

TREV WILKINSON



Guitar and hardware designer Trev Wilkinson is known for such groundbreaking products as the Fender-Wilkinson Roller Nut, the ADT Self-Tuning Bridge, and the VS100 Vibrato System. His innovations have made it easier for guitarists to focus on *playing* instead of tuning and pampering cranky tremolos, and he strives to create a working tool, rather than a work of art.

BY LINDSAY TUCKER

Throughout his long career, Trev Wilkinson has always made a point to remember the beginner, and he considers every skill level when making such product decisions as adding features and pricing instruments. Recently, Wilkinson combined forces with one of Britain's premier independent distributors, John Hornby Skewes & Co., to oversee their affordable Vintage guitars and add his own, more upscale Fret-King brand to JHS's catalog.

The idea behind Vintage is to offer accessibly priced, vintage-looking guitars with great finishes, quality parts, and features that are typically found on guitars costing upward of a thousand dollars. These instruments include Wilkinson-designed hardware, a bubinga neck extension that runs into the body to add rigidity and enhance acoustic resonance, and a Roll Control knob that allows variable coil splitting.

"I think the unfortunate truth of our industry is that an awful lot of things have been taken out [of affordable guitars] in order to achieve a price point," Wilkinson says, "but the reality is if you go in at the beginning wanting to achieve all those things, the price point isn't actually that different. So you say, 'Why don't we do it

then?' And I think that's really behind an awful lot of the success of Vintage guitars."

When it comes to Fret-King, Wilkinson keeps his designs classic without being forced into "nostalgia corner" as he describes it—the phenomena of guitar players snubbing useful innovations in exchange for blind loyalty to Fender and Gibson designs. According to Wilkinson, Leo Fender himself was a victim of this phenomenon. "In conversations I had with Leo," Wilkinson says, "he could never understand why people held his early guitars in such reverence, when in his mind the [G&L] guitars he built before he died were far superior to his previous guitars. He couldn't understand that he'd already created that nostalgia."

It's too soon to tell, but Wilkinson might be fostering some nostalgia for his own pioneering technological advances in the music industry. He's been described as "Britain's one-man think tank." And at 62, he's certainly not throwing in the towel anytime soon—asserting that there's always more work to be done when it comes to improving guitar playability.

We'll let him tell you the rest.

When you got onboard with JHS and the Vintage brand, what was your first order of business?

I took about 57 models and kind of went through each one, spec'ing it and putting what I considered to be the right pickup with the right guitar, and choosing the right vibratos, tailpieces, and tuners. I went through all the body shapes and all the body designs. Some obviously are paying homage to past classic designs and some are unique to Vintage guitars.

What would you say is behind the success of the Vintage brand?

They just offer so much value for money. They sound so good, play so well, and perform so well, that sometimes people look at them and go, "Wow! What a fantastic bargain—it's too cheap—why don't you make it more expensive?" And we say, "Why should we?" Everyone should have access to a working guitar.

There are manufacturers who have very, very high dollar instruments and are obviously interested in creating aspirational consumer brands. But then, as you come down the dollar chain from, let's say, a guitar at \$3000 or \$4000, you have to take features out because obviously if you've got everything in a \$4000 guitar, you can't put everything in the \$2000 guitar, because then your customer wouldn't have to buy the \$4000 guitar. We've always taken the philosophy of, "Why don't we build it in at \$299, rather than take it out at \$299?" We can do this because we're not trying to protect a very expensive guitar.

There came a point in our industry where prices came down so low it was actually impossible to make a reasonable guitar cheaper than what the big brands were doing. So the sensible distributors—the

In addition to its Distressed Sunburst finish, this Vintage V6HMRSB has a pair of Wilkinson single-coils, a WHHB humbucker, a distressed WVCD trem, and Wilkinson EZ LOK tuners.

people who were in control of their own destinies—looked at the situation and said, "Well, we've got to change. We can no longer compete on price, so we have to compete on quality and features." And I think that was the key for the Vintage brand. We concentrated on the quality of the product and the features. It's part of a long-term plan and probably the most important way that we went from a "me too" guitar to a brand that

people ask for by name because they know it's a quality product.

