



Teacher's Pets

There's not a lot that Phil Hilborne hasn't achieved as a pro guitarist, guitar tutor, recording engineer, recording artist, session player and musical director. With just an hour or two to go before his equipment is due to be packed off to the USA, Lars Mullen becomes a stowaway

I'm just running through the gear before it gets shipped out for a tour called Flashback,' explains Phil Hilborne, surrounded by a treasure trove of guitars and amplifiers. 'We'll be taking in 55 stadiums across America. You could say it's the biggest tribute act in the world, playing music from people who no longer tour or who aren't around any more. It's a full-on event covering songs by Hendrix, The Doors, Janis Joplin, Three Dog Night, Led Zeppelin, Pink Floyd and loads of others. I'm taking seven guitars, and all but one are in the crate.'

The one that doesn't leave Phil's side is his flagship red PRS. 'This is the baby, the one I'd grab if the house was on fire. It always travels with me,' he confirms. 'I was playing at a guitar show somewhere in London during the mid-'80s and Paul Reed Smith asked to come up and



Phil's much-travelled 'red' PRS and his quilt-top in whale blue



Phil Hilborne is a man in touch with his pastel side



play with my band. At the time he was just another guitar maker, certainly not with the status he has now. He offered to make me a guitar for cost price, and this is it... my Phil Hilborne signature model. I asked for a red top as I was thinking of Hank Marvin, who was recognised for having a red guitar. It didn't seem to do him any harm!

'I play a lot with Iron Maiden's drummer, Nicko McBrain, and Nicko has spent his entire life taking the micky out of me, saying "Here comes Phil and his pink banjo!" He went on so much about it that I got an official letter from Paul saying yes, the back is pink... but the front is red. So it's red-pink, Nicko!

'To say it's done some work would be an understatement. It's played over 1000 gigs, plus hundreds of hours for session and recording work. I recorded 100 teaching CDs in a row without a problem. Eventually I wore it out. All the hardware has been replaced -

machineheads, pickups, bridge, the lot - and the frets are larger 6100s. The body is thinner, as they stripped it back to remove a cymbal ding. It now has Custom wound Vintage Bass and Deep Dish pickups, with a coil tap and sweet switch.

'It's got that "pair of old shoes" vibe... I just know what it can do. It's all very well having

'It's good to think I was there before PRS became a success story. It wasn't very trendy to have one in the '80s'

ornamental guitars, but if they're not any use, what's the point? I'm lucky, as these are my tools of the trade. People often say PRS are a bit like a Strat and a bit like a Les Paul, but are neither. They do a pretty good job of each one, and I like the fact that they have their own individual character.

'My other signature model - which is definitely blue, by the way! - won't really do the zingy thing: it's got Dragon pickups and a fatter, darker sound. I did a New Metal library album for Sony with this guitar, and it was brilliant. Like the red one, it has a one-off finish.

'I have a couple in the USA that I'll also use on this tour - a blue 12-string Custom 22 and a black Custom 24 used for DAGGAD. I bought this natural PRS when we were rehearsing in

Savannah earlier in the year. It's also on board as a spare for the red one.'

So what's Phil's experience of the joys of being an official guitar endorser?

'People think you just get free guitars, but that's not what it's about,' he advises. 'I've actually sent a PRS prototype back as there were several problems that needed to be rectified, and it just didn't work ☹'



A recent blonde PRS and an affordable SE with two P90s



Westone Trevor Rabin and late '80s Larrivée with MIDI pickup



Left, a much-modded '70s Strat; right, a homebrew with graphite neck and Floyd Rose vibrato



'It's good to think I was there before PRS became a success story, as it certainly wasn't trendy to have one during the '80s. There were very few in the UK, as most players were into superstrats and pointy guitars.

'I have few leftovers from that period, including this Westone Trevor Rabin signature to which I fitted a PRS HFS2 humbucker at the bridge, and a Larrivée loaded with a Roland GK2A guitar synth pickup. These Larrivées were built to rock, but they can also mellow down and do a pretty good Strat impersonation. I met Jean Larrivée at a guitar show in Manchester, and he said he was pleased one of his guitars was being played the way it should be.

'But during that period I was playing my '70s Strat more than anything else. I had the neck

scalloped, which was popular at the time when all that neo-classical heavy rock malarkey came in, and I had it refinished by Charlie Chandler as the original finish was worn out. This was a period when everyone was fitting humbuckers to Strats and trying to make all their guitars sound the same, and this one has a PRS HFS at the bridge and Dimarzio SD/S1s in the neck and middle. With the ash body, it's a heavy guitar.

