

# GUITAR MOT THE ROAD TO REDEMPTION

Take three untouched guitars and three experienced luthiers, stick them in a room together and see what happens. That was the plan hatched by *G&B* to redress decades of guitar neglect

Story and photography **Mark Alexander**



**A**greeing to have each of your guitars dissected by a team of seasoned luthiers could be viewed as a kind of sadistic pleasure. For me, it was like taking my loved ones to a hospital, placing them on an operating table and watching skilled surgeons work on them. The idea made me uncomfortable and slightly nauseous.

You see, my clutch of guitars has been kept carefully out of reach of trained technicians ever since they were first acquired. Each one has been loved and cherished, but the sum total of their care over the last 30 years amounts to an occasional change of strings and a light dusting. Maybe it was a pang of guilt, but I thought it would be interesting to see what could be achieved if these neglected instruments were placed into the caring hands of three men with the power to revive unloved musical instruments.

We arranged for the whole thing to happen on the same day, in the same workshop,

meaning it would be a relatively quick and painless process...

First on the bench is my Fender Stratocaster Plus, which I purchased proudly 29 years ago. A distinctive first-generation example with an ivory finish and rosewood fingerboard, the Strat Plus was introduced in 1987 as an upgrade to the American Standard Stratocaster, boasting the same Lace Sensor pickups used by Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck, no less. I took mine to university, on to my first job in London and into my first home. It was present when I proposed to my now wife and it sat next to me when I cradled my first-born. It has been everywhere with me, other than to see a guitar tech.

"First impressions are there are a few problems with the string heights," explains Ian Dickenson, who heads up The Guitar Workshop in Glasgow. "There is some crunching in the selector switch, which is causing some cut-out and lots of crackling. Tone pot #2 is pretty stiff and sticky. The

pickup heights all need adjusting, and there's some general wear and tear. The frets are also flattening out around 12-14 – the happy place on a Strat. Nothing too major." As initial assessments go, I'd expected worse.

Next to go under the knife is my Faith Venus (natural), which was purchased a couple of years after the formation of Faith in 2002. The Patrick James Eggle design was the first model to be released by the company and has remained its most popular model to date. Mine has seen some changes; most notably the replacement bridge pins and some accidental damage inflicted on a tuning peg during a clumsy thrash. It turns out these are the least of my worries...

"It's in good condition," says Rory Dowling of Taran Guitars encouragingly. "It's got African mahogany back and sides, the soundboard is a solid European spruce top. It's not bad. Fret wear is not massive, but it definitely needs attention because we have a lump at the bottom of the neck, which >





Ian Dickenson giving the Strat's fingerboard some much needed TLC



No pot was left unturned by our luthiers





is standard for all instruments that haven't been set up. It means when you're playing higher up the neck, it can rattle – and that's an issue."

For an opening gambit, I'm not too perturbed. However, he goes on to explain that the action needs to come down by 0.3mm on the bass side and about 0.7mm on the treble to make the guitar "playable". And then there's the saddle and the nut. Dowling explains that replacing these plastic components with bone would crisp up the sound and encourage a better transition of sound from the strings to the soundboard.

"And there's a gap behind the saddle," he continues. "There are two things happening here. The intonation is being pulled forward, so it's playing sharp because the strings are shorter than they should be relative to the frets. Also, by putting in a new saddle that is perfectly upright and fits the slot snugly, you'll have a better transmission of sound and it will stay in tune better. So that's a really important area to change. The nut is doing pretty much the same thing."

Dowling's initial palatable assessment is now giving cause for concern. Although it looks good to me, my Faith clearly needs some attention to bring out the potential of the instrument. Concerned by Dowling's appraisal, I make my way gingerly to Pete Beer's workbench.

Beer has been plying his trade as a luthier for 15 years. Under his watchful eye is my Joan Cashimira 130-c – a cutaway classical guitar purchased from the luthier's factory in Spain 20 years earlier. It travelled home with me in a cardboard box, surviving Alicante airport during the height of Spain's expatriate heyday. It now holds pride of place in my





## IAN DICKENSON

Ian studied guitar making under master luthiers William Kelday, Paul Hyland and Michael Ritchie at Anniesland College in Glasgow between 2005 and 2007. He followed that up by repairing and restoring instruments for various shops, studios and private customers while working as head technician for Freshman Guitars. During this seven-year stint, he set up around 40,000 guitars. Since then, he has created The Guitar Workshop in Glasgow, the founding principle of which is to be an open workshop that is visible on the high street, and encourages customers and guitar enthusiasts to see and experience instruments being made and repaired by hand.

