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Leo's Legacy Part 2

MusicMan G&L

By Greg Gagliano & Tim Pershing

As you may recall from Part One of this series, we wanted to know what has been happening at Leo Fender's former companies and with his popular designs now that he is quite "removed" from the scene. In Part One we visited the Fender Custom Shop, and now in Part 2 we will cover Leo's other two business ventures: MusicMan and G&L.

Sadly, Ernie Ball/MusicMan did not answer our many requests for information and a factory tour, so the level of detail regarding the current MusicMan company will not be the same as it is for the Fender Custom Shop or G&L (who were both very pleasant and cooperative).

After the sale of Fender Electric Instruments, Leo was retained by CBS for a 5-year period. Several of his designs were actually produced by CBS Fender (the Bronco guitar and Mustang Bass) but it is unclear whether those were "new" Leo creations or designs that were ready and waiting at the time of the sale.

MusicMan

Once his 5-year contract with CBS expired, Leo formed CLF Research, which was still contractually barred from manufacturing guitars (CBS was understandably concerned about the prospect of competing against him) but that didn't prevent Leo from continuing his passion for tinkering with guitar and pickup designs. After the 10-year "no make guitars" period was over, Leo joined forces with Forrest White and Tom Walker to create MusicMan (1975-1980). Here, Leo would design and manufacture guitars for MusicMan through his CLF Research company.

The MusicMan years produced two guitars and two basses: the Stingray guitar, the Stingray Bass, Sabre, and Sabre Bass. The company continued with little wind until Ernie Ball company bought it. The guitars were never popular and were immediately dropped from the lineup, but the basses were (and are) fairly popular.

The two-pickup Sabre Bass was discontinued in the late '80s/early '90s, while the single pickup Stingray was kept in the catalog and refined. The major refinements included a 6-bolt neck joint and a new preamp circuit. Under the MusicMan label, Ernie Ball could also introduce a new line of guitars, far more popular as they were better suited to the needs of musicians. The Stingray remains the only remnant of Leo Fender's work at MusicMan, though the new models take some of their cues from Leo's classic designs.

It is clear, however, that Ernie Ball/MusicMan strays further from Leo's ideas than any of his other companies, and they evidently feel neither constrained nor obligated when it comes to Leo Fender. Regardless, the Ernie Ball/MusicMan designs are well respected and the guitars are very well made. Endorsements from players like Albert Lee and Steve Morse don't seem to hurt sales either...