Certain features make Vintage guitars, as you say, "the bigger bang for the buck." I partnered up with a company in Korea to do some very traditional bridges, but we've made changes to them so they perform much better. For instance, on the spring block, the holes are staggered in a way that allows the strings to leave the block and pass over the saddles at an angle

that helps keep those strings in tune. I also developed some tuning keys called EZ-LOKs that work like a locking tuner, but actually don't require any mechanical manufacturing. There's nothing to unwind when you're slacking the strings using the vibrato, and they always come back to pitch.

I don't have a high-dollar pickup range to protect. So I can produce a single-coil pickup that will sound as good as any





ABOVE: The Wilkinson ADT Self-Tuning Bridge uses signals from the vibrating strings to control onboard electric motors and automated tuning gears. Located between the bridge pickup and ADT unit, the string sensor also provides a pitch readout for the player. **LEFT:** This Fret-King Country Squire Semitone Deluxe features a translucent red finish and optional "vintage gold" pickguard. The model is loaded with two Fret-King Alnico 5 vintage-voiced single-coils and a Fret-King humbucker, and sports a Wilkinson VSV vintage-style trem.

company can wind anywhere in the world, and I can do it at a much lower price point because I'm not worried about people thinking that the pickups in expensive guitars aren't as good.

You've always been concerned with making the guitarist's job easier. Can you tell us about some design problems you've aimed to fix?

For instance, the major problem with all vibrato-equipped guitars is keeping them in tune, hence the original invention of the Floyd Rose system. My systems have always been the alternative to a Floyd Rose. I've never asked a guitar player to clamp anything, and I've never asked a player to use a wrench to change strings. But I've always endeavored to keep him as perfectly in tune during his performance onstage as he possibly can without all the other paraphernalia around it, and I think that is key

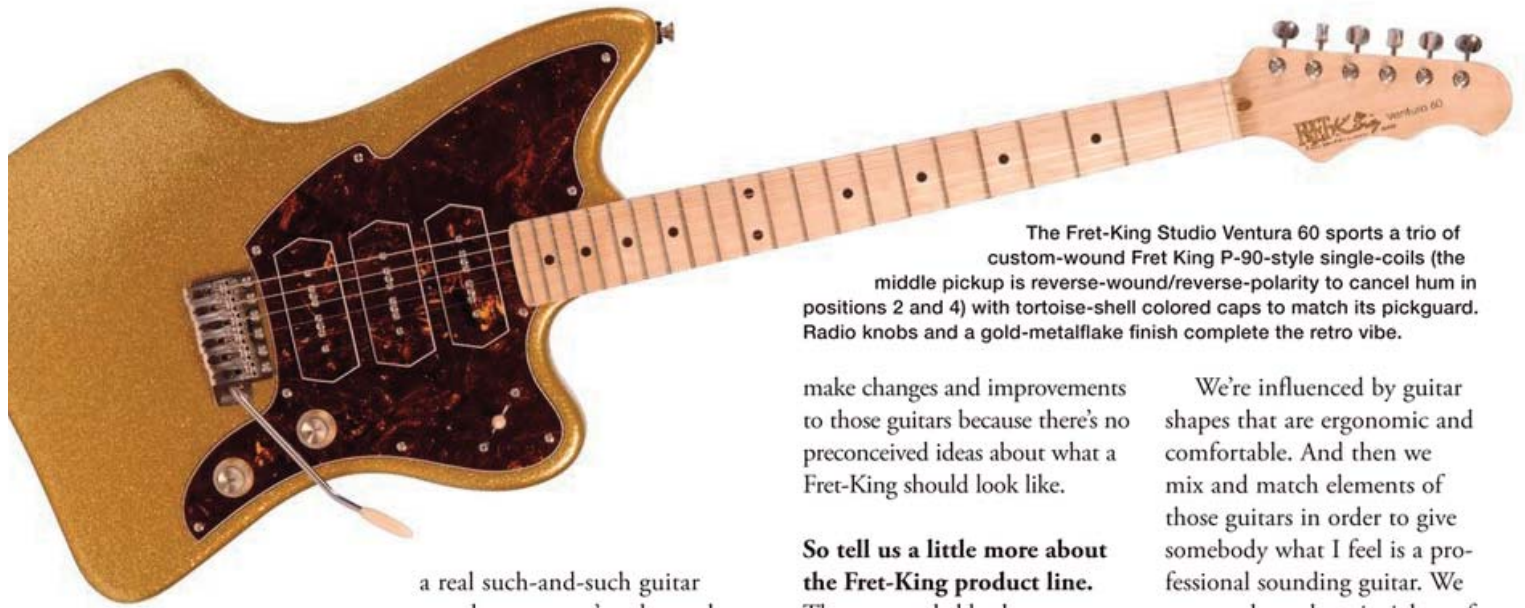
to the success of the guitar. This applies to a semi-pro or a professional player and even