[www.guitarworkshopglasgow.com](http://www.guitarworkshopglasgow.com)



## RORY DOWLING

Rory commits to building 12 guitars every year. It's a commitment that has earned him a 14-month waiting list. His company, Taran Guitars, was set up following a fateful sortie into furniture design, which resulted in a first-class BA (Hons) degree 13 years ago. He didn't take to making furniture, but enjoyed building guitars, and four years ago he relocated from Edinburgh to a converted milking shed in Fife. Since then, his business has gone from strength to strength, with the likes of Martin Simpson, Matheu Watson and Kenny Anderson (aka King Creosote) calling on his services and prompting a five-fold expansion of his workshop.

[www.taranguitars.co.uk](http://www.taranguitars.co.uk)



## PETE BEER

Pete, like Ian Dickenson, began his lutherie career in 2001 at Anniesland College in Glasgow, before moving to London Metropolitan University to study musical instrument technology. He established himself in south west England before returning to his native Scotland in 2014, marking the move by designing and building his ideal workshop with a view over the lower Clyde. His idea was to build guitars that met the exacting demands of contemporary classical performers and specialise in repair work on classical guitars.

[www.petebeerguitars.com](http://www.petebeerguitars.com)

*The Strat receives the most obvious and intrusive surgery. With the scratchplate removed and the neck separated, my guitar lies in pieces*

living room as a bona fide survivor and my 'special' investment. "It's a bit thick on the varnish around the edge, but I think it's a solid top," says Beer. "On the nut and the treble strings, the action is a bit high, even for standard classical technique. The fingerboard could do with cleaning up, which I would do anyway. There are no obvious structural problems and the neck angle is okay."

Although a fairly blunt appraisal, it does at least represent a relatively clean bill of health for my beloved guitar, or so it appears.

### Nitty gritty

With the initial appraisals over, it's time to sharpen the chisels, select the sand paper and cut the strings. Each guitar will be given the once-over by its appointed luthier, each of whom has donned a workmanlike apron and a stern game face. The niceties are over; it's about to get serious.

The Strat receives the most obvious, and certainly intrusive, surgery. With the

scratchplate removed and the neck separated from the body, my guitar lies in pieces on Dickenson's workbench. Despite the carnage, his main objective is to ensure the internal electrics work as they should after evading any proper care and attention for nearly three decades.

To my relief, it seems they've endured remarkably well. "I've sprayed out all the switches, pots and connections," he says, "and everything seems to be working fine."

My semi-acoustic Faith lies on Dowling's table similarly exposed by his detailed examination. "We've taken off all the strings," he explains, "and the saddle and the nut, and we've given it a fret dress. We levelled all the frets and got rid of the hump and shallow area in the neck. I adjusted the truss rod because there was too much relief in it – I try not to adjust the truss rod if I don't have to, but in this case I had to."

As unnerving as the process is, I'm becoming accustomed to seeing my guitars >



The Strat gets a spring clean





The Joan Cashimira cutaway pre-makeover



Pete Beer gets started on the fretboard



Beer fitting a replacement saddle

*In this universe of minute trigonometry, where millimetres matter, the difference between any guitar and a tuneful, stable instrument is in the detail*

in varying degrees of undress. The initial assessments weren't too damning and nothing has been said to cause real concern. However, all that is about to change...

"The saddle slot is forward on the instrument from where it should be by 3mm," explains Dowling in a chilling tone. "It's a common thing on factory-built instruments. That would make it play sharp – the strings are too short relative to the scale length. Also, the closer the bridge is to the x-brace, the less the top can move and the less volume you'll get from your instrument." "You mentioned that it was quite quiet," he tells me. "That could be because the bridge is glued too far forward. That distance is critical."

If we had more time, the solution to this juddering reality check would be to remove the bridge and replace it 3mm from where it's currently located. Instead, we opt to squeeze the saddle into its original slot as close as possible to its optimum position. "We can get it to fit," says Dowling, "but it's not ideal."

This thunderous hammer blow makes it apparent that the technicians working on my guitars have an entirely different view of the world than I do. In this universe of minute trigonometry, where millimetres matter and angles count, the difference between any guitar and a responsive, tuneful and stable musical instrument is all in the detail.

