

King of the Frets

The first big story of 2008 (or the last of 2007, depending on how you look at it) sees John Hornby Skewes & Co buying Trevor Wilkinson's Fret King line of guitars. It's more than a distribution deal and it's more than a simple buyout. Dennis Drumm explains to Andy Barrett...

When a distributor takes on a new line – particularly in guitars – the trade journalist usually has to use every sinew to avoid asking the question: 'does the world need another guitar brand?' The answer is often 'no', but tact and diplomacy require a more long-winded and positive response. The news that JHS & Co has bought Trevor Wilkinson's Fret King brand and will be the global distributor for it, however, creates no such dilemmas.

First of all, it isn't a new guitar brand. It's been around for years and has earned a good deal of high praise from some pretty influential players. Second, if there is one thing that Trevor Wilkinson does not do when he works on a guitar design, it is rely on existing designs, concepts and 'received wisdom'. He is a designer who is always looking for something new to do, a new approach. He asks the question 'why' an awful lot when sitting down at his drawing board. The results can easily be seen in his Italia guitars, in JHS's Vintage Advance and, of course, in Fret King. Whatever else they might be, they are never 'me too' and they rarely conform to the expected.

JHS' MD, Dennis Drumm, has spent a lot of time with Wilkinson over the past few years and it was always

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assumed that they were working on tweaks in the Vintage line. What no-one knew until now was that there were other plans afoot.

"Ever since Trev and I started working together on the JHS Vintage line, it's been a dream to bring Trev's absolutely amazing Fret-King guitars to the market," explains Drumm (right, with Wilkinson in pic opposite). "In August 2007, JHS concluded an agreement with Trev to acquire Fret-King, and entered a long-term contract with him to develop what is now the premier JHS guitar brand and bring it to the international market."

JHS is not simply distributing Fret King, it is now the owner. Also the company has not simply bought a brand in stasis, it has signed a contract with the designer to develop the line. Third, the Garforth supplier is already looking at Fret King as its 'premier guitar brand'.

"Our objective was to bring incredible levels of specification and quality to players who can only dream of aspiring to some of the esoteric boutique brands which are out there," Drumm continues. "We have succeeded, and to see Trev's dream brought to life is truly awesome."

"Awesome in the sense that each Fret King guitar is the distillation, the very essence, the soul, of over three decades of knowledge, of experience, of listening to guitar players, tweaking, repairing, and building hand made guitars, co-operating with so many iconic maestros of the electric guitar world, from the famous to the little known, and generally being immersed in the search for the holy grail of the modern vintage guitar."

What is emerging here is a partnership that suits both sides perfectly. Wilkinson with his designs and guitar-building know-how, and Drumm with his sales and marketing clout – and both with an unerring passion for the guitar. Look within that passion on both sides and you will find a desire not only for every willing pair of hands to hold a guitar, but for those hands to hold something that is worthy of being a guitar. The result is not the cheapest guitars on the market by any means, but an ongoing campaign to get the best possible, while remaining in touch with most people's spending realities.

"Trev and I truly believe that in a market which is already well populated by guitars with astronomical price tags, Fret King offers the first serious alternative to the mind-bendingly expensive, low-volume esoteric instruments, and absurdly high priced corporate custom shop products," says Drumm. "Fret-King, too, carries a serious price tag, but is still actually astonishing value."

The line-up of Fret King guitars and basses will number over 170 individual options and, as such, represent a significant addition to the JHS guitar catalogue. They will be available in two categories:

Drumm says Fret-King guitars will carry a "serious price tag" but will be "astounding value"

Green Label series guitars and basses are hand-built in Wilkinson's UK workshops to painstaking standards, while the mid-price Blue Label series guitars are to be produced in a low volume, luthier-built environment.

While this might sound like a 'something for everyone' scenario, Drumm has no illusions about the task ahead. "Neither Trev or I expect that everyone will like Fret King, but anyone who knows what they are talking about will appreciate its merits," he insists, adding: "Me, I'm just knocked out to be lucky enough to be working with a genius. Perhaps some of it will rub off."

