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FRET King
by
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Your Next Guitar Is Here!

Long live the King

The recent announcement that JHS had bought Trevor Wilkinson's Fret King brand, followed by a noteworthy launch at the recent NAMM show, created a considerable buzz, but seemed to overlook an important point: this is the launch of a British made electric guitar brand. **Andy Barrett** takes Dennis Drumm and Trevor Wilkinson to one side...

Undoubtedly, one of the main talking points at NAMM was the (I'm going to stick my neck out here) audacious launch of JHS's latest acquisition: Trevor Wilkinson's Fret King ranges of electric guitars.

There were many product launches at NAMM, and some very good ones, too, but nothing quite equalled the vibe that hovered around a range of guitars with some 170 options – with most of those made in the UK.

With images of the crammed JHS stand in Anaheim still strong, the modest, distinctly spartan surroundings of Fret King's home, Wilkinson's workshop in Southport, came as something of a surprise.

Two people in the office and one in the workshop, with Wilkinson shuttling between the two, hardly seemed like the launch pad for a new global brand.

"What did you expect?" smiles Wilkinson. "Just about anybody can make a guitar. What we do here is add that finishing touch, the finesse that makes a really good guitar stand out."

This immediately leads me to venture that Fret King is not, therefore, a new British guitar, simply another British label on an Asian guitar. Wilkinson doesn't even flinch – he merely broadens his smile.

"No, the Green Label models are built in the UK, but having set up factories in the UK twice now I have learnt some painful lessons – most importantly that there simply isn't the pool of specialist guitar craftsmen in the UK to sustain a volume production operation. In California you can do it, but not in Britain. Here we have a lot of cottage industries – look at Fylde, John Smith, Patrick James Eggle and so on.

"So, with Fret King, all the components are designed by me, and produced by partners, like Gotoh Japan. Green Label bodies are made by selected specialist machinists, for whom I select the timbers, provide the detailed dimensions and spec plus the personal training to produce

consistently correct bodies and who I know are good enough to get it right. Then all the fretting, finishing and finessing which create the Fret King feel, are done in my Southport workshops."

"All the talk of 'making a guitar with a CNC machine' is something of a misconception," interjects JHS boss Dennis Drumm. "Some people have the idea that it's as simple as putting a piece of wood into a machine at one end, and getting a finished product, out of the other end, but that's a fallacy."

Which brought us very neatly back to that element of finesse Wilkinson had mentioned. It is a classic 80-20 scenario with that last 20 per cent of the work in Wilkinson's workshop adding 80 per cent

"Many classic designs are uncomfortable to hold. But, time has got us used to the imperfections and we have come to accept them as the norm."

Trevor Wilkinson

of the value of the Green Label instruments. "It's all about quality with the Green Label guitars," says Wilkinson. "This is where most of the options come in. The Blue Label range is produced in Korea and has about 25 options on it..."

Dennis Drumm is quick to jump in: "Don't get the wrong impression, though," he says. "Blue Label guitars are very high quality, made in, I would say, medium quantities, by a production partner who produces exceptional product."

"Our brief to him was to make samples with Japanese levels of quality, fit and

finish, then go past that benchmark, and get the production guitars to a point where they are so good it's impossible to identify a country of origin. Fret King is an extension – a progression if you will, of what we have been doing with Vintage. We deliberately set out to over specify at any price point."

All this could be, of course, words cast cheaply, but again the one of the benefits of being in Wilkinson's workshop is that the guitars are there, too.

The Blue Label Eclat, for example, is a classically styled, dual humbucking, single cutaway, with all the weight, meat and fingering ease any player would expect from such a guitar. It will sit very comfortably alongside any high-end 'standard' instrument – but will have a UK list price of just £999.

This will be the flagship Blue Label instrument, with the Green Label, Wilkinson built models ranging up to £1,700. No wonder eyebrows have been raised. What are essentially custom shop guitars not even nudging the £2,000 mark. Some might even say JHS might be devaluing the high-end guitar.

"Most of the big, established brands started at the top end of the market," Drumm says, clearly not convinced at the suggestion. "From there they then seek to make market share at lower price points by compromising, using more cost effective components and methods. We have had to come in from the other end, starting low, but building in value at every price point."

"We have progressed this thinking through our work with Vintage and up to the Vintage Advance series last year. Fret King is the next natural step and proves that value can be achieved at every step."

"Since I started working with Dennis, we have had something to prove," says Wilkinson. "Dennis has been very brave. He has asked what can be done, I've told him, and he hasn't shied away from anything, including the very best components. When I



BROTHERS IN ARMS: Wilkinson (left) and Drumm are united in their belief that Fret King can be a major, high-end guitar brand





started work on Vintage, it was already a powerful brand in the UK. A year later we had a better guitar, and that has continued."