'I also created a superstrat, for the want of a better word, with a graphite neck on a Strat body. It's got a Jackson Floyd Rose - it gets in the way of my strumming hand, but it's great for doing the gargly stuff. It plays beautifully, and the hefty midrange is great for heavy rock.

'I also beefed up this red Strat Plus with a Seymour Duncan Jeff Beck Junior single coil and a Shadow MIDI system. It plays very nicely. It originally had a rosewood board but it had problems, so I swapped it for a maple one. I really can't hear any difference, even being a total tone freak. To me it's aesthetic, looking down on a white board instead of black. In any case, it's all out of the window when a drummer like Nicko starts up... the noisy bastard.

'This green limited edition Strat was an eBay purchase... I just wanted another Strat, really. Tim Mills from Bare Knuckle sent me a set of Yngwie Malmsteen signature pickups, but they were too metally for me; there's enough gain on the amps and pedals for all that. So I settled for a Rory Gallagher Irish Tour in the bridge and a Mother's Milk for the neck and middle. I also fitted a set of KTS titanium saddles, which have made a massive difference.

'To me, there's no point in playing if there's no tone. A lot of guitarists play without actually listening and being objective about it. It's a bit like setting amps up with the numbers on the controls. It's not rocket science to hear if it's

for me. I think they respected that. I couldn't stand the thought of someone buying a certain model after seeing me play it only to find it wasn't up to scratch.

'But I was really impressed with this PRS SE with P90s. I can almost see a parallel between this and the Les Paul Juniors, which were really student guitars. I've recorded many hours with this one, and it's a lot of guitar for the money.



Fender Strat Plus with MIDI and a green matching-headstock Strat



A trio of Fret-Kings from the UK's own Trevor Wilkinson

PRIVATE COLLECTION



Left, a customised Les Paul Deluxe; right and below, a Sid Poole custom



too bassy or trebly. I normally set my amps up for "AC/DC plus", then kick in a pedal if I want the next step - but it always sounds dirtier than you think.'

Phil admires guitar builders who have a passion for their products. 'Trevor Wilkinson makes some fine guitars, and he's British. We should be proud of him,' he says. 'He's achieved a lot and he genuinely cares about it. I'd love to see what he could come up with on an unlimited budget.'

'His Fret-King guitars are exceptional. My blue EU has a second volume which acts as a roll-off for one of the bridge humbucker coils. I used the white Corona on the Phil Hilborne Band's *15th Anniversary* album on a song called *The Yogurt Man*. The red one is maybe the best of the three - very Stratty. These really are great value.'

Another maker close to Phil's heart is the late Sid Poole. 'I asked Sid to rebuild this '69 Les Paul, a Deluxe that had been routed for humbuckers in the '80s. He did a lot of work including stripping it back and fitting Tom Holmes pickups, and it's now more of a Standard than a Deluxe. Sid was such a great guy, and I miss him dearly.'



Recent SG Standard and US Std Tele with Hipshot D-Tuner

'There's no point in playing if there's no tone. I set my amps up for "AC/DC plus", then kick in a pedal for the next step - but it always sounds dirtier than you think'

'I also have the last guitar he made. Well, the body was done but it wasn't sprayed, and the neck was fretted but it didn't have tuners I took it to Terry Morgan in Birmingham who completed the job, and I'm sure Sid would be really happy with it. Paul Reed Smith earlier took one back to finish in America... he realised what a great maker Sid was.'

Next up is a Gibson SG. 'When I was younger I listened to Frank Marino and Angus Young, so I thought I really should

have one,' Phil says. 'I don't play it that much. I intended to change the pickups, but it sounds pretty good as it is. Again, this was an eBay purchase. I prefer to meet people on the motorway somewhere to do the deed, though. It makes me laugh... sellers always say "How will you know me when you see me?" I always reply, "Surely you'll be the one carrying a guitar!"'

'I also picked up this Tele with a drop tuner over the net, and this amazing little



Ernie Ball Music Man Luke and a Line 6 Variax 500



'70s Yamaha SG with scalloped fingerboard



Mahogany Selmer lap steel, probably late '30s or 1940s

'As a kid, I asked a player in a pub to show me some licks and he just laughed and walked away. I vowed I'd never treat anyone like that'

Selmer lap steel, probably from the 1940s. I love the Bakelite parts, and it sounds really good... especially through some of these rigs.

