

GRETSCH® CELEBRATES 10 YEARS OF THE GRETSCH CUSTOM SHOP

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. (Jan. 25, 2014) – 2014 marks a decade of the finest guitars to ever bear the name so prized by guitarists everywhere for most of a century—Gretsch guitars.

It's certainly true that all Gretsch guitars are fabulous creations, but those that come from the Gretsch Custom Shop offer something quite a bit more. Few in number, they are the truly extraordinary work of truly talented craftsmen. And if you think production Gretsch guitars are as wonderful in and of themselves as they really are, just imagine being one of the lucky few to get their hands on a Gretsch Custom Shop guitar. Just imagine playing the very best of Gretsch's best. Back in 2003, that's just what Mike Lewis had in mind.

When Fender acquired licensing for the manufacture, distribution and marketing of Gretsch guitars in 2002, Lewis helmed the effort. An accomplished guitarist with an especially keen mind for product authenticity and marketing, he'd been with Fender for a dozen years, first in charge of amps and then in charge of guitars. As such, Lewis was the ideal figure to engineer a new golden age of Gretsch guitars.

Fender's own custom shop, founded in 1987 in Corona, Calif., had earned worldwide acclaim by the dawn of the 2000s. Among the dozen or so master builders there at that time, only two—Stephen Stern and Chris Fleming—had significant arch-top hollow-body building experience. Stern had studied under two of the world's greatest arch-top luthiers, Jimmy D'Aquisto and Robert Benedetto. He arrived at the Fender Custom Shop in 1993, working directly with D'Aquisto until the great luthier's death in 1995, and also crafting fine Benedetto guitars. Fleming was an acclaimed Fender Custom Shop master builder who'd arrived at Fender in 2000 and quickly established a sterling reputation as one of the shop's top craftsmen.

With the 2002 Fender/Gretsch licensing deal in place, high-quality Gretsch guitars soon started coming from Japan, with considerably more manufacturing and marketing muscle

behind them than Gretsch had experienced in quite some time. Under such promising circumstances, it didn't take long for the idea of a Gretsch Custom Shop to surface. Its genesis was in fact decidedly uncomplicated.

"It was as simple as looking around the shop and saying something like 'We ought to build some things here,'" Lewis said.

Why not? A Gretsch guitar model or two built in the United States and given the full-on custom treatment using the readily available resources of the Fender Custom Shop seemed like an idea whose time had come. With all his hollow-body expertise, Stern was ideal for the job despite the fact that he'd never built a Gretsch guitar before, but he more than had his hands full with Benedetto guitars at the time.

Lewis enlisted Fleming and Fender's George Blanda to craft a pair of custom U.S.-made Gretsch models to display at the January 2004 NAMM show. Both builders pored over a pair of original-era guitars sent from the large vintage Gretsch collection of Randy Bachman (of Bachman-Turner Overdrive fame), taking meticulous measurements and noting every spec and detail. Work proceeded throughout 2003, with Fleming building the bodies and Blanda fashioning the necks.

The results debuted in 2004 under the banner of the "Gretsch U.S. Custom Shop," with two stunning new limited-edition versions of original-era classics—the G6136CST White Falcon and G6120WCST Nashville Western.

Both guitars were warmly received and earned much acclaim, and with that the Gretsch Custom Shop was up and running. Meanwhile, Benedetto's licensing agreement with Fender was nearing its end, and within a year Stern became free to work on custom Gretsch guitars. He took the Gretsch custom design and production reins in 2005, and, with a small crew, his little upstairs corner of the Fender Custom Shop became in effect the Gretsch Custom Shop.

The G6136CST White Falcon and G6120WCST Nashville Western formed the nucleus of the Gretsch Custom Shop offering throughout the mid 2000s, joined each year by new limited-edition custom Gretsch guitars of impeccable style and build. These included the

G6136TCST-R White Falcon LTD Custom Relic of 2007-2009, the G6120WCST-R Nashville Western LTD Custom Relic of 2007, the G6118T-R-CST Anniversary Relic of 2007-2009 and the G6128TDS-R Duo Jet Relic with Bigsby of 2008-2009.

Further, it didn't take long for the Gretsch Custom Shop to turn its attention to the world's two greatest Gretsch players; one the company's longtime patron saint, and the other its still very active modern-day savior.

The great Chet Atkins (1924-2001) is a central and seminal figure in the history of Gretsch guitars, and the Gretsch Custom Shop wasted little time in honoring him once his name returned to Gretsch guitars in the mid-late 2000s. 2004's original G6120WCST Nashville Western was re-christened the G6120WCST Chet Atkins Hollow Body in January 2007 and remained so until the model was discontinued in December 2009. 2008 saw the single-year run of the gorgeous G6120-125 Chet Atkins 125th Anniversary Hollow Body, and the G6120DSW-R Chet Atkins Relic Hollow Body was offered from early 2009 through mid 2010.

Brian Setzer, meanwhile, had busied himself since the late 1970s as a sort of one-man Gretsch revival. He was spectacularly successful at it, too, with the Stray Cats and later the Brian Setzer Orchestra. No artist did more to popularize Gretsch in the modern era, and the two joined forces in a remarkably prolific relationship that re-energized Gretsch in the mid-2000s with an entire lineup of Setzer signature guitars.