Fret-King doesn't have an old brand that we can damage by trying something new. We have a new brand that certainly pays its respects to past icons. But we can make changes and improvements to those guitars because there's no preconceived ideas about what a Fret-King should look like.

the beginner. We shouldn't leave the novice out of the equation because why should beginners have to play something sub-standard? We try to give all players equal footing to be able to play onstage in front of any audience, no matter what level.

From your experience, what does it take for a guitar innovation to catch on in this industry?

I think our industry is steeped in nostalgia—it has never really moved forward. There have been some fantastic innovations in the guitar industry, but very, very few of them have actually been successful because they always seem to just go one step too far. I think guitar players are very conservative, even though they might be outlandish in the way they look and dress.



The Fret-King Studio Ventura 60 sports a trio of custom-wound Fret King P-90-style single-coils (the middle pickup is reverse-wound/reverse-polarity to cancel hum in positions 2 and 4) with tortoise-shell colored caps to match its pickguard. Radio knobs and a gold-metalflake finish complete the retro vibe.

Their choice of instruments can be incredibly conservative. There's so much nostalgia out there that if the companies that tend to be associated with major players try to innovate or make things different or better, people say, "Well, that's not

a real such-and-such guitar now because you've changed the bridge, you've changed the tuners, and you've changed the pickups."

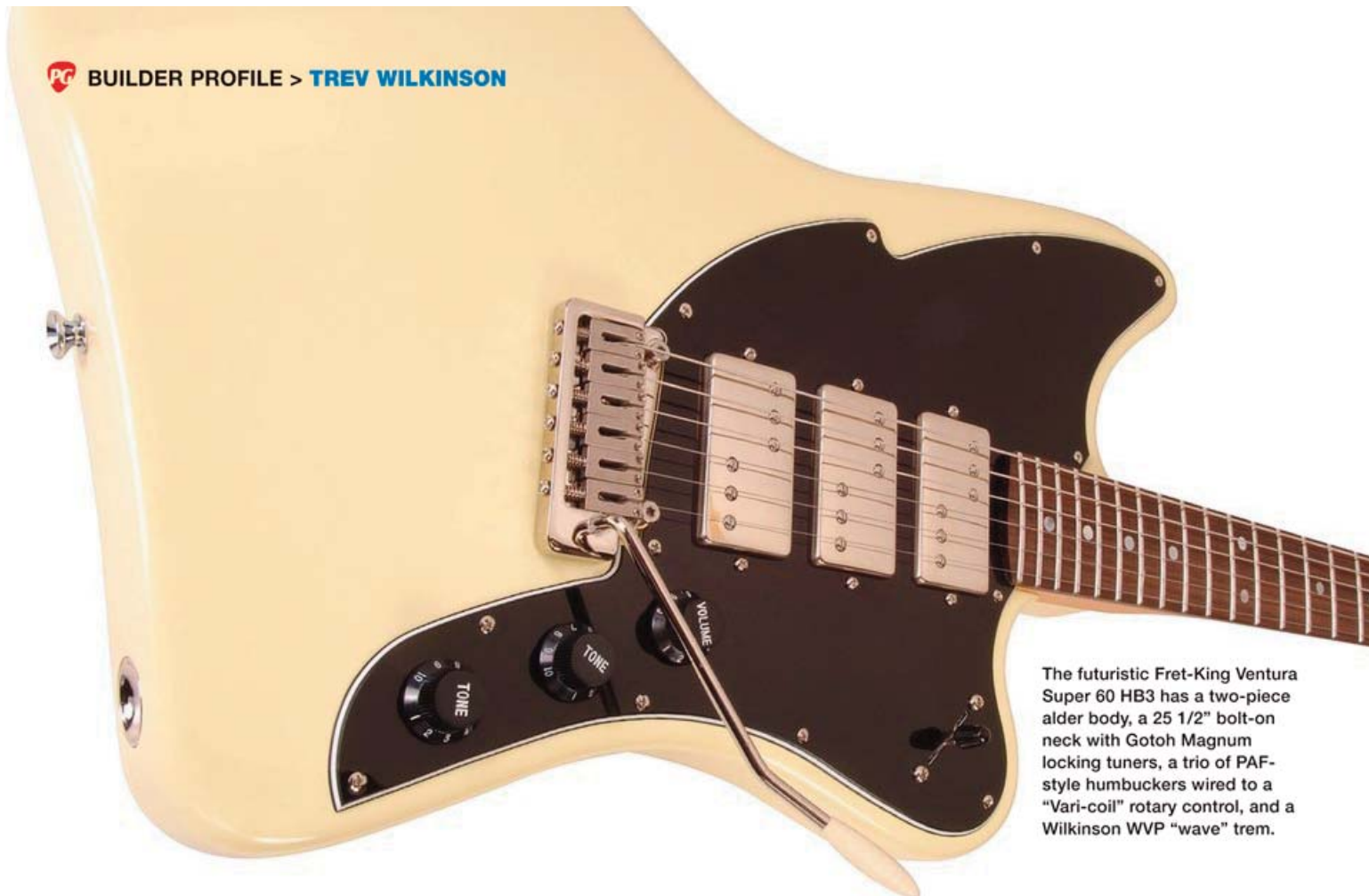
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So tell us a little more about the Fret-King product line.

