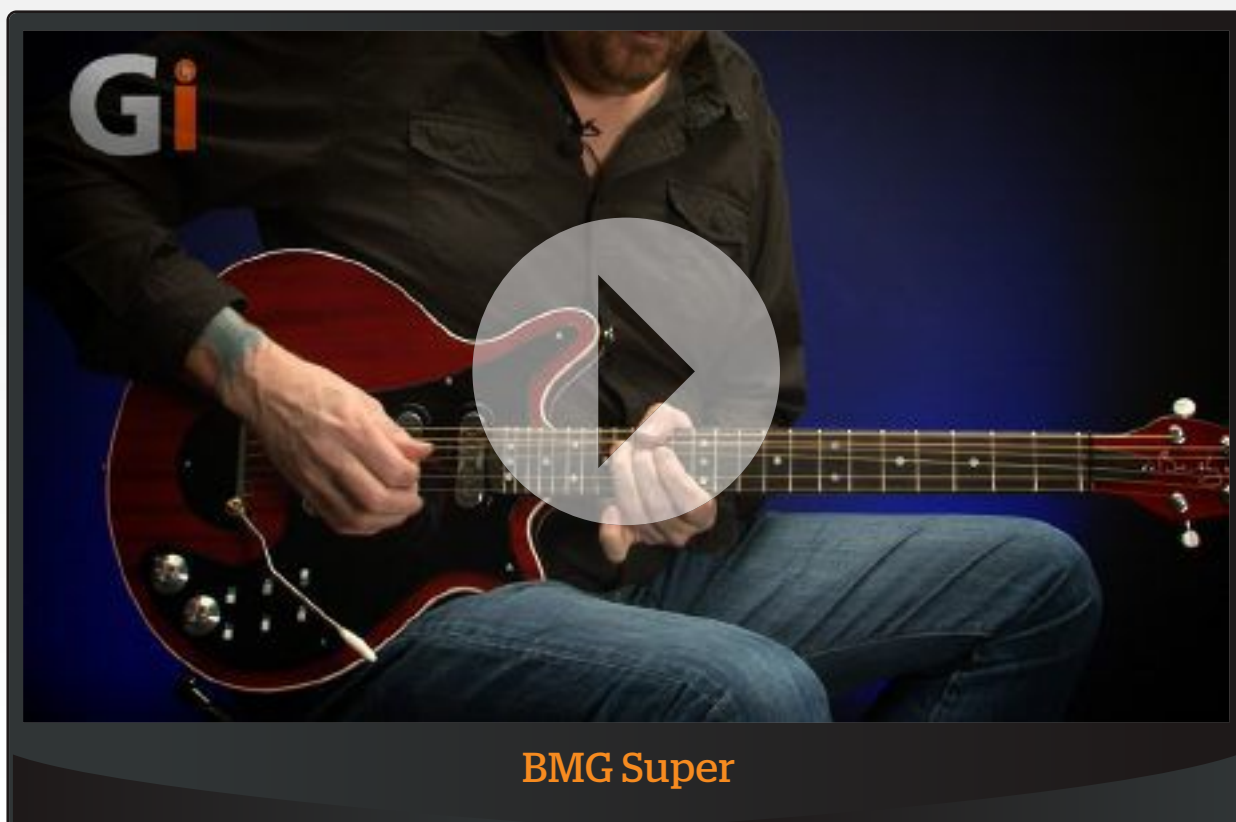


**PROS** Even closer to the original! • Excellent build • Pi  
• Exceptionally versatile

**CONS** It's not cheap • Still a very individual choice (wh



per model from Dr. May's very own guitar brand. Is this hand  
ted Brian May fan only? Or is this a guitar with a wider appeal?



builders who offered a more authentic version of the Red Special at more  
sedate prices. One such luthier from Japan was Kazutaka Ijuin of KZ Guitars  
who was producing very accurate and beautifully built unofficial replicas. BM  
Guitars enlisted him and along with Greg Fryer they designed the original run  
of Supers, that were manufactured by KZ in Japan.

pickups are superb • Fabulous to play • Body mounted pickups help sustain & tone

which could be a pro!)

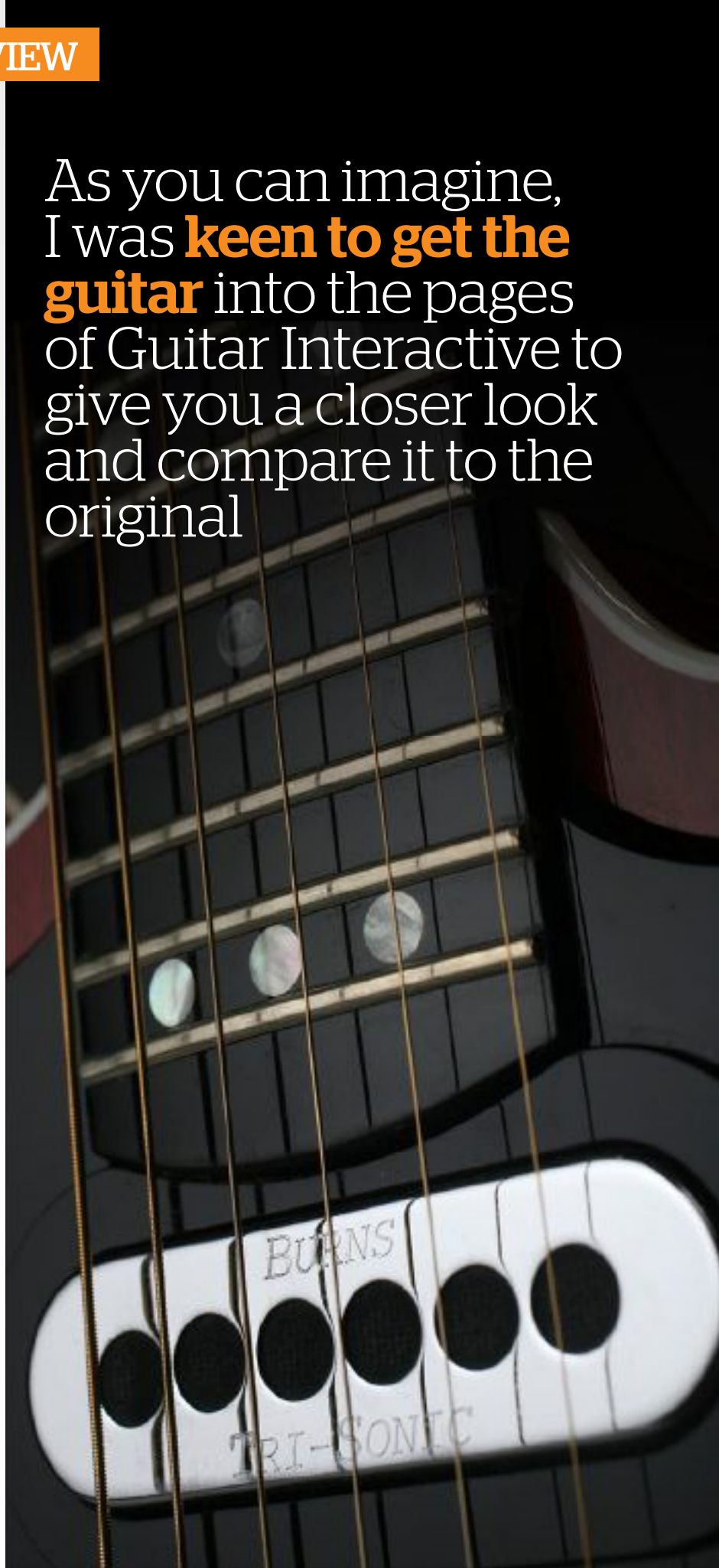
[...>]

That Original Super was hugely successful with the fans, and Brian himself used one on tour. But the guitar was only available for a short period before production halted.

Fast-forward to 2015 and a new builder in the Czech Republic joined forces with BM Guitars, and the second edition Super became available. I had personally been talking to Barry Moorhouse at House Music (which looks after BMG) since the tail end of 2014 when I heard that the new Super was going into production. I had been using an original KZ/Fryer Super on the We Will Rock You German tour since 2012, and was very keen to see and hear how the new Super would stand up against the original Super. As you can imagine, I was keen to get the guitar into the pages of Guitar Interactive to give you a closer look and compare it to the original, along with the BM Special, which has its own review in this issue.