'I saw Jamie Humphries, who's an ex-pupil of mine, demoing guitars for Music Man, and one of them was this Ernie Ball Luke. I thought it was the best of the bunch, possibly because of the active pickups, so I bought one. It's the perfect teaching guitar - small, lightweight and so easy to play.

'The Yamaha SG was one of the first decent electrics I had. I got it cheap in the mid-'70s because it had a ding in the back. It contains a lot of memories. It's had a few mods: Lee Hodgson rewired it many years ago in some bizarre way only he could explain, so it's stuffed with capacitors. It has a really good Pete Townshend ring to it. I recorded *My Generation* for one of the magazines on it and it sounded exactly the same. I had the frets scalloped during that period when you had to play every note at once, for no apparent reason. I'm not sure what it is... probably an SG2000. It's tuned to Nashville tuning [with E, A, D and G an octave higher] right now.'

Phil is one of the masters of amp and guitar tone, utilising pickups and amp settings to their fullest potential.

'You have to go through the whole gear thing,' he explains. 'There's no point in having a really expensive guitar and using a £5 lead or inferior batteries. So many things affect the tone. They say no two trees are the same, so surely that has to relate to guitars. I also like to use the guitar's controls, which to a lot of players are alien devices, so they always keep them full on.'

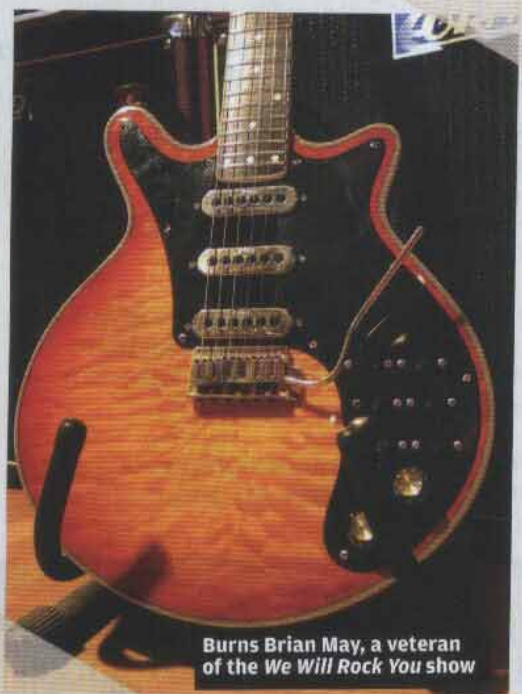
'I stand in about 125 times a year as guitarist in the *We Will Rock You* show at London's Dominion theatre. I've been doing that for around six years, and one of the reasons I got the job was because I know how to control a guitar. The Queen repertoire is really varied, so control is vital. Songs like *I Want To Break Free* is about two on the guitar, *Hammer To Fall* is about 4 with the solo work around 6 to 8... it's hardly ever on 10, as the amps just compress too much.

'The Burns Brian May is the only one for the job. The mother of pearl bindings are unusual. I said I'd have this guitar if they put a black scratchplate on, so it's probably the only sunburst with a black plate. It even fooled Brian May.'

Phil's Widdle Music studio is stuffed with guitars to cater for all aspects of recording and teaching. 'I have instruments here for all styles of playing,' he says. 'This Line 6 is great for recording and live work. I used it gigging with Hannah Jane Fox, and it's very useful to be able to switch from acoustic to humbucker sounds. Line 6 has done a lot with technology and you have to take that on board as it's getting better and better. I also recently purchased a Fender VG Strat for this USA tour. The tuning abilities and onboard sounds make it a superb jobbing guitar.'

As Phil clears a space for the next day's recording and tuition session, he has one final story. 'I'll never forget - once, when I was a kid, I asked a player in a pub to show me some licks, and he just laughed and walked away. From then on I vowed if I ever got to the stage of knowing what I was doing, I'd never treat anyone like that, and I never have.'

'There was even a time during the '70s when players would turn their back on the audience so you couldn't see what they were doing. It was the same when two-handed tapping came out. But no one owns music. It's free information. If you find a way of playing that's more efficient, then you share it - and that's what I've been doing as a teacher over the last 30 years.'



Burns Brian May, a veteran of the *We Will Rock You* show