There are probably about seven or eight major models in the series in various shapes. You've got your classic single-cut and double-cut bolt-ons, you've got your classic single-cut set necks, and you've got some basses in there, and a couple of, shall we say, slightly more unusually shaped guitars.

We're influenced by guitar shapes that are ergonomic and comfortable. And then we mix and match elements of those guitars in order to give somebody what I feel is a professional sounding guitar. We seem to have done it right so far because nobody says the guitars are no good [laughs]. I think we take people forward, but we do pay homage to the past of our industry without being tied to it and without being restricted by what is in our past. The reality of it is—and I've used



The futuristic Fret-King Ventura Super 60 HB3 has a two-piece alder body, a 25 1/2" bolt-on neck with Gotoh Magnum locking tuners, a trio of PAF-style humbuckers wired to a "Vari-coil" rotary control, and a Wilkinson WVP "wave" trem.

the terminology many, many times—I believe we do actually build a better mousetrap.

Will you ever consider offering custom options?

As far as custom options go, I'm a little bit wary, because I don't believe we can always give our customer the sound he's got in his head. He comes to a custom builder and says, "Well, I'd like a

double-cut bolt-on with a swamp-ash body, and a maple neck with an ebony fingerboard, and I want it to have this style of pickup in the bridge, and I want this style of pickup in the middle, and I want this vibrato bridge or this fixed bridge." When that guitar goes together, I don't believe it can *possibly* deliver the sound that's in the player's head. Instead, I prefer that the player looks at our guitars, plays our guitars, and then chooses something that suits what he wants to do.

I think custom building a guitar is guesswork. You can make a very pretty guitar, but you'll notice on our website there aren't too many guitars in there with fancy tops, or what I refer to as furniture guitars. I think guitars should be chosen for playability and sound. I don't think they should be chosen because they have an outrageous

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flame-maple top. That is not a reason to buy a guitar for me. That's a reason to buy something that you have on the wall to look at. I don't believe guitars should be hung on the wall and looked at. I believe they should go out and earn their living.

You've created so many useful innovations in the industry. For someone who's not an avid guitarist, how are you able to see the picture so clearly?