Comparisons are never easy but I have been lucky enough to have played the original Red Special, built by Brian and his father, on numerous occasions and I have also played one of Brian's Fryer replicas. As well as this I have also borrowed Brian's

As you can imagine, I was **keen to get the guitar** into the pages of Guitar Interactive to give you a closer look and compare it to the original



green Guyton replica when I toured with Brian May and Kerry Ellis, so I have a pretty good idea of how all of them feel and play, which I've borne closely in mind while playing this latest Super.

To start with, visually the BMG Super is very authentic looking, with a more accurate red colour than the BMG Special boasts. For the real devotee, this shade is based on the red wood dye and layers of Rustin's Plastic Coating that Brian and his father had applied to the original. The scratch plate and tremolo are also pretty much the same as on the original. As with the BMG Special, there are few differences that make that make the guitar more cost effective, as you might expect. BM Guitars say the Super is meant to bridge the gap between the very affordable BM Special, and the exquisite and 'reassuringly expensive' Guyton.

Starting with the body, the Super is constructed from two-piece quarter sawn mahogany, with a two-piece quarter sawn, book matched mahogany top. The dimensions of the body are faithful to the original RS, with some slight modifications





to the acoustic chambers and the control cavity. The body is coloured with an attractive antique cherry stain and features a white double edge binding.

The headstock and fingerboard radius are also faithful to the original Red Special, as is the neck profile, which is very chunky! The neck however is glued on, as opposed to the single large bolt on Brian's 'Old Lady'. BM Guitars has also opted for a clear lacquered ebony fretboard as opposed to painted oak on the original - a choice not many would argue with!

The guitar features 24 frets and a zero fret which are Dunlop 6130s, with a Graph Tech Black TUSQ-XL nut. The fingerboard features attractive mother of pearl face and side dot markers; Brian made his dot markers from shirt buttons from his mother's sewing box, saving the most colourful markers for the 24<sup>th</sup> fret! The headstock matches the exact dimensions and angle of Brian's 'Old Lady', which aids straight string pull for excellent tuning stability. The headstock houses six Gotoh Magnum Lock machine heads, three on each side. The headstock is decorated with a mother of pearl "May Star" decal and the "Super" Brian May signature. The truss access is located on the headstock with the cover matching the scratch plate.

A huge difference between the Special and the Super is that on the Super neither the pickups nor the six slider switches are mounted on the scratch plate, as they are on the Special. This scratch plate is identical to the one on the original guitar, with the pickups being mounted directly into the body, resulting in both a more resonant sound and a neater less cluttered looking design.

As for those pickups, they are three Adeson Burns Tri-Sonic single coil pickups, constructed by Adrian Turner under license to Burns. These are exact recreations of the Burns Tri-Sonic pickups built between 1960 and 1965, using original components, and wound on an original late 1950s Burns winding machine. These are the same pickups used in the Andrew Guyton RS, and are exact to Brian's pickups. The sound of these is not as hot as the standard Tri-Sonic pickups, or the Brian May branded pickups found on the Special, in fact it's a lot warmer and fuller, with that direct mounting aiding sustain.

The Super is fitted with six Switchcraft slider switches, three to engage the pickups and three acting as phase switches. These six switches are fitted directly to an aluminium mounting plate under the scratch plate. The Super is wired in series, and can produce a wide range of tones thanks to its unique switching

[...>]

## To play, **the Super feels nice and light** and is very well balanced...

capabilities. The guitar features two rotary controls, one volume and one tone, with authentic lathed aluminium “flying saucer” knobs, and 250k pots.

The knife-edge tremolo tailpiece is an exact replica, built to Brian’s original design and specification by Kazutaka Ijuin of KZ Guitars, with the bar crafted from Greg Fryer’s templates. This tremolo and tailpiece is visually stunning, and the performance is fantastic, with an accurate response, fantastic pitch return and tuning stability.

One of the design compromises you will find on the Super is the bridge, however, with Brian’s roller system being replaced with a custom modified Wilkinson roller bridge. The bridge on the original is a totally hand made unit that Brian designed, hand tooled from a block of aluminum and to manufacture units such as this would again effect the retail price drastically, pushing it into the realms of the Guyton.

So the Super is visually stunning - a really beautiful looking guitar, and having played Brian’s ‘Old Lady’ on numerous occasions I can tell you that it felt every bit like the Red Special. That said, one has to remember that there was something Zen like, or magical about how the original was built. Would Brian have produced a second guitar that felt exactly the same as the original if he had the

exact same materials? I think not; my point is, that many people get very picky when discussing Red Special replicas. The only guitar the truly feels like the original Red Special is the original; but this guitar does a bloody good impression of it!

To play, the Super feels nice and light and is very well balanced, which is surprising when you consider the thickness of the neck. Thick and sturdy, its sheer size obviously goes hand in hand with the chambered mahogany body helping the production of long sweet sustaining notes. Unamplified, the Super was zingy, vibrant and loud. Plugged in it was heaven. You really can notice a difference between the standard Brian May branded pickups and the Adeson Burns, as well as the fact they’re screwed directly into a chambered mahogany body.

Engaging the bridge and middle produced a thick growl, but with plenty of space and highs. I used a Fryer treble booster (and a sixpence!) into a TAE pedal for the demo, and I think you’ll agree the tone is superb. The neck pickup is much more mellow than the Special’s, and has a rich warm character, that morphs into a creamy sustain as the guitar volume is increased. Start combining pickups and knocking one out of phase and the Super screams with plenty harmonic overtones - wonderful!

This is a magnificent guitar, and I loved playing it; and coming with a hard shell case and a numbered certificate signed by Dr. May makes it a very special and collectable package. Personally I wish BM Guitars would go the whole hog and use an authentic bridge, but that's me being ultra picky. How does it compare with the Special? I think the Special holds its own very well - especially bearing in mind its price - but there are just a few details that make this feel like the real deal. How does it compare with the original Super? If anything I felt that this guitar performed better than the original Super production that I had played close to 1,000 shows on; I loved it!!

Like the Special, this is a guitar with hidden depths. If you suspect it is only for Queen tribute bands or dedicated Brian May fans, then you are wrong because it offers a level of versatility you simply won't get from the obvious alternatives. Choosing a Brian May Special or, even better, a Super, will set you apart from the crowd in a way that may, or may not, appeal - but that aside, you will get a fabulous guitar in either case and one that will go places other guitars simply cannot venture into. **END>**

## Brian May Super

**MSRP £2.950 US \$3,502.14**

Made in: Czech republic

Body

Back : 2-Piece Quartersawn Mahogany with Acoustic Chambers

Top : Book-Matched, Quartersawn Mahogany

Binding White

Neck 1-Piece Quartersawn Mahogany

Finish Gloss "Antique Cherry"

Fingerboard Ebony,

Clear Lacquer Coated

Frets 24 + Zero Fret (Jim Dunlop 6130)

Inlays Mother-Of-Pearl Face + Side Dots

Neck Join Glued-In Construction

Headstock Original RS Shape with Mother-Of-Pearl "MayStar" + Super Signature Inlays

Pickups 3 x Adeson/Fryer Custom Modified Burns Tri-Sonic Series Wired, Single Coil

Switches White  
 Switchcraft Slider Switches - 3 x  
 Pickup On/Off + 3 x Pickup Phase  
 In/Out

Controls Master Volume  
 + Master Tone with BM Replica,  
 Lathe-Turned, Billet Stock,  
 Aluminium Control Knobs

Bridge Custom  
 Modified Wilkinson Roller  
 Bridge

Tremolo Custom  
 Designed BM Replica Knife-Edge  
 Tremolo + Custom BM Replica  
 Trem Arm

Machineheads 3-A-Side  
 Gotoh Magnum Lock Tuners

Nut Graph Tech Black  
 TUSQ-XL

Scratchplates Exact  
 RS Replica Main Control Plate +  
 Half-Moon Tremolo Tail Plate +  
 Matching Truss Rod Cover

Body Depth 40mm  
 (1.57")

Scale 610mm (24")

Fingerboard Radius  
 184.2mm (7.25")