Gretsch duly honored Setzer with the first Custom Shop "Tribute" model, the G6120SSC Brian Setzer Tribute Nashville, which debuted in January 2007. By hand, Stern and his crew built 59 of the instruments, which were virtually indistinguishable from Setzer's beloved 1959 6120, right down to their thin nitro finish, dice control knobs, black cat and "Lucky Lady" body stickers, headstock skull sticker, and every last nick and scratch.

Throughout this formative period, Stern and the Gretsch Custom Shop produced only a small number of instruments each year, and awareness of the shop's very existence was slow to spread during the very early years. Momentum was gathering, however.

"It really took off in 2008," Stern said. He showed a few models at a summer dealer show—Penguins and Duo Jets, plus "a Falcon or two"—and that's when several key dealers really

sat up and took notice.

“It really started taking off,” Stern said. “It started snowballing from there.”

Up to that point, the Gretsch Custom Shop was a surprisingly small operation in terms of actually building the guitars. It was Stern himself at first, aided by Fleming and fellow master builder “Red” Dave Nichols. With business taking off in 2008 though, three other builders joined Stern’s team that year.

More work, attention and acclaim arrived with the turn of the decade. Until that point, all Gretsch Custom Shop guitars were small-run production models. And in addition to the Brian Setzer Tribute Nashville, the only other artist Tribute model was the G6129BZ Billy Zoom Tribute Custom Shop Silver Jet, designed for X guitarist Tyson “Billy Zoom” Kindell and introduced in 2008. The Gretsch Custom Shop had yet to build any specially commissioned one-off instruments.

That changed in 2010. Artists were becoming aware of the shop’s existence, and Morrissey guitarist and musical director Martin “Boz” Boorer contacted Stern with a special request—a custom pink Penguin guitar. Stern obliged, and Boorer delightedly received the beautifully crafted pink Penguin—the first Gretsch Custom Shop one-off model—in spring 2010.

Other great artists who loomed large in Gretsch’s legacy soon received the Custom Shop treatment. The first of these was Eddie Cochran (1938-1960), the rock and rockabilly forefather who died tragically in 1960 at age 21 after having contributed memorable and influential classics such as “Summertime Blues,” “C’mon Everybody,” “Sittin’ in the Balcony” and “Twenty Flight Rock.”

Working closely with Cochran’s family throughout 2009, Stern was granted access to spec out Cochran’s distinctively modified 6120 guitar. The meticulously crafted result, the G6120EC Eddie Cochran Tribute Hollow Body, was (once again) all but indistinguishable from the original, and it came with a fascinating wealth of reproduction Cochran memorabilia that paid fitting tribute indeed. Fifty of the guitars were offered in 2010.

That year also brought the Gretsch Custom Shop’s biggest project to date and the most public attention it had ever received. As the tenth anniversary of George Harrison’s

November 2001 passing approached, Gretsch worked closely with the late guitarist's estate in developing a Tribute model replica of his first Gretsch guitar—an all-black 1957 Duo Jet that Harrison bought second-hand at age 18 in summer 1961. It was the guitar that Harrison played during the historic three-year period when the Beatles went from local favorites to U.K. sensations to worldwide phenomenon; the guitar used to record first Beatles album *Please Please Me* and the title song that was the group's first number-one hit.

Stern examined Harrison's guitar and noted its specs with customary thoroughness and meticulous attention to detail. After many months of work, the G6128T-GH George Harrison Tribute Custom Shop Duo Jet was introduced in January 2011 in a limited edition of 60 guitars and immediately drew great acclaim and much glowing press. *Premier Guitar* magazine called it "flawless," and the guitar was the subject of a *USA Today* feature story that put Stern and the Gretsch Custom Shop in front of a far greater audience than ever before.

The Gretsch Custom Shop was still a remarkably small operation—just Stern and two other builders by the end of 2012. The shop received its biggest personnel boost in 2013 with the arrival of five more builders: Anthony Corona, Chad Henrichsen, Andy Hicks, Gonzalo Madrigal and Vince Van Trigt.

As it celebrates its tenth anniversary in 2014, the Gretsch Custom Shop is as busy as ever. Stern and his builders remain hard at work, crafting small productions of extraordinary instruments, striking one-off models and various special projects that are the envy of guitar aficionados in general and Gretsch fans in particular all over the world. For a full decade now, the idea is still simple and the emphasis remains the same.

"It's the attention to detail," Stern said. "It's the feel of it. With a Gretsch Custom Shop instrument, you can tell the difference when it's in your hands."

Indeed, no detail is too small. Stern and his builders are always learning how to do what they do even better. They're always learning more about the subtleties of true vintage authenticity, from body routs and finish shades right down to the felt under the pickguard and more. And it doesn't happen quickly—Gretsch Custom Shop builders take time and

take pride. It's a handcrafted process that lasts three months—say, for example, building in January, painting in February and assembly in March.

It has been a fascinating evolution, and Gretsch fans everywhere can look forward to the next 10 years of the best of Gretsch's best. The first decade has certainly been remarkable.

"The tremendous growth of the Gretsch Custom Shop over the past 10 years has been very exciting," Stern said. "To think that it started in 2004 with just two models and has now grown to offer a wide range of models and options is truly amazing. I would like to say a sincere thank you to all who have helped to support the Gretsch Custom Shop and to its awesome staff, for without them this would not be possible."

For more information, visit www.gretschguitars.com.

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