"The thing is," Drumm continues, "when you look at the actual costs involved in production guitars, the difference at unit price between the least expensive parts, and top quality ones is not actually that great. By the time you get to the serious end of the market, using the best possible parts and components is so much easier, I've never understood why anyone would want to compromise on fractions of a penny."

A question I'm sure many guitarists have asked when confronted with a guitar that, after the initial excitement of purchase fails to live up to expectation.

Taking the mention of Vintage a step further, however, would it not have been easier to simply build on that brand, at which JHS and Wilkinson have thrown much money and time, rather than re-launching a whole new brand?

"Vintage is an important and valuable brand for JHS," says Drumm. "We have grown the line and it is now being successfully sold in 44 countries, but it would have been tough to have pushed it ever upwards in price. There is a perception of what Vintage is – and it is a very positive perception – but it would

have been unrealistic to have attempted to take it outside of the market's understanding of what the brand is.

"With Fret King, there has been an awareness of the brand among the guitar cognoscenti for 15 years, giving us a wonderful spring board to launch this new range. You can't make a VW into a Bentley, but VW can buy Bentley and promote both brands in a subtly conjoined way, and what we do with Fret King will trickle down to Vintage.

"This takes us back to the issue of value at any price point," Drumm continues. "Okay, so a Green Label Corona 60 may well be perceived to be worth over £2,000, but it would be dishonest of us to put such an arbitrary price tag on a guitar that can be produced for what it is and can be sold for £1,449. We have established a particular mind set with our guitar brands. Dealers and guitarists have come to expect certain things from those brands. You have to be fair with people. What is more, although Fret King has been around for 15 years, this is still a launch of a new range of products, and we have to come into the market hard.

"When we sat down to plan the Fret King range, we asked the question 'how can we make the guitar that we want to play?' The next question was, 'how much

will this cost?' We've arrived at the new ranges by building in what is possible, rather than following what I see as the somewhat more corporate route of 'choose a price point, pick a parts bin and specification to suit the margin structure required, and accept the outcome.'

As many know, Fret King has been popping its head above the surface of the MI

"There has been an awareness of the Fret King brand amongst the guitar cognoscenti for 15 years, which gives us a great springboard."

Dennis Drumm

trade since the early '90s in various guises and with different distribution arrangements, but has never quite hit the mark for the general guitar playing public, despite a good number of (particularly American) pro players taking an immediate shine to them.

Then, about five years ago, Tokai approached Wilkinson to create a range of

guitars based on classics to help the brand push further into the market.

"When Tokai approached me, I realised that I had the chance to do something a bit more experimental than I had before," he explains. "The classic designs of guitars have a lot going for them, but there is a lot that is inherently wrong and the problem that Gibson and Fender have is that by changing them and putting the faults to rights, they would have to admit that they were wrong to begin with.

"I don't have that problem and I can change all the little annoying design quirks to make a vibrato loaded guitar, say, that will stay in tune and generally be more player-friendly.

"Tokai took these guitars to their US distributor, but they were concerned about being sued. They needn't have been – there is absolutely no comparison between the range I designed and anything anyone else makes, but that was it. Tokai wouldn't proceed without the volume of the US market, and the project was still born."

By the time all of this came to pass, Wilkinson was involved with JHS and the Vintage line, but now, four years on, the range Wilkinson designed for the Tokai project has formed the basis of what is the

FRETTM King

by
Trev Wilkinson

Wilkinson in his Southport workshop – where the magic happens

Blue Label, taking the ethos of the Vintage Advance line further: classically inspired, but with subtle design differences and some vastly improved hardware options.

"Trev and I like to think of Fret King as 'friendly guitars,'" says Drumm. "Look at any of the models, they are in no way offensive to the eye, to the contrary, they are very much what guitarists are used to, with balance, style and grace. We could make radical, angular, aggressive designs, but the more you look at them, the more offensive they tend to become. The more you look at a Fret King guitar, the more beautiful it becomes."

"I think it's about not alienating the customer," Wilkinson continues. "So many classic designs have the knobs and switches in places you would never put them, certainly not today. Many classic designs are uncomfortable to hold. I think it is true that Fender and Gibson got it right first time – although I think Leo [Fender] got it more right – but also, time has got us used to the imperfections we have come to accept as the norm."

"I have been able to put those knobs and switches where they are needed and develop body designs that make holding and playing the guitar more comfortable. None of the changes we make are purely for the sake of it. They are all the result of asking how things can be made better, how they can improve the playability."

And there is no doubt that features such as the angled pickup switch on the Country Squire or the forearm scoop on the Eclat (which also nicely illustrates the 22mm deep maple top), to name but two, do make for a pleasing playing experience.

"We are trying to make guitars for players," points out Wilkinson. "Leo was never a guitarist – he was a production man. There is no doubt he created a great product for a new market, and that was needed, but after he moved on he actually told me personally that he couldn't understand why his new [G&L] guitars weren't out selling his old designs."