Neck Width @ Nut  
 46mm (1.81")

Neck Width @ 12th Fret  
 51mm (2.00")

Neck Depth @ 2nd Fret  
 26.5mm (1.04")

Neck Depth @ 14th Fret  
 29.8mm (1.17")

String Spacing @ Nut  
 40mm (1.57")

String Spacing @ Bridge  
 50.8mm (2.00")

Weight Approx 3.22kg  
 (7.1lbs)

Strings D'Addario XL-  
 120 Super Light (Plain Steel .009  
 - .011 - .016 - Nickel Wound .024 - .032  
 - .042)

Included Premium  
 Quality Brian May Guitars Hard  
 Shell Case

Handcrafted By  
 NBE Corp. s.r.o., Horovice, Czech  
 Republic

Extras Official  
 Certificate Of Authenticity,  
 Numbered & Personally Signed By  
 Dr. May

# BMG Special

As part of our Brian May special issue, we thought about the great man's name. Plenty of guitarists have signed themselves! **Jamie Humphries**, who knows the guitar. But is it just for Queen tribute acts? Here's where

**B**rian May's home made Red Special guitar is one of the most distinctive looking and unique sounding guitars in Rock history. Constructed totally by Brian and his father Harold, the Red Special has graced pretty much every

recording made by Brian that features electric guitar. Over the years he has been involved in several collaborations with various guitar companies, to produce a close replica at an affordable price. Early attempts by US manufacturer Guild resulted in the



## STAR RATING



**PROS** Unique sounds • More versatile than traditional

**CONS** Do you want to stand out from the crowd?



ht it was time to take a look at the unique signature guitars that carry the  
ature models but few, if any, have them based on guitars they actually made  
e original well, takes a look at a very affordable replica.  
e you find out...

first official Red Special style/replica guitars. Following  
a departure from Guild, Brian next collaborated with  
Burns, producing a highly successful replica of the original  
guitar. This version introduced variations on the original  
that made the guitar much more affordable than the high  
end, totally authentic, replicas produced by luthiers like  
Greg Fryer from Australia, KZ from Japan, and Andrew  
Guyton from the UK.

Brian eventually moved production of the Burns over  
to his own company, Brian May Guitars, which he set  
up with the help of Barry Moorhouse of House Music,  
and Brian's long time guitar tech Pete Malandrone. The  
company now produces several variations of the Red  
Special including various BMG Specials in a variety of  
finishes: the BMG Super, the BMG Vision, a stripped  
down twin humbucker version, the BMG Mini May, the  
BMG Bass, the BMG Rhapsody Acoustic, and the BMG  
Uke.

We've actually reviewed a BMG Special in *Guitar  
Interactive* before, way back in issue 14, but we felt it  
deserved a second glance in a feature which is bound to  
spur readers to wonder what this surprisingly affordable  
instrument could offer them that they aren't already  
getting from other guitars. It also seemed pretty much  
essential to compare the BMG Special with the BMG



l favourites • Wilkinson tremolo very effective • Well made • Helps you stand out from the crowd

[...>]

# The neck and neck joint are **one of the biggest differences between** the BMG Special and the original.

Super, which we are taking a first look at in this issue.

To ring the changes at least a little, BMG sent us something a bit different from the normal Special everyone will immediately recognise and we were delighted to open the box to find a BMG Special Limited Edition in striking Windermere Blue - a pale metallic blue that gives the Special more than a hint of retro chic.

Visually there is no mistaking that this is a Brian May guitar, with the look and construction faithful to the original. There are obvious differences, though, which have all been considered to produce the highest quality replica of the original guitar that won't break the bank. Another interesting point that came up when I was talking with Pete Malandrone (see our interview in this issue) is that he discusses how BMG is trying to produce a guitar that isn't just for Brian May fans, but is something that stands up on its own against other popular brands.

The body shape is faithful to the original, and although is constructed from different wood to Brian's 'Old Lady', it features a chambered mahogany body with the chambering based on Brian's original design. This is finished off with a book matched mahogany top, with a six-ply pinstripe front and rear binding. The body and neck are

finished in a high gloss lacquer and I have to say the finishing and binding are exquisite; no finish bleeding into the binding and no roughly finished edges. The guitar features a 24" scale one-piece glued-on mahogany neck, with an ebony fingerboard loaded with 24 jumbo frets. The neck features a "D" profile, and measures 45 mm at the nut. The neck also includes a graphite nut and a zero fret.

The neck and neck joint are one of the biggest differences between the BMG Special and the original. The original neck was constructed from a huge thick piece of 100 year old mahogany, with a huge profile, that is attached to the body with a large bolt that secures to the truss rod; the end of the truss rod being a hoop that hooks round the bolt. The neck of the BMG Special, on the other hand, has a very modern, contemporary feeling profile, which is both stable and comfortable to play on, especially for long periods of time.

Moving further down the neck we come to the headstock, which is authentic in design and shape to Brian's original. The headstock finish matches the body and sports Brian's signature as the guitar's decal. The angle of the headstock is minimal, to aid straight string pull from the bridge through to the machine heads, which minimises friction

[...>]

## Experimenting with the out of phase switch various pickup configurations produces so interesting tones.

and tuning instabilities. The headstock is loaded with six Grover Rotomatic internal locking cam machine heads. These offer fast and tidy string replacement and solid tuning stability, as well as a smooth accurate rotary motion. The headstock also includes the truss rod access, which is covered matching the scratch plate and half moon decorative plate.

Back on the body, the pickups and six pickup switches are mounted onto the scratch plate. There are three pickup on/off sliding switches, and three pickup in and out of phase sliding switches; two switches per pickup. Once again the scratch plate is one of the slight differences between the BMG Special and the original. The original features a plate where the screws holding the switches are hidden, whereas the plate on the BMG Special has the screws exposed, front mounting the switches. The pickup mountings are also slightly different to the original's, with the pickup height adjustment screws visible on the Special. These slight differences help to keep the cost of production of the guitar down.

The guitar includes a single volume and tone control that globally controls all three pickups. Once again there is a slight cosmetic difference with slightly smaller

plastic chrome finished knobs, as opposed to the larger aluminium "flying saucer" knobs. The BMG Special also uses 250k pots.

Another difference is the pickups found on the BMG Special. The original features Burns Tri-Sonic single coil pickups, which Brian purchased to replace the pickups he had hand-wound himself. The Burns Special featured genuine Burns Tri-Sonic pickups, although they were a modern equivalent. The BMG Special features Brian May branded Tri-Sonic style pickups, which are based on the original '60s Burns pickups. These three single coil pickups are wired in series. With the aid of the six switches, myriad tones can be produced, with countless pickup configurations, both in and out of phase.

These pickups also add to the authentic look and styling of the guitar, keeping it close to Brian's 'Old Lady'. Once again, the production of Brian May branded pickups helps to keep the cost of the guitar down.

Probably the biggest difference between the BMG Special and the original Red Special is the tremolo. The original features a floating system that balances the pull of the strings against the tension of two motorcycle valve

springs so the body from par with the mother's down. A into the l would pu Special ce May Gui tremolo s Burns vir with tuni Wilkinso brass sad rear of th plate has close to t matches truss rod

I am very sound of Special fr run, arou modifical wound A as found played w the Quee I know h Special's keen to p

# ches with me very

et under a plate on the front of  
! The arm of the bar was made  
t of a bicycle saddlebag support,  
tip being made from one of his  
larger knitting needles, filed  
beautiful brass bolt fixes the arm  
body. To produce a similar unit  
ush up the price of the BMG  
considerably. As Burns did, Brian  
stars opted for a traditional vintage  
system but, unlike the original  
vintage trem, which suffered  
ing issues, BMG opted for the  
n WVP Knife Edge system, with  
dles and a custom BM bar. At the  
e bridge a half moon decorative  
been added to keep the styling as  
he original as possible. This plate  
both the scratch plate and the  
cover.

y familiar with the feel and  
the BMG Special. I own a green  
from a slightly older production  
and 2009, which has had some  
tions made, including hand  
deson Burns Tri-Sonic pickups,  
in the BMG Super. Having  
ell over 1,000 performances of  
en musical We Will Rock You,  
ow to get the most out of the  
unique electronics, so I was pretty  
play this more up to date model,



[...>]

as it features some slight improvements and changes.