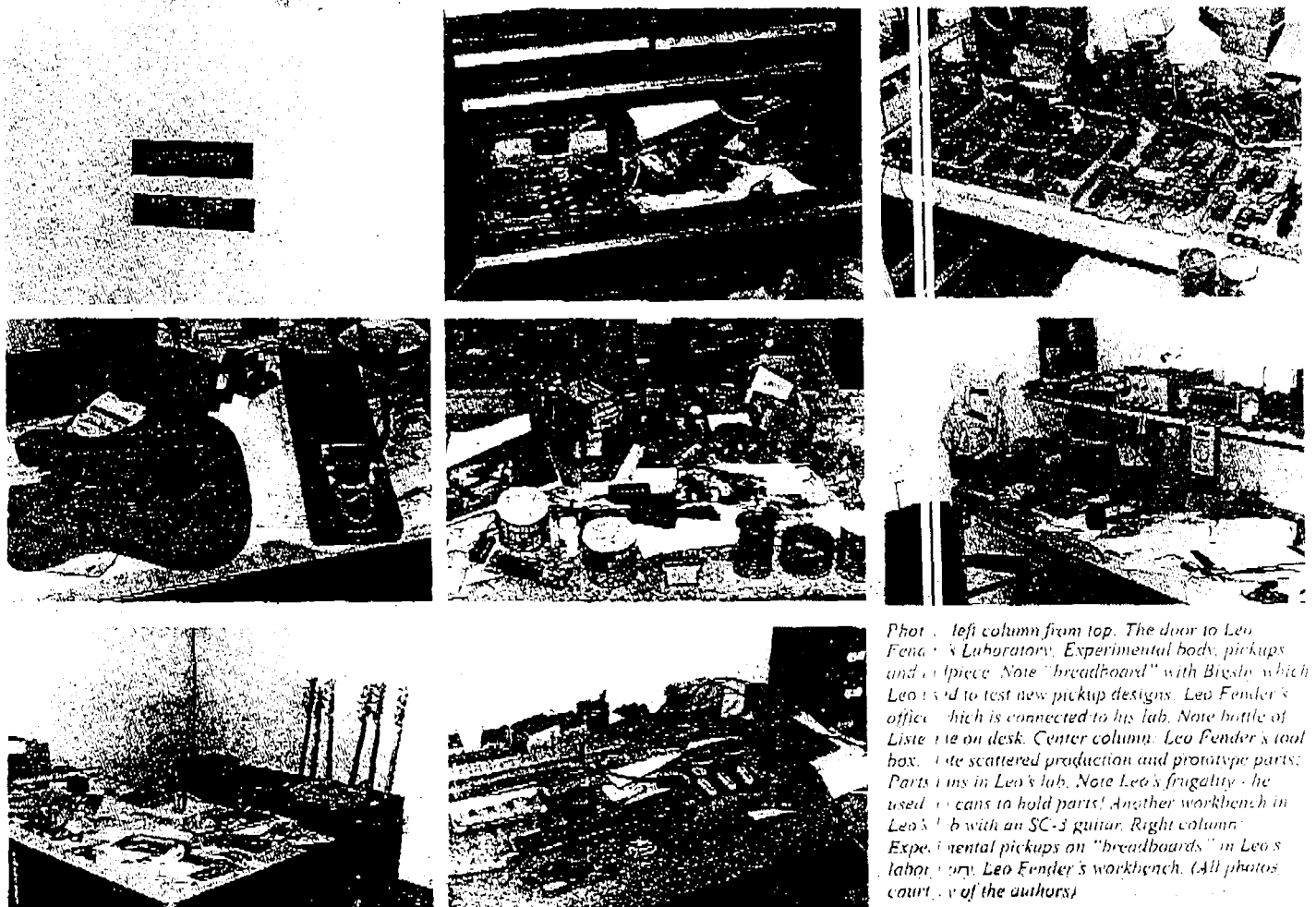
G&L

In 1980, Leo Fender (along with George Fullerton) formed his last company out of CLF Research. Though many critics will claim that the guitars made during Leo's twilight years did not approach his classic designs of the past, the magnitude of his accomplishments from 1980 until his death in March 1991 cannot be disputed. Leo's genius was in abundant supply during the G&L years with the advent of a number of useful design features, including the Saddle Lock bridge for guitar and bass, Magnetic Field Design pickup in several humbucking and single coil varieties, new preamp circuits for bass and guitar, BiCut neck, Dual Fulcrum Vibrato, and Fine Tuner Vibrato.

In December 1991, several months after Leo's death, BBE Inc. took over the management (and ultimately the ownership) of the G&L company. Though Leo's G&L designs were well thought out and generally great sounding, the guitars themselves were not well received by the public, mainly due to aesthetics (and to a lesser extent, some odd features). At a time when "Stratmania" and the vintage vibe frenzy turned guitarists towards vintage, reissue and classically styled instruments, Leo was trying to sell what were rather unconventional guitars. In addition, the G&L model line was complex, which probably confused buyers. So, the new owners did some "house cleaning" with the model line.

The most popular models, such as the L-2000 bass and S-500, ASAT and ASAT Classic guitars were retained, and the body shapes were given a facelift to look more "conventional" (i.e. "Fendery"). Then new models, such as the Legacy series guitars, were added to the line using some or all of Leo's innovations from the 1980s. The G&L company of the 1990s is far more in tune with the guitar buying public's desires than the G&L company of 1980s ever was. The new owners have succeeded in repackaging Leo's designs so that they are more marketable, as their sales growth in this decade surely demonstrates.

Though the model line was altered, very little has changed at the G&L factory, which is still located on Fender Avenue in Fullerton, California (approximately 2 miles from Leo's old Fender complex on the corner of South Raymond Avenue and Valencia Avenue). The factory currently employs about 30 people and there are two



Photos (left column from top): The door to Leo Fender's Laboratory. Experimental body, pickups and a piece. Note "breadboard" with Bigsby which Leo used to test new pickup designs. Leo Fender's office, which is connected to his lab. Note bottle of Listine on desk. Center column: Leo Fender's tool box. Note scattered production and prototype parts. Parts bins in Leo's lab. Note Leo's frugality - he used tin cans to hold parts! Another workbench in Leo's lab with an SC-3 guitar. Right column: Experimental pickups on "breadboards" in Leo's laboratory. Leo Fender's workbench. (All photos