

A question we are asked repeatedly...

"Has Eric Clapton Ever Used a SESSION Transistor Amp?"

Yes! Two Rockette:30s
bought from Andertons
in Guildford, Surrey
and used on the 'August' album,
from which his only
No. 1 hit was taken...

...now that must be devastating news for
the 'valve amp only' religion! Read on...



CLAPTON SPECIAL

Photo: Shimmy/Where's Eric



Clapton - with Crash II

Keys To The HIGHWAY

From The Yardbirds to the new album of Robert Johnson songs, Eric Clapton has nailed more than his fair share of classic tones. Rick Batey looks at the man's hardware of the past, and talks to his long-serving right-hand man Lee Dickson to find out what's happening right now...

Few players can have sported as many different guitars through their careers as Eric Clapton. As well as his many trademark Stratocasters, the list includes a Telecaster, a Jazzmaster and a Gretsch in The Yardbirds, a Strat-necked Tele in Blind Faith, Gibson Les Pauls from the Bluesbreakers through to Cream and at gigs in the mid/late '80s, the famous Fool-painted psychedelic Gibson SG, a number of different short-scale jazzy Gibson Byrdlands, other Gibson semi-acoustics including an ES-150 and a ES-175, a Gibson Explorer, the cherry-red ES-335 that was used on and off from 1967

through to 2003, a Firebird in Cream and with Delaney & Bonnie, a Pensa-Suhr... and even a Roland guitar synth.

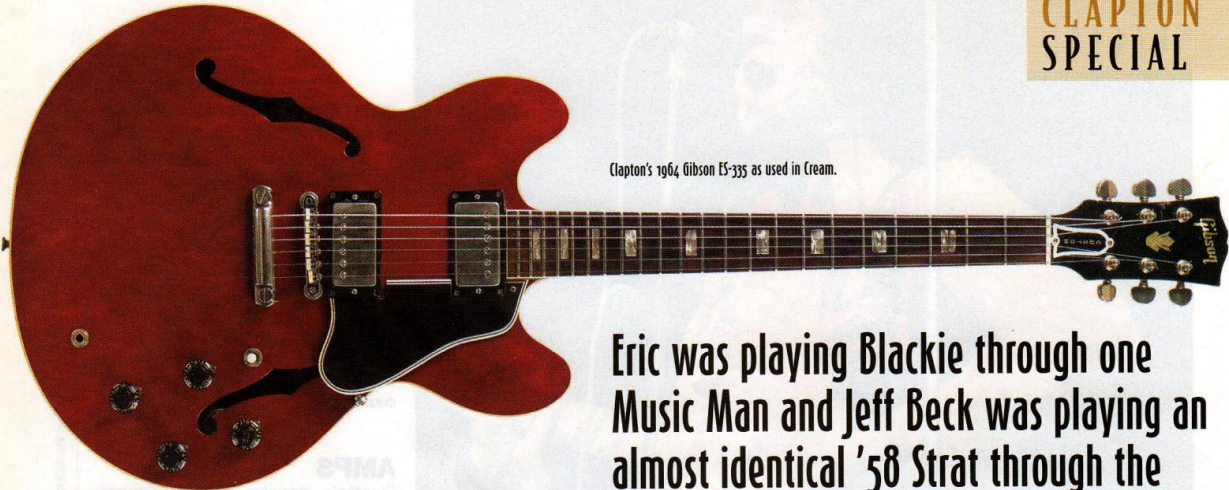
Then, in 1999, a charity auction laid open Clapton's private guitar closet to the world. That 100-strong collection – which raised no less than five million dollars for the man's own charity – included fine '50s D'Angelicos, a Roger Giffen guitar, Santa Cruz acoustics, a Trussart steel-bodied electric, a Fender D'Aquisto, a Fender Broadcaster Relic, an ES-330, resophonics by National, Dobro and Beltona, a Harmony, a Silvertone – even a '30s Kalamazoo, a Gibson J-185 and a J-200... and there we were thinking that EC had never

gone near a Gibson flat-top in his life. Oh, and there was also a Versace guitar strap. It went for nine thousand bucks.