"And that is exactly where we are again now," Drumm takes up. "Innovation, moving on, moving forward, progress, yet with respect. Obviously, we are really very excited about this, but I guess we have to be careful not to big it up too much. Yes, we think we have made great guitars that people will want to play, guitars with intelligent points of difference, but it is going to be a big task to get them into players' hands so they understand and come to accept the proposition"

"The US market is more open to new stuff, but the British still tend to buy a headstock," adds Wilkinson.

"Branding is so important to a lot of people," returns Drumm. "Our job is to make a brand – and that means making a reputation, building trust, and having a real



brand story to tell. There has never been a coherent launch of a British brand on this scale. It is a major deal. If Britain produces a product then it will have to look good, feel good and exceed expectations. We are confident we have done this."

"I've been part of a couple of UK guitar launches," says Wilkinson. "I am determined that this will not be another failed English brand."

If there is a crucial link in the chain that ties quality to reputation, it is the dealer, and few, if any companies understand this better than JHS.

"A Fret King dealership is going to be extremely simple and very achievable," says Drumm. "We are asking that dealerships stock seven guitars, five Blue Label, and two Green Label. We want a good geographical spread for them, so it's available to guitarists all over the country, and our preferred dealer profile is the specialist, knowledgeable dealer, large or small."

There will be a strong introductory offer, which any dealer taking full advantage of stocking the minimum and taking standard JHS settlements will benefit from just shy of a 50 per cent margin. In early February, a mailshot was sent to all JHS dealers, and for those that take the line on, there will be free point of sale material, much like what JHS has done with Vintage and Ovation.

"Blue Label guitars will be available immediately after Musikmesse," says Drumm. "Green Label guitars, which we will build up some limited stock of the more popular models as time progresses, will

usually require a 12 week lead time – after all, this is essentially a custom line. Trev doesn't like the term, but that is what it is, but the earlier dealers get on board, the earlier they will get the Green Label models."

Customers will be able to pick from body shape, pickup configuration, hardware and colour, much as you would when ordering a new car. This is as near to

a unique guitar as makes no difference.

Production of Green Label guitars will be quite limited to begin with, but Wilkinson expects a good 20 guitars a month will be coming out of the Southport base. "I could say to Dennis that I'd make 60 per month, but then I would have to take on three new staff, and that would leave me involved almost exclusively in training, get us too far in to the numbers game too early and I would be going down the same road I've been down before. We want to maintain the mystique and the exclusivity."

It's a lot to keep one's eye on, so there are presumably strict criteria for dealers taking on the line.

"Not really," Drumm replies. "We are simply looking for dealers that 'get it' – dealers that understand what we are trying to do here, what Fret King means. I am certain there are dealers out there looking for something a bit different in the mid high and high end, especially where margins are constantly being squeezed. Something that offers more than the established high end volume brands would dare to bring to the market. I think dealers will find the Fret King proposition very attractive."

"And this isn't the end," says Drumm. "I hope we've created something of a problem for ourselves. We can't do anything that can't be explained, but with Vintage Advance in '07 and now Fret King in '08, you can be sure there is going to be some pretty exciting stuff going on in '09."

"People will always be asking 'what's the catch? What's the angle? Where's the bullshit? But there honestly aren't any of these. Trev and I simply want to make good honest guitars. The challenge now is how to get that message out."

Seems as though a pretty good start has been made already.

JHS: 0133 286 5381

BLUE LABEL ECLAT

THE TOP of the Blue label range, the Eclat is an impressive instrument that combines a playing experience with some neat new design tweaks. A two-piece mahogany body with a 22mm book-matched, flame maple top (made highly visible by the extremely comfortable forearm 'scoop'), a single piece mahogany neck with improved upper fret access, two PAF-style pickups, and an easily accessible volume control beneath the bridge pickup.

The attention to detail and the quality of the Wilkinson designed hardware and pickups give this guitar some excellent tonal possibilities and a level of versatility beyond expectations players would normally have of a guitar of this character.

GREEN LABEL COUNTRY SQUIRE 'YARDBIRD'

"I COULDN'T resist building this," says Wilkinson. "After seeing Beck and the Yardbirds in the 60s, his Fender Esquire was the guitar I wanted more than any other – the audacity of someone taking a grinder to a slab bodied 'Holy Grail' guitar was just so cool."

Wilkinson discovered that his friend, Seymour Duncan actually owned the original, so he went over to check it out. As much as possible, he has kept to the original spec with both the forearm chamfer and the rib chamfer on the back, and is fitted with a Seymour Duncan Broadcaster repro pickup, voiced by Duncan. The three-way selector is in fact a tone control, activating a preset 'bass' tone, full volume and tone control or a direct pickup tone.