Well, it started with the Roller Nut. That started me on the path. I was looking for a purpose. I've played in bands, I know what it's like to play onstage, and I know what it's like to go onstage with a guitar you don't trust. It's a panic. So when I developed the Roller Nut, I could then actually take a guitar with a vibrato system and know that when I used that system—if I went to a lead break, or if I decided to do an



Black Label

Full range coming 2012...

The V-style Vintage VV60TA features an Eastern poplar body, set maple neck, a 24 3/4"-scale bound rosewood fretboard, and Wilkinson humbuckers.



Wilkinson shows his latest handiwork—the hardware component of his ADT Self-Tuning Bridge.

arpeggio—all six strings would be in tune. That's a huge relief when you're onstage performing, no matter how big or small the club is.

I've always worked with players. I've never looked at the commerciality of our industry, probably to my detriment. I'll say to a player, "This is a design. Does it work for you?" And I'm talking about serious players—I'm not talking about a local guy down at the pub. I like to use their ears, and I like them to confirm my theories. When I invented the

VS100 Vibrato System, I knew it worked, or I felt it worked, but it wasn't until a lot of guitar players of some stature would actually turn around and say, "You know what, Trev, this is a great vibrato bridge. It works, it stays in tune, and I'll use it." Like Scott Henderson, he was really, really helpful to me at the time, and he's a superb guitar player and an absolute tone monster. So that gives you confidence. You feel you're doing something right when you get people—top players—actually

say, "This works and I can use it onstage."

And how did you come up with the ADT self-tuning bridge? I understand it was a joint effort?

Yes, I was part of a team. I like to say that I drove the bus. A lot of the mechanics were left to me, but I'm not a digital engineer. The technology that's required to take the sound from the string and turn it into a signal to generate electric motors to turn gearboxes is not my doing. That was just me being able to say, "A guitar player will

put up with that, but he won't put up with this. So we have to make it happen faster or we have to be more accurate." And so forth. So yes, I stress all the time that I was part of a team. But it was my job with that product to actually design it and tailor it so it didn't get in the way of playing normally.

So what's next?

A holiday? I don't know. We can still take the self-tuning system further. I guess we'll just keep trying to make a better mousetrap. PG



BEST of 2011 PREMIER GEAR AWARDS

FRET-KING SUPER-MATIC

Some of us don't mind too terribly if our guitars sound like they were tuned by a sleep-deprived member of the Kingsmen from time to time. Most of us, however, like to tune a lot and prefer that our guitars stay that way. And others have the *nerve* to prefer alternate tunings that stay in tune, which no matter how you size it adds up to a whole lotta peg-twisting. That reality apparently got guitar innovator Trev Wilkinson thinking. The result is the Fret-King Super-Matic, a self-tuning marvel that really works in standard and alternate tunings alike.

The real magic of the Super-Matic is the latter capability. It makes the guitar a real solution to the guitar-that-can-do-it-all dilemma, if that's your concern. Features like the Vari-coil pickup coil-splitting system and the fact that you can store your own preset tunings make this a guitar you can personalize for a multitude of situations.

fret-king.com



FRET[®] King
by
Trev Wilkinson

JD

"Jerry Donahue's finest guitar yet – Fret-King is really aiming for the stars..."

Dave Burrluck,
Guitarist magazine.
Guitarist Choice Award.



"My new Black Label JD guitar cranks out five of the blaziest tones (from the three most popular solid body guitars) in as many decades. I couldn't be happier!"

Jerry Donahue

Jerry Donahue.



Fret-King Black Label JD

Designed by guitar guru Trev Wilkinson and string-bending king Jerry Donahue, the Fret-King Black Label JD guitar is a culmination of Jerry's 40 years at the top of the industry.

With its specially-wired custom Wilkinson singlecoil pickups and its five-way selector switch, the JD guitar sounds like any of the most recognisable solid-body sounds of the last 50 years, enabling you to go from twangy country tones to rich jazz chords or that in-between 'quack tone' in a second – and more.

Featuring an alder body, ash top and black binding, the JD guitar has a bolt-on 22-fret maple neck with maple fingerboard that is just begging to be played again and again.

Visit your local Fret-King Dealer and play your next guitar today.

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