ELECTRICS

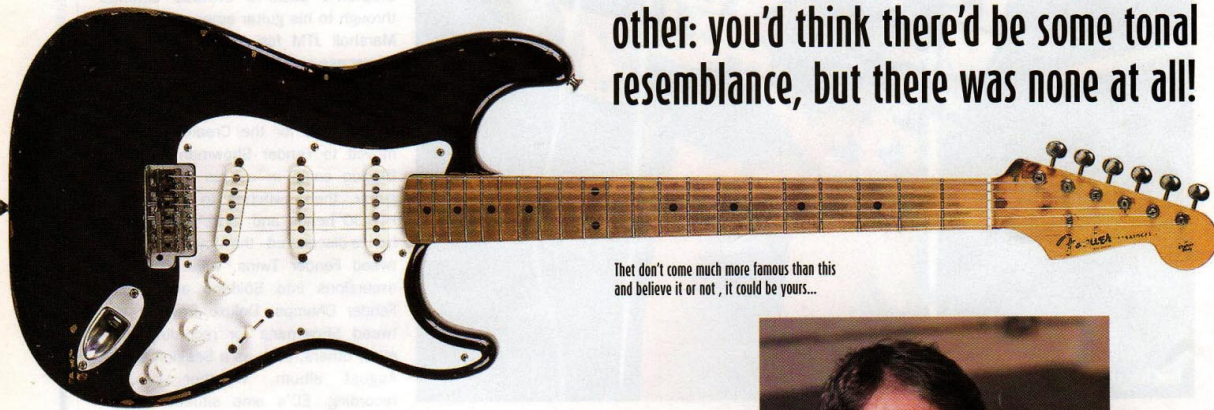
Despite the collector's smorgasbord he's had at his disposal, Clapton settled on Fender Strats in the early '70s as his main stage electrics and has rarely strayed far in the intervening years – though on the first leg of this tour in Japan, a Gibson Chet Atkins and an L-5 have appeared, for one song each. 'Eric does love Gibsons,' confirms Lee Dickson, Clapton's road manager and guitar tech for some 24

CLAPTON SPECIAL



Clapton's 1964 Gibson ES-335 as used in Cream.

Eric was playing Blackie through one Music Man and Jeff Beck was playing an almost identical '58 Strat through the other: you'd think there'd be some tonal resemblance, but there was none at all!



They don't come much more famous than this and believe it or not, it could be yours...

years. 'He especially likes their old jazz guitars, like the L-5 and the Byrdland. Then there was that lovely old ES-350 he got for the Chuck Berry film, *Hail Hail Rock'n'Roll*... a great sight, Eric and Keith Richards, both with ES-350s! I think Eric rather hoped Chuck would come over and say, "Hey, great guitar", but of course he never even noticed! Chuck, he's an amazing figure, but' - a polite cough - 'he's something of a unique man to work with.

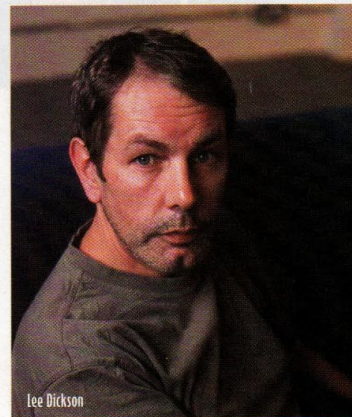
'Then there was the original Les Paul Standard, of course, the Bluesbreaker one that was stolen. There have been several stories about it, from the sublime to the ridiculous, but the one I'd tend to believe - and this is from someone who knows his stuff - is that it's still in London, in someone's closet, and the guy is too scared to bring it out because of the possible repercussions. Eric has another 1960 Les Paul,

though, a really wonderful one with a lovely neck... although it's got a very slight mark on it from where somebody left the case open, and a cat peed in it!

'So while Eric likes Gibsons for certain applications, he's really a Strat man - it's just a question of ergonomics. We basically take four out on the road: a slide one, a main one, an identical spare, and a 'spare spare'. The 'spare spare' comes from the days when Eric would break a top E string, and I'd be fixing it and I'd look round and he'd have bust another one. It's just the way he plays... sometimes he hits them really hard.

'The current main Strat is what we call the "Crashocaster", with artwork by a New York graffiti artist called Crash. Eric's very knowledgeable about modern art, and he's had a lot of input into these guitars. That guitar was made specially for this tour, and then in

June Eric will give it away in effect.' On *Me And Mr Johnson* Clapton employed the



Lee Dickson

Crashocaster, a '50s Gibson L-5 and a '50s Byrdland.