First off, the guitar balanced perfectly when seated and standing; it's not neck heavy at all. The guitar feels relatively light, due to the chambering, and when playing unamplified, it produced a loud vibrant sound. Plugged in, the guitar really came to life. I ran it into a Fryer Brian May treble booster, and into a Thundertomate TAE pedal, direct into the desk. I started off by switching in the individual single coil pickups before experimenting with combinations. The great thing about the way the Special is wired is that when the bridge and middle pickups are engaged, they act like a humbucker. This is one of Brian's favourite combinations, producing a rich warm tone, with a crisp clear top end presence. Backing down the volume, the guitar cleans up beautifully, ideal for the clean shimmering chord arpeggios of "Under Pressure" and "Days of Our Lives". Cranking the guitar volume up aids a thick overdriven tone and I can't help but launching into "Hammer to Fall" and "One Vision". The neck pickup has a warm woody quality, and with the volume set around half way you get the smooth solo tone of "Killer Queen". One thing I will say is that it takes a little while to get used to the position of the volume control as its set above the tone. Also the six pickup switches can be a little fiddly and may take some getting used to.

Experimenting with the out of phase switches with various pickup configurations produces some very interesting tones. When reversing the phase a lot of harmonics and overtones are produced, and with the guitar

fully cranked with a treble booster you can achieve some screaming leads! One of Brian's most favoured out of phase combinations is using the neck and middle pickups, with one of them reversed. This is the solo tone for "Bohemian Rhapsody", which produces high octave harmonics, especially when attacking the strings with a sixpence. Another great combination is the bridge and neck pickups engaged, with one of them reversed. These two pickups really pull and fight against each other, with some very interesting tonal results. Just sitting with this guitar and experimenting for a short time you get to hear how much of a useful studio tool it is,

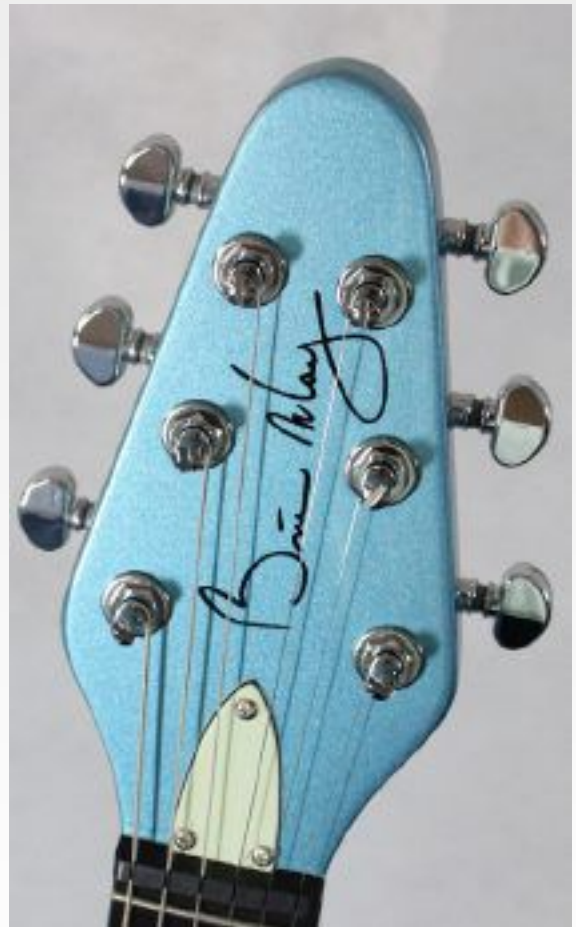
The Wilkinson tremolo system fitted on the BMG Special is one of the best vintage tremolos I have ever used. Fully floating, it allows upward and downward motion, and is equally at home adding light vibrato to chords as it is dive bombing and wrenching up screaming out of phase harmonics. You can even flick it to get the Steve Vai "blubber" effects. The stability is fantastic, returning to pitch from a healthy dose of abuse. This is obviously aided by the guitars straight string pull construction and locking tuners.

I have used a variety of Brian May signature guitars over the last 10 years of working on the show. In London I started out using Burns version, and the first incarnation of the BM Special. Touring in Europe I used the original KZ/Fryer Super and, as I mentioned, I own a 2009 BM Special, which had a huge amount of build and hardware improvements from the original first generation Special, so I had plenty to

compare this production guitar with.

And the verdict? The BM Guitars team has yet again made further improvements, making this a very well constructed, versatile, and unique sounding instrument, offering great build quality and fantastic playability, at a very budget friendly price. It also comes with a premier padded gig bag with a stitched Brian May logo.

Perhaps the \$64,000 question is, does this guitar only work for Brian May fans? My answer is no - it has a lot more potential. Most working guitarists reach for either Les Paul or Strat style guitars, both producing specific tones in their own right. The BM Special has its own unique voice, and is capable of producing a wider range of tones to most guitars. This guitar would make a great addition to any working guitarist's tone tools. **END>**



## Brian May Special

**MSRP £749 US \$1,067.03 (see website for offers)**

Made in: Korea

Acoustic Chambered Mahogany Body

Two-Piece Scratch Plate

Set-In Mahogany Neck

24" Scale - 24 Fret Ebony Fingerboard

Grover Locking Rotomatic Tuners

Dual Truss Rod

Graphite nut

Wilkinson WVP Knife Edge Tremolo Bridge with BM Custom Trem Arm

3 x Tri-Sonic Style, Series Wired, Single Coil Pickups

Original BM Style Electrics - Individual Pickup ON/OFF + Phase Switching System

# Brian May Fryer / Knight Audio Treble Boosters & KAT Strap Treble Booster

Treble boosters a Rangemaster Tre notably by the gr footsteps was Bri  
**Jamie Humphri**

**I**n his formative years Brian May listened to all kinds of guitar music. His favourite guitarists included the master of clean sounds, Hank Marvin, but he was also drawn towards distorted tones of Jimi Hendrix and Rory Gallagher and was curious about how he could achieve these himself. The answer came after seeing Rory at a performance at the Marquee club in London. Brian and his friends waited behind to talk to Rory. Rory graciously informed Brian that he achieved his tone by plugging his guitar in a Dallas Rangemaster treble booster and a Vox AC30. It was from that point that Brian started using treble boosters, and has continued to do so throughout his career.

Over the years Brian has used numerous treble boosters; Guild even produced a number of signature treble boosters for him at one stage. For many years however, Brian used Pete Cornish treble boosters that were based on the original sound of

the Dallas Rangemaster. Enter Greg Fryer, who as well as building replica RS guitars for Brian, and who started building a variety of treble boosters, some with gain controls, some without, but based on the Cornish interpretation. Fryer was building these units by hand, and with more and more requests for a signature BM booster from the public, larger scale manufacturing began with the help of Nigel Knight of Knight Audio Technologies.

So what does a treble booster do exactly? The treble booster doesn't actually produce a sound itself, but it helps to push your amp into a smooth overdrive/distortion. The treble booster produces a set amount of gain boost that hits the valves harder, pushing the amp to distort. But there is also some clever EQ going on, with the treble booster rolling off a certain amount of low end and boost upper frequencies; in the case of the Fryer/KAT (Knight Audio Technologies) boosters

## STAR RATING



**PROS** Versatile • Very well specced • Great sounds • G

**CONS** New to the market and yet to be proven

re woven into the legend and lore of effects pedals. Back in the early 1960s, the Dallas  
ble Booster was one of the only effects units on the market and was widely used -  
eat Irish guitarist Rory Gallagher, who paired it with his Vox AC30s. Following in Rory's  
an May, whose use of treble boosters has become an integral part of his unique sound.  
es looks at four versions of Brian May endorsed TBs.



ood looks

[...>]



around 2.7Khz. But it also rolls off some top, around 5Khz, because boosting top end creates a fizzy tone. Rolling off the top helps keep the sound of the treble booster full and warm, while the boosted upper-mids creates a cutting tone that sits in the mix, and rolling off bottom stops the sound becoming muddy and woolly. A treble booster will give you a great sounding tone that makes a guitar sit where it should sit.

Fryer/KAT produces three signature Brian May treble boosters, Treble Booster Touring, Treble Booster Deluxe, and Treble Booster Plus, all three of which do something

quite different. Nigel Knight of KAT also produces his own range of treble boosters, including the very small and compact strap booster, which Brian May uses pretty much exclusively. I've had all four to film for this review.

The Fryer boosters have been demonstrated on the same guitar so you can really get a good idea of how each one notches up the gain, and alters the tone. The KAT booster I demoed on my RS Model 84 fitted with original 1984 Brian May signature DiMarzio pickups.

## Fryer/KAT Treble Booster Touring

### Pros:

Great EQ curve

Plenty of Gain boost

Rich smooth distortion

### Cons:

Battery power only

Lack of on/off switch and gain and EQ control



[...>]

First let's take a look at the Treble Booster Touring, which was the first booster the Fryer designed and built for Brian, and is the one that he used for a number of years. This is also the choice of booster that we used on We Will Rock You shows in London, and Germany. The pedal is housed in a sturdy red metal casing, with the in and output sockets situated on the top of the unit. The unit is battery powered only, with the battery compartment on the left side. This pedal doesn't have an on off switch - yep that's correct, it's on all the time, just how Brian uses them. For some this may be off putting but if you play off the guitar volume control then it really does work. The unit produces 31db of gain, and with its EQ voicing will go from very glassy expressive cleans with the guitar volume backed off, to a rich crunchy rhythm sound volume half up, great for producing a crunchy sound with plenty of space, and not at all muddy.

Crank the guitar volume up to maximum, and you'll get a smooth lead distortion, great for articulate defined passages and long sustaining bends. This unit will also produce wonderful feedback tones. One thing to consider when buying a Fryer BM treble booster is that you cannot alter the tone or gain; this is a pre-set tone. Brian doesn't adjust pedals or ever stomp on pedals; all the tone shaping he does is done on the Red Special. This unit will also work in both transistor and valve amps; for the demo I had it plugged into a Thundertomate TAE, which is a tube amp emulator, a transistor pedal (*we'll be reviewing one of these in a future issue - Ed*)

I am very familiar with this booster, and I love it. I prefer using boosters to overdrive or distortion units, and have found myself leaning more towards treble boosters because they just get the guitar tone in the correct place EQ wise.

## **Fryer/KAT Treble Booster Deluxe**

### **Pros:**

**A very well built no frill booster**

**Expressive vowel-like EQ curve**

**Extra gain boost, aiding more distortion**

**Produces a very clear clean drive tone**

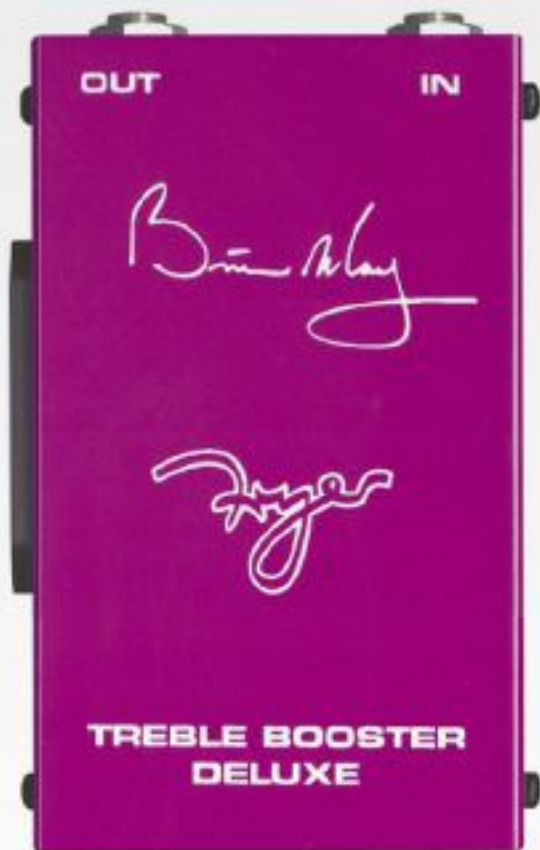
### **Cons:**

**Battery power only**

**Lack of on off switch and gain and EQ control**



The Treble Booster Deluxe is the next booster up, and is a slightly different beast to the touring. The layout of the Deluxe is the same as the Touring; in- and outputs on the top, battery compartment on the side, and no on/off switch or controls; the only obvious difference being the magenta coloured box. So what's the difference inside? First, this little box gives you extra gain - 35db - and has had some low end dialled in. By adding back the low end the gain has been increased, and tonally this makes it sound very different. The sound of this treble



booster has been compared to Brian's mid-1970's tone, and has a distinct vowel like quality to the sound. Once again, to alter the tone you do not use the box; the gain and EQ is all pre-set, and non-adjustable. Instead you work your guitar as Brian does, and the result is a set of very organic tones. Once again this unit cleans up nicely, and responds to pick attack. As I wind up the guitar volume more you really start to notice the EQ difference, and the extra gain. This really is a fantastic sounding booster. This unit will work with valve amps and transistor amps, and will also work with humbucker guitars.

## KAT/Fryer Treble Booster Plus

### Pros:

Plenty of gain boost for added flexibility

Very full thick EQ voicing

A very rich smooth distortion

Very dynamic pedal, reacts to subtle guitar volume changes

### Cons:

Battery power only

Lack of on off switch and gain and EQ control



This is our final Fryer booster, and I've saved the best till last. Once again the layout and construction is the same as on the previous two, but soundwise it's very different. Based on Brian's late '70's tone, this booster gives you 36db of boost, so it's quite a noticeable jump from the Touring booster. The low end as been bought in more, aiding the gain boost, and more of the mid frequencies have been pushed, giving you a very full warm sounding booster. To be honest this booster floored me, and I love the tone voicing and gain structure of the Plus. Once again this pedal will work with both single coil and humbucker guitars, and both valve and transistor amps.

## **KAT Strap Mount Treble Booster**

### **Pros:**

Lightweight multi-purpose treble booster

On/off switch and adjustable gain trim

Battery indicator

Plenty of clean dynamic gain:  
Virtually noiseless

### **Cons:**

Boutique price, but totally hand made and worth it!



Our final booster is Brian's main choice of live treble booster, and is also the booster that I predominantly used on the 2014/15 We Will Rock You German tour, and the 2015 Champions of Rock Swedish tour.

Brian only uses a treble booster between his guitar and his amp, but prefers the booster before his wireless, driving the wireless hard, which actually adds to his live sound. Prior to the development of this product he had been using some small custom-built strap boosters, a regular treble booster being too bulky to strap mount, but had been having trouble with RF noise, and interference from stage lighting. Nigel Knight stepped in with the task of building a strap booster that would eliminate these issues. Brian's tech, Pete Malandrone, also requested an on/off switch to conserve battery life and to save him the task of unscrewing the boosters on all the guitars before each show to change



batteries. The result is the KAT strap booster, which I have to say is a boutique work of art.

Nigel has achieved the impossible here, hand building each of them, he compares it to building a ship in a bottle. He has managed to design a small, compact strap treble booster that is quiet, and versatile. The booster is housed in a small metal box that attaches to the guitar strap with a very strong

Velcro and Velcro straps. The top of the booster has a small on/off switch, as well as a battery indicator light. There is also a small screw that can be used to increase or decrease the desired amount of gain. This screw is recessed so it won't get accidentally turned during use. The bottom of the booster has a moulded shielded guitar cable attached, with a Switchcraft right angled jack plug that attaches directly to your guitar. Next to this is the output that can be fed to either a wireless pack or to an amp. This booster can be used with or without a wireless unit, and works great as a standalone treble booster with a huge advantage over pedal board mounted units. Because the cable built into the strap booster is short, it means you have a run of just a few inches from your guitar to your booster.

Normally the first run of cable from the guitar to the first pedal on your board is considerably longer, which results in signal loss and diminished high-end frequencies. With the KAT booster the high frequencies are not affected, so your tone remains pure and defined - genius! The unit is perfectly shielded so you won't get noise or interference when using high gain. Also being strap mounted, the strap booster can act as a line driver to boost signal through long runs of cable to the first effect on your pedal board.

For our demo I ran the strap booster from my guitar into the TAE pedal and straight to the mixer. The tone of the strap booster is based on the touring booster, Brian's preferred booster tone, with a variable gain between the touring and deluxe. This booster produces a wonderful tone - very defined dynamic drive, with plenty of crisp high end when cleaned up. The strap booster is very dynamic and reacts to the slightest adjustment of the guitar volume; from clean, to crunch, to drive, to full smooth distortion, with minimal compression when the guitar is turned fully up.

## Conclusions

This has been quite a tricky review to rate. Each of these boosters does something in its own right very well. I love all three of the Fryer boosters, but if I had to choose one to take with me on a session it would be the Plus, as the tone is richer and there is a little more gain to play with. But for me the winner, if there has to be one, is the strap booster. It is small and lightweight, well shielded, and sounds fantastic. Having it strap mounted eliminates that initial cable run from the guitar, so you don't lose high-end frequencies. Also having it on your strap as a line driver to your first pedal is a great idea. I have been using one of these for well over a year now, and have just ordered a second; but don't take my word for it, listen to Brian's live tone and hear for yourself! **END>**

## KAT/Fryer Treble Boosters

Price: Touring, Deluxe and Plus - £129.99 each (Box set of

3 £399)

KAT STB Strap-Mount £220

Specifications and ordering: See text and website: [www.deacyamp.com](http://www.deacyamp.com)

# The Deacy Amp

It may be the strangest amp we've ever seen. The Deacy amp has featured on some of the most iconic recordings of the ultimate Brian May sound with the help of John Deacon. If you want one you'll have to move quickly.

**B**rian May's tone is one of the most recognisable in Rock and consists of some very unlikely components. If having a totally home made guitar that was built using any materials he and his father could lay their hands on wasn't enough, many of his finest moments were recorded using an amplifier built from parts found in a skip (aka dumpster)! Songs such as 'Good Company', 'Killer Queen', 'Bohemian Rhapsody' and 'A Winters Tale', to name just a few, all contained sections recorded with this very distinctive sounding homemade amp. Combined with the Red Special and a treble booster, the 'Deacy', as it was dubbed, produced a very cutting crisp distorted tone,

which when manipulated with the pickup and phase switching capabilities of the Red Special, different mic positioning, and the use of a wah as a tone control, enabled Brian to produce symphonic orchestral like sounds from his guitar. The Deacy became very much a part of Queen and Brian's voice in the studio.

Brian wasn't the only academically gifted member of Queen, nor was he the only one to have experimented building musical equipment with anything that came to hand. Queen's bassist, John Deacon, was an Honours electronics student studying in London and found the circuit board that formed the basis for the Deacy amp discarded in a builders skip

in 1972. His attention was drawn to the wires hanging over the side of the skip, and on closer investigation he discovered the circuit board attached to the other end. John decided to use the circuit board to build a small practice amp for playing guitar through. He mounted the circuit inside an old bookshelf speaker he had lying around, and mounted a jack socket on the rear of the speaker. There was also a power lead coming out of the back of the speaker that connected to a PP9 battery. The 'Deacy amp' was born! It had no controls and produced a warm, slightly distorted tone, but history was about to be made when John took the little amp along to a Queen rehearsal. Brian May was intrigued

## STAR RATING



**PROS** 100% authentic reproduction • Simple design • Moments in Rock history!!

**CONS** Expensive for an amp with absolutely no controls

r reviewed. It may be one of the strangest amps being made for guitar! But The Deacy  
listened to solos in Rock history. **Jamie Humphries** continues his search for the  
p of an amp based on a discarded circuit board liberated from a roadside skip. But if  
ckly.



and plugged in his Red Special and treble booster. Driving the amp with the treble booster pushed both the input and output stage, producing a very unique distorted tone that Brian has never been able to achieve on anything else, analogue or digital. From that point on the

• Great size and tone for studio recording • Tone tried and tested on some of the greatest

rols

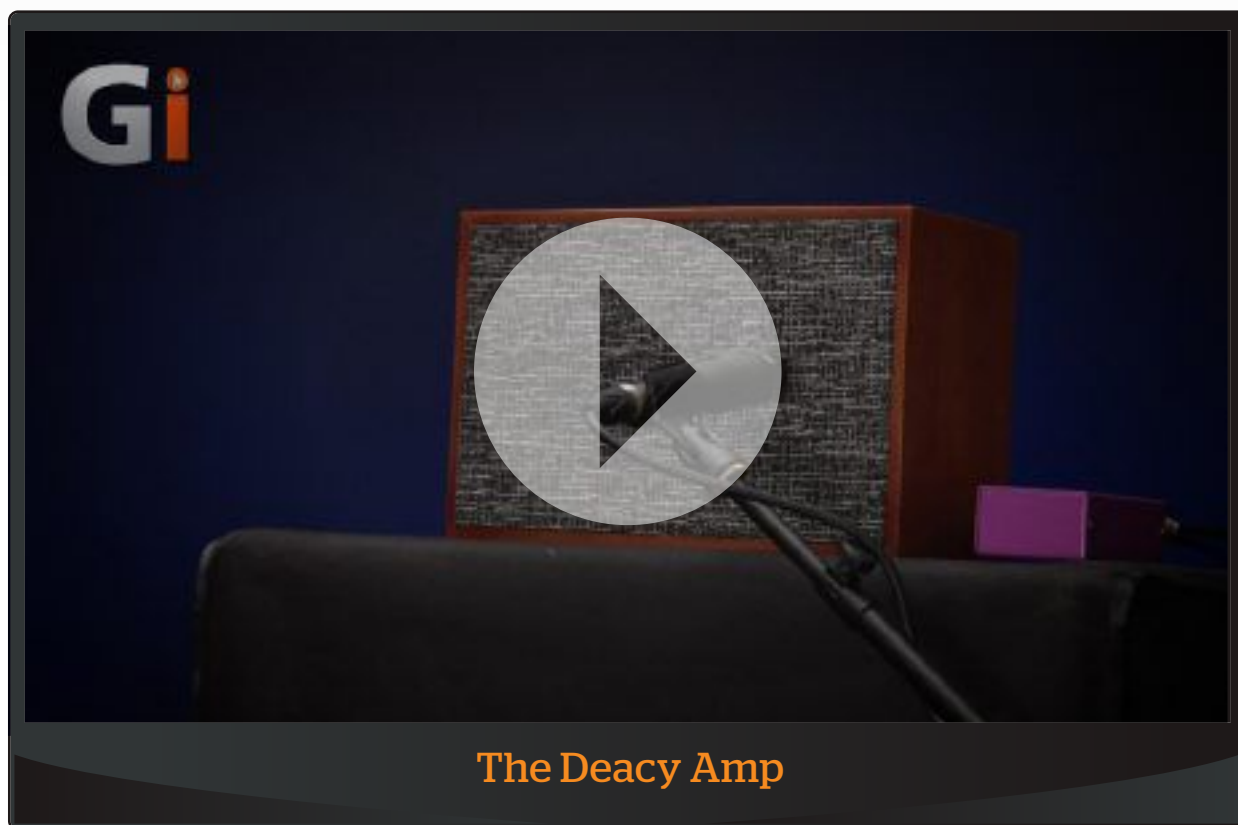
[...>]

Brian took part in a **iblandi test**, resulting in him choosing the replica when asked which one was his original!

Deacy amp became part of Brian's arsenal of tone tools; often blending it with his darker AC30 tone.

Brian and his tech Pete Malandrone eventually decided that they wanted a replica of the Deacy made as a back up for Brian, as well as producing a unit to sell. Around thirteen years were spent painstakingly researching and building an exact replica; Brian even allowed the original Deacy to be taken apart to match the speakers, circuit

board and transistors correctly to produce the legendary Deacy tone. This task was originally undertaken by Australian Greg Fryer and ultimately concluded by Nigel Knight, who has an extensive knowledge of vintage electric components. Everything was researched and analysed to the utmost degree, even down to cabinet thickness and the weave of the grille cloth. Experts at Celestion Speakers aided Nigel, with extensive analysis of the speakers that would eventually result in exact recreations.



[...>]



Eventually the finished replica was sat with Brian's original Deacy, and Brian took part in a "blind" test, resulting in him choosing the replica when asked which one was his original!

I had been lucky enough to see the original Deacy at Brian's studio when I was there for a rehearsal once, although I had never heard it in the flesh, so this was a first for me. For our review, Pete Malandrone very trustingly allowed me to use one of Brian's spare Deacy replicas, that had in fact been used on the Queen and Adam Lambert tour. Brian integrates the Deacy amp into his live rig, and uses it on such songs as 'Last Horizon'.

As previously mentioned, this is an exact replica of Brian's original amp, as handbuilt by John Deacon and is constructed from veneered chipboard, with a sapele finish. The cabinet is a sealed box, with mitred corner joints; the interior features a front and rear chipboard baffle. The push-pull 0.75 Watt four transistor amplifier drives two speakers; a 6" low/midrange frequency 30 Watt twin cone speaker, and a single 3" paper cone high frequency speaker. The amplifier can be powered in two different ways; either a 9V DC PP9 battery or with the KAT Deacy amp battery Simulator unit. I used the battery simulator for our review, which faithfully emulates the battery supply conditions of the PP9. The battery emulator is mains powered and features a control that lets you adjust how much power the battery has, for example Brian prefers the sound of the Deacy when the battery is running out. With the battery

emulator you simply turn down the battery level control.

For the demo, I used the BMG Super (reviewed elsewhere in this issue) into a Fryer/KAT treble booster deluxe; I also used a sixpenny piece. Straight away from the first chord I hit you could hear the distinctive Brian May tone. The distortion is very saturated, and with a moderate compression. Even though this amp is transistor based and has no controls at all, the tone is rich, and has a very distinct top end. Turning down the volume, the amplifier cleans up, and as the guitar volume is increased there is a steady gain increase. For the main part I used Brian's most favoured tone, with the bridge and middle pickups, creating a thick humbucker style tone. But switching to the neck and middle and kicking one pickup out of phase creates some very familiar tones.

To sum things up this is an excellent amp for several reasons. First, it's the Brian May tone in a box, so for the fan/fanatic this really is a must have. Second, its simplistic design is one of its winning features. Guitar amps are often so over the top with way too many controls, that they become confusing and intimidating. The Deacy on the other hand just sounds fantastic, with no controls. The only variables are the pedals in front, and how you operate your guitar. Third, if like me you have a home studio this is a great low wattage amp for recording, with a tone that is just perfectly designed for placing the guitar in the correct position in the mix. Let's face it,

if you look at the hits it has been used on, that's not a bad track record at all!

However - and take this as a warning - if you have decided you really want one of these unique amps don't delay, thinking you will be able to pick one up in a few

years! Knight Audio says it is now on the last 20 that will be produced. The obsolete components used are now unobtainable so rather than compromise with make-dos and 'maybe good enoughs', Knight Audio has ceased production and says it will build no more. **END>**

## The Deacy amp

**Price: £799 (battery simulator optional extra)**

Made in: UK

Amplifier Section

Form - Four transistor, transformer coupled push-pull amplifier

Output pair Operating Class - B

Output Power (Undistorted) - 750mW (RMS)

Power Requirements - 9VDC (PP9 not supplied)

Reverse Polarity Protection - Yes

Transistor Compliment - AC125, AC126, 2 x AC128

### Speaker Section

Form - Twin driver/passive Crossover

Loading - Infinite baffle, sealed box

LF/MF Unit - 6" Twin Cone 25mm Voice Coil 30W

HF Unit - 3" Paper cone 15mm Voice Coil 15W

### Cabinet Section

Construction - Sealed box. Mitred corner joints

Finish - Sapele

Cabinet walls - Matched A/B veneered Chipboard

Front Baffle Material - 12mm bare chipboard

Rear Baffle Material - 12mm bare chipboard

Internal damping - 25mm acoustic wadding

# Vox AC30 C2 Custom

The Vox AC30 has had a relatively affordable C2 Custom gear, **Jamie Humphries**

**T**he final link in Brian May's signal chain is his faithful trio of Vox AC30 amps. Brian's love affair with AC30s began at a young age, witnessing his two of his heroes, Hank Marvin and Rory Gallagher, both favouring the combo to produce very different and unique tones. It was Brian's after gig conversation with Rory that prompted him to head into London and purchase two rather beaten up AC30s for just £25 each (*those were the days!* - Ed)

Brian has used many AC30s over the years, and he has a huge collection of them. He even had his own limited edition signature AC30 released a few years ago and today favours three modified AC30TBX amps

in his set, with the middle amp dry, whilst the outer two heads have the effected signal. This together with his Red Special, a treble booster - and let's not forget the sixpence as a pick - all go together in creating his majestic tone.

The AC30 C2 is an up to date take on the classic 'Top Boost' model, and features some very welcome features, whilst retaining its classic Vox styling. We opted for the C2 over the hand-wired AC30 for two reasons; the first being affordability, and the second being a purely cosmetic slant when comparing the amp to Brian May's favourites.

The amp features two 25 Watt Celestion 'Green Back' speakers, with the traditional

choice of EL84 power tubes. If you are a real purist you may wish to track down one of the Alnico blue speakered versions, but that is going to cost you a hefty premium. The amp features two independent channels, which aren't foot switchable, but includes two 'high' and 'low' independent inputs. The channels consist of a normal channel and a top boost, which includes bass and treble.

We also have a reverb section that includes tone and level plus a tremolo section featuring speed and depth controls. Both the reverb and tremolo can be switched by a footswitch that is sold, a bit disappointingly, as an optional extra. The master section includes tone cut, for rolling off top end, and the

## STAR RATING



**PROS** Great mix of tones • Retro styling with modern

**CONS** Foot switch not included • Vox purists may not

as many reincarnations as a Tibetan Llama - some good, some less successful. The Custom is one of the most recent. For the final part of our examination of Brian May's assesses how well it does in comparison with some of the classic models.



master volume. The controls are mounted onto the chassis, located on the top of the amp, and maintain the traditional vintage look with 'chicken head' knobs. The top panel also houses the standby controls and indicator lights.

features • Good price point

take to the C2's modernisation

[...>]

With the **help of the master volume** I was able to push the normal volume to start driving the tubes..

The rear of the cabinet is partially open but differs quite a lot from genuine vintage AC30s by being quite well guarded. This, we assume, is for safety reasons (it will keep careless fingers off your glassware!) so that's fair enough as it has no impact of the amp's performance. More significantly, the C2 includes some welcome new features including an effects loop; this is a plus point when wanting to emulate Brian's use of delay and chorus, without having an elaborate switching system. There is also an additional

speaker output for adding an extension cabinet, and also the foot switch jack socket.

Performance wise the amp produced some beautifully rich warm tones, with a classy boutique feels to them. The normal channel was ideal for twangy Hank-style cleans. With the help of the master volume I was able to push the normal volume to start driving the tubes, giving me a convincing Link Wray tone, especially when I dialled in some tremolo and reverb. The reverb produces



[...>]

a very lush ambient effect, and with the tone control you can tailor the tone of your reverb to your choice. The top boost channel can also produce clean to crunch tones, but is slightly more flexible due to the EQ. The sound of both channels also changes depending on whether you are using the high or low inputs. When driving the level of the top boost channel whilst plugged into the high input, thanks to the master volume I could drive the amp and get a Brian May like tone at a level that wouldn't get you kicked out of your band!

To my mind this is a great AC30, and mixes a wide range of classic Vox tones with

modern features and build quality. Some die hard fans may dislike the PCB build, the master volume and the lack of a valve rectifier. But what you get is an amp at a more affordable price, capable of mixing '60's inspired cleans with classic Rock crunch and with which, when driven, you can achieve much more modern sounds. The addition of the master volume aids getting crunch tones at a more sedate level, plus with greater headroom you can drive this beauty on miked pub gigs. If you're looking to start a Brian May inspired rig, the C2 is a great starting point; highly recommended! **END >**





## VOX AC30C2 Custom Specifications

MSRP £922.80

US \$1,540

Made in: China

Output Power: 30 Watts RMS into 16 Ohms

Speaker: 2 x 12" 8 ohm Celestion G12M Greenback

Inputs: Normal input jack (high and low), Top Boost input jack (high and low), FX RETURN jack, Footswitch jack

Outputs: External loudspeaker jack, Extension loudspeaker jack,

FX SEND jack

Dimensions (W x D x H): 702 x 265 x 556 mm / 27.64 x 10.43 x 21.89 inches

Weight: 32.2 kg / 70.99 lbs.

Options: VFS2A Footswitch



# Brian May Guitars Rhapsody

Brian May has had a long time love of the acoustic guitar and his guitar brand, Brian May, has a unique style and sound. But with so many great acoustics on the market today, how do you choose a Brian May, **Jamie Humphries** finds out.

**I**f you've ever had the pleasure of seeing a live Brian May concert, or a Queen performance, you will know that Brian enjoys intimate moments with the audience and just an acoustic guitar. His love of the guitar was born from experiencing an Egmond acoustic that he received for his seventh birthday. It was actually from this guitar's looks that the Red Special was born, with Brian winding his own pickup and plugging it into his father's home made radio.

With the success of the Super and the Special, BM Guitars has expanded its product lines with the Red Special Bass, Ukulele, and now with an electro acoustic guitar named the Rhapsody. There are two Rhapsody models available at present, the natural finished top version being the flagship, with an antique cherry finished option, keeping the Red Special flag flying. The cherry version features a four band EQ on the pre-amp, while the natural includes a microphone blend control. I'll talk about that curious anomaly later.

Visually, the Rhapsody is based on the body shape of the Red Special, making it quite a unique and striking looking guitar. It would certainly look great on stage next to a BM Super or Special. This small-bodied acoustic features a solid spruce top, with very attractive (laminated) mahogany back and sides. The guitar features an oval sound hole with a linear decorative rosette. The front of the bridge is rosewood, with an undersaddle piezo acoustic transducer.

The comfortable neck is made from mahogany, with a rosewood board and 24 frets. The headstock is also based on the RS design, with the six Gotoh style machine heads situated three a side. The machine heads are finished off nicely with wooden bottoms. The front of the headstock includes a rosewood veneer, with the Brian May signature decal.

The Rhapsody includes the well known Fishman Presys Plus pre-amp, which is fitted in the top of the body. This small unit

## STAR RATING



**PROS** Blend works really well • Great to play • Well made

**CONS** A bit neck-heavy • Blend control not included

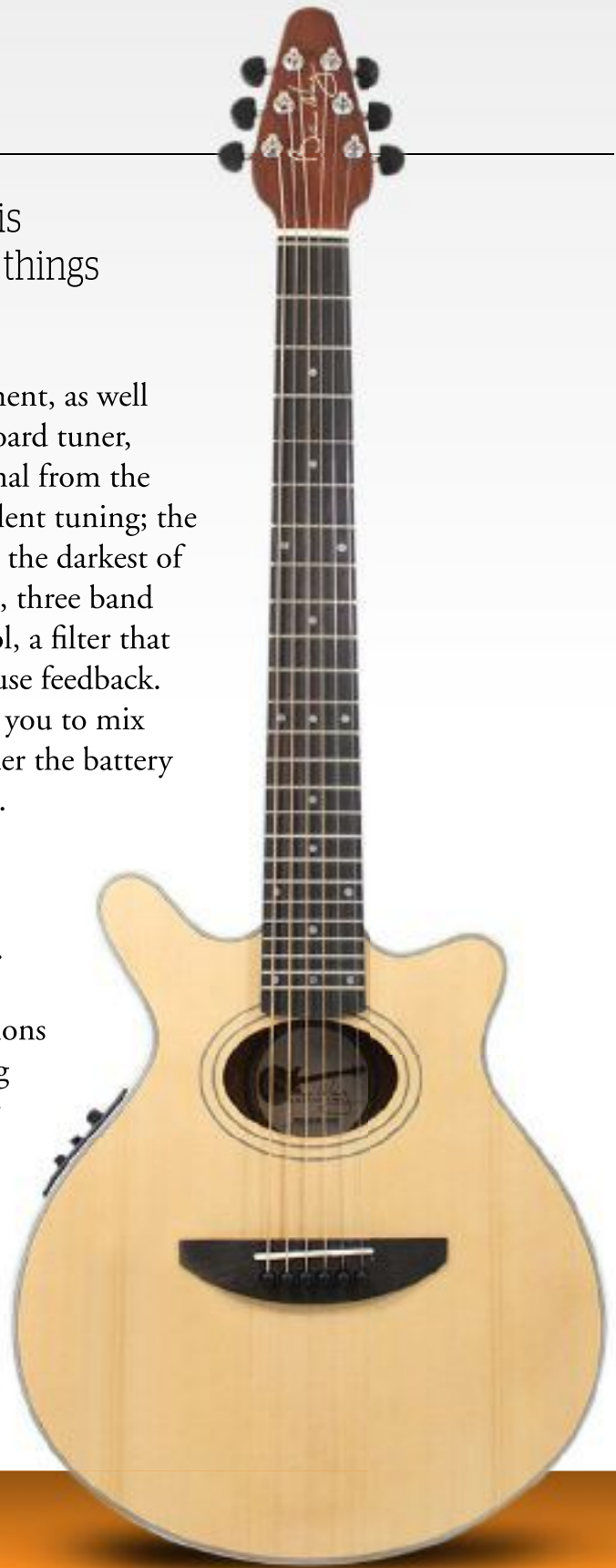


# Acoustic

ay Guitars, has an acoustic guitar to capture his  
Does the Rhapsody compare? Our expert on all things

features easy access to the battery compartment, as well as a battery warning light. There is an on board tuner, which was very accurate, and mutes the signal from the guitar output, making for speedy onstage silent tuning; the LED display is bright enough to be seen on the darkest of stages. The Presys includes a master volume, three band EQ, bass, middle and treble, a notch control, a filter that helps eliminate low end frequencies that cause feedback. It also includes a blend control that enables you to mix in the condenser mic, which is situated under the battery compartment, with the bridge piezo system.

On the Antique Cherry version, the blend control isn't included, instead we have a brilliance control, which is a high-end filter. I found this a slightly strange thing for BM guitars to have done, and felt it limited options for buyers. Why only offer the mic blending on the natural? What if I wanted the cherry colour with the blend? I think BM guitars should include a choice of having either pre-amp, or just use one in both guitars! To my mind, the blend control is much more useful than brilliance.



ade

on from Antique Cherry finished version

[...>]



All in all this **is great acoustic guitar**. Its small body size make it ideal for travelling with.

The final control is phase, which can be used to improve bass response at low volume and again help suppress feedback at high volume. Again I found this to be a slightly redundant control as we have the notch that does pretty much the same thing.

Sitting with the Rhapsody I found the body shape surprisingly comfortable, but it was a little neck heavy, possible an inherent issue due to the guitar's small body. Acoustically it sounded great, with a very full rich tone, and plenty of volume; not what I was expecting

[...>]

for such a small-bodied guitar. The neck was very comfortable to play, and the set-up and playability out of the box was first class.

Plugging it in, the Rhapsody performed excellently, with a very pleasant sounding pre-amp, and versatile, responsive EQ. My point about the blend control was certainly validated here, as I found that I dialled in more of the onboard condenser mic than the piezo, so that the sound of the body and wood predominated. I'm not a fan of DI'd acoustics; I find piezo systems sound thin and two-dimensional by and large, and having a mic/blend option is a tremendous

advantage over the familiar arrangement you find on most electro-acoustics.

All in all this is great acoustic guitar. Its small body size make it ideal for travelling with, and it loses very little tonal quality for having a small body. My one niggle was the one control difference between natural or cherry finishes, which to me seems slightly pointless. If you're in the market for a great sounding acoustic guitar that's not overly expensive, then I would give the Rhapsody a closer look. The guitar comes with a hard case as well, so you're getting good value for money here. **END >**

## Brian May Guitars Rhapsody Acoustic

MSRP £TBC US \$3,398

MSRP £495 US \$705.18

Made in: Unknown

Top: Spruce

Back & Sides: Mahogany

Fishman Presys+ Features

Volume Control

Bass, Middle & Treble Control

Notch Filter for On-board Anti-feedback Control

Brilliance Control for Additional

Tone Shaping

Built-in Tuner with LED Display

Phase Switch

Battery Level Indicator

Low Profile Control Knobs

Unique Pivot Design for Instant 9-Volt Battery Access

End-Pin Jack Output

Fishman Sonico pickup & PRESYS pre-amp