"The original saddle was quite loose, which meant when it was under tension it leant forward, which meant it was only touching the guitar at the top edge of the slot and the

front corner of the saddle," explains Beer as he delves deeper into the setup of my classical six-string. "If you get a nice, snug fit, the saddle will touch both sides and the bottom of the slot, making a much better contact with the guitar, which can make a fare bit of difference to the sound."

My Joan Cashimira cutaway not only has action issues, the tonality of the instrument is being undermined by an ill-fitting saddle. These barely detectable discrepancies and resulting minuscule adjustments are real eye-openers. These are not issues I've been able to detect with my limited knowledge and uncultured ear, but they all seem to make sense. I've noticed a fall-off in sound and there's a disconnect in the tonal range. Suddenly it all rings true...

**The results**

With the day drawing to a close, the air is thick with dust and the sound of strings being tuned. The smell of lemon polish lies over the workbenches like an early-morning hue and, through it all, I can make out my three guitars each with a new glow. If they had eyes, they would be glinting. If they could walk, there would be a distinct spring in their step.

Ostensibly, my guitars are unchanged. They're still sporting the same chips and marks that made them mine, but something is different. The Strat has perhaps seen the closest scrutiny and the most obvious change resulting from a spur-of-the-moment decision to hard-tail the bridge. But the neck is also >





## BEFORE AND AFTER

### 1996 Fender Stratocaster Plus

#### BEFORE

- Pickups loose
- Pickup selector crackly
- Dead frets

#### AFTER

- + Neck looks and feels like new
- + Zero noise when changing pickups
- + Hardtail bridge

### 2004 Faith Venus (natural)

#### BEFORE

- Lacklustre tone
- Buzzing on various frets
- Occasional tuning issues

#### AFTER

- + Easier to play
- + Confident, uniform sound
- + Increased tuning stability

### 1996 Joan Cashimira cutaway

#### BEFORE

- High action
- Temperamental tuning
- Dubious intonation

#### AFTER

- + Improved feel
- + Easier to play

smooth and the pickups secure, with their heights now properly adjusted. Yes, the pickup selector has been cleaned and the tone pots no longer crackle, but the guitar itself feels improved. Almost new.

“Everything went smoothly. It was a complete and full MOT,” says Dickenson. “There’s colour in the neck and a nice bit of hard wood behind the bridge. You can go from pickup to pickup without it cutting out

We’ve tightened the tuners and adjusted the intonation so it plays in tune everywhere,” explains Dowling. “The biggest surprise was the bridge being in the wrong place, but everything else was fine.”

The gleaming frets and cleansed fretboard may have caught my eye, but my Faith plays easier, delivers crisper tones and has a more complete sound, perhaps resulting from the improvements made to the tuning. The once-

“The main thing is, I’ve put in a new nut and saddle. The new saddle is tighter-fitting. The old one was pretty loose and was leaning forward, and I’ve made it quite a bit lower because the action before was high. There was quite a bit of uneven finish underneath the old nut, so I’ve taken that away and the new nut is tighter-fitting and a lot lower,” he explains. “I’ve also cleaned up the fingerboard because it was quite grubby.”

It all sounds so every-day. The reality is that the guitar feels new, and plays like an entirely different instrument. All over the fingerboard, it feels as if the strings are there to be played, rather than hammered down into place. And the sound seems brighter and more articulate.

The guitars I’ve lived with and grown accustomed to have taken some time out. They have been whisked off to a musical instrument’s equivalent of a spa resort and indulged in relaxing treatments and therapeutic remedies. Inside and out, they’ve been cleansed, and are now looking and playing like new. In what had been a long-overdue bout of TLC, my guitars have been given a new and rejuvenating lease of life – much to my relief. 🎸

*I can make out my three guitars with a new glow. If they had eyes, they would be glinting. If they could walk, there would be a spring in their step*

and the fretwork has been brought back to factory spec. They flatten out over time – it’s basically metal grinding against metal, so it’s a whole new lease of life.”

My Faith Venus has certainly been through the mill. Changes to the saddle and nut, as well as the action, have pushed it closer to the guitar I’ve always wanted it to be. “We’ve given it a fret dress, a new nut and saddle, and pulled the saddle back as far as we could.

stifled sound seems brighter and more ample. Those little nagging doubts that had been building are gone.

Finally, my Joan Cashimira cutaway has probably seen the least use over the years, but still commands a special place in my collection because of the tone it produces. Saying that, I’ve always found it tricky to play, assuming it’s all part of the classical vibe. Beer puts me straight on a few things.