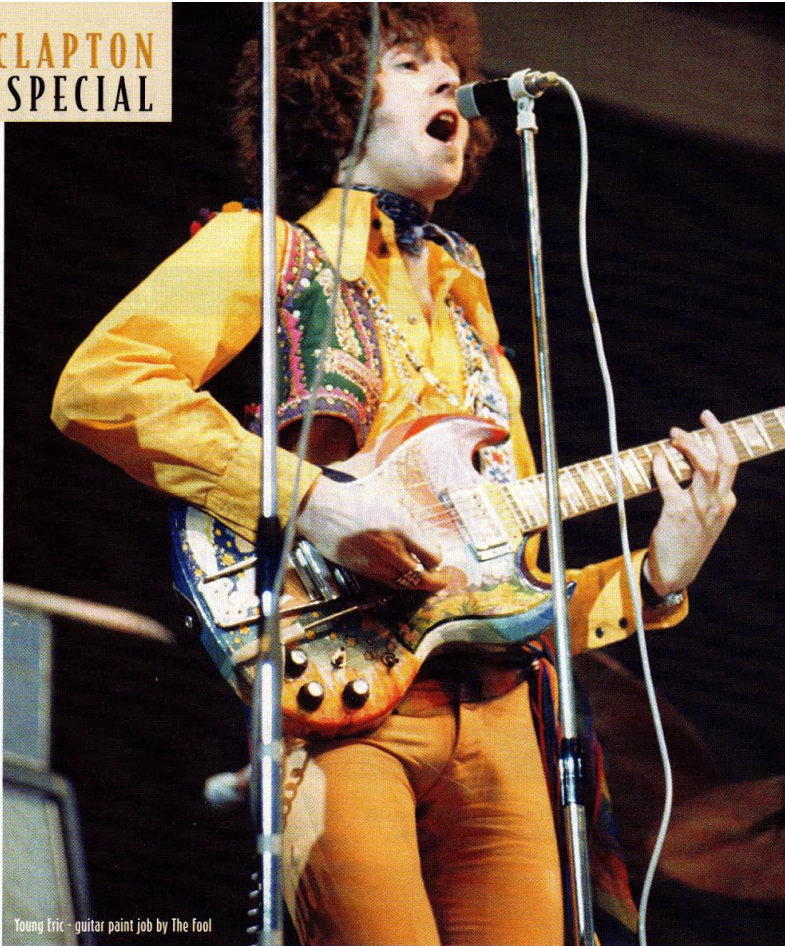
ACOUSTICS

Eric Clapton loves his Strats, but he also has a strong affection for his acoustics. He's a long-time vintage Martin fan - and a real lover of quality nylon-strung classical and flamencos, though you'll rarely see him playing one on stage since he doesn't like to modernise them with pickups and preamps. His favourite steel-strings ▶



Hot press: here's Crash III - the Strat Eric will be playing on the European tour before it's auctioned by Christie's

CLAPTON SPECIAL



Young Eric - guitar paint job by The Fool

◀ are probably his 1939 000-42, the *Unplugged* guitar, and another from the same year and just a few serial numbers apart. In the past he's played many Martins including several different types of 000, a D-28, a D-45 in Derek And The Dominos, a J-40-12 and a D-12-28. Other makes include couple of Taylors in the mid '90s, numerous Dobros and Nationals, and assorted Guilds including a G46 – a guitar Clapton officially put his name to around 1987.

These days, though, it's Martin all the way. Clapton's acoustic parts on *Me And Mr Johnson* were played on an old Martin OM-45 and what he calls 'an ECB' – presumably a Brazilian rosewood Martin 000-42EC. But with both his beloved vintage 000-42s earmarked for



Photo: Shimmy/Where's Eric

the upcoming Christie's auction – as is a monstrous Cream-era Tony Zemaitis 12-string, nicknamed 'Ivan The Terrible' – it seems likely that live duties on this tour will fall to his current main squeeze, a black-finished Martin 000, one of a private limited series of just seven shared between Clapton and a Japanese musician friend, Hiroshi Fujiwara. 'Those guitars were just really just for fun,' Clapton says. 'They might be launching them as a standard line, but I'm not completely sure of that.'

Onstage acoustic amplification is still a matter of ongoing R&D. 'We're using the standard Martin Thinline undersaddle transducer into an Avalon DI,' reveals Lee Dickson. 'It's not quite perfect, though, especially when Eric gets more forceful, like on the second



Photo: Minoru Kobata/Star file

part of *Change The World*... it seems as though that little endpin-mounted preamp just can't cope. For a while we went with a blender system mixing an internal mic with the undersaddle, but that's fallen by the wayside. We'll be taking the opportunity at these rehearsals to try a new system, a co-axial undersaddle with an added Mid control on the preamp. I'll run it past Robert Collins, our esteemed sound engineer, and see how it goes. But it's all down to Eric – it's his ears that count.'

AMPS

Clapton's decisive attitude extends through to his guitar amps, too. First a Marshall JTM fan – see our *Vintage Showcase* on page 37 for details on his famous Bluesbreaker-era rig – he moved to 100W Marshall with twin 4x12" cabs for the Cream era, then moved to Fender Showman amps as Blackie came in as his number one guitar, then switched to Music Man HD130 heads and 2x12" cabs. Next, he re-discovered the joys of 1950s tweed Fender Twins, with occasional excursions into Soldano amps, plus Fender Champs, Deluxe Reverbs and tweed Showmans for recording, plus many others, such as a *Session on the August* album. Whether live or recording, EC's amp situation is an ever-changing one.

'The trouble is, it's pretty challenging to find a new amp that sounds like a tweed '50s Twin when the original has been tweaked and boosted and messed with and had the output transformer changed,' Lee Dickson says of the current onstage situation. 'For a while we went with three Twin-alike amps made by John Suhr of the Fender Custom Shop. John's a really talented guy and the amps worked just great, especially when they started building the cabinets out of 100-year-old pine. But one time we were playing at Madison Square Garden and, for some reason, those amps weren't happening. It was a rough period for me – there's nothing worse than to have the boss unhappy. We tried other amps, but

Photo: Alan Holman/Photo Reviews

◀ eventually went back to the Suhrs. 'For the next tour, though, we switched to Fender Vibro-King combos with three 10" speakers. Once we'd added 2x12" extension cabs they worked pretty well but we were never quite convinced by the way the tone controls worked, so we decided to enlist British amp builder Denis Cornell. Eric wrote down his ideas about the sound he wanted and Denis started out by doctoring some existing amps before he and I planned some new ones with one passive channel and one active one for really fierce sounds. I think I got rather carried away – they were great amps, but they simply had too many knobs for Eric's liking... he's from the old plug-in-and-play school.

'Denis then made some more basic single-channel ones with a switch to cut the power from 80W to 20W, and they were much better for our purposes. Those are the amps we're going with at the moment, plus a Leslie for the part in *Badge*. And if he wants something different, then we've still got the old Fenders and Music Mans and Soldanos ready to be pulled out, just in case.

'I must say, though, that a really good player will always sound like himself no matter what he plays. I remember Jeff Beck once turned up to play alongside Eric at a show at Guildford Civic. We were using a Music Man head through a 2x12" cabinet, and we actually had two cabinets with two amps on top, one as a spare. Eric was playing Blackie through one Music Man and Jeff was playing an almost identical '58 Strat through the other: you'd think there'd be some tonal resemblance, but there was none at all! I was standing right behind the stack – and what was coming out was like chalk and cheese, like A and Z. That's Eric, he'll always be him no matter what he plays... and it's exactly the same with Jeff.'

BEING ERIC'S TECH

Though Lee Dickson is modest about his own abilities ('I'm okay with guitars, but I'm not a great amp man') there's no doubt that after all these years, he still gets a major buzz from standing to one side of an Eric Clapton gig. 'If there's one thing that opened my eyes all over again,' he says, 'it was doing the *Blues* tour. Of course, Eric's a blues player at heart, but I'd never heard him play so many blues songs in homage to the original artists, and nail it so exactly. The Freddie King stuff, the Elmore James slide numbers he did on a Byrdland – I was just amazed...

'He's also a good guy to work for. He's very funny, with a wicked sense of humour, and he's not too demanding – he just wants you to do your job and get on with it. I've seen players that scream and shout at their road managers and get all prissy and freaked out, but that

ART ATTACK

While Clapton's love of guitars certainly encompasses the plain and simple, he's also a well-established patron of visual arts and delights in unusual paint jobs. The latest manifestation of his passion for the painted is evidenced by this series of

Clapton signature guitars painted by several different graffiti artists. From left to right the work of: Daze, D'Zine, Futura, Kaws, Next Sky, She 1, She 1 and Stash. See page 32 for more on Clapton and the Fender Custom Shop.



doesn't happen. It has to be something pretty horrendous for Eric to get angry.

'The thing is, although we spend a lot of time and trouble getting a great sound, he's not reliant on what kind of lead he uses or what kind of battery. To a large degree he can pick up any guitar or amp and sound like himself – and whatever he's using, he'll nail it nine times out of 10. People are always coming up to me and asking what kind of overdrive pedal he uses, and I just say, 'none'. It's something that goes on between his head, his heart and fingers. Lots of guys can copy him, but when you hear him live, it's the real deal. He's also a very respectful player when

performing with different people. With the older blues guys, the whole thing used to be to try to blow each other off stage. Eric's never like that – he doesn't try to out-do anyone, he's just happy to be playing with his heroes.

'A lot of this job comes down to how you work with people,' declares Dixon. 'We've been lucky, with a lot of great guys at Fender, Ernie Ball, Jim Dunlop, Martin, Gibson and others helping us down the years. And if you're fortunate enough to work for a major artist, half of it is really down to personality. As Kenny Rogers once said, you've got to know when to hold them, and know when to fold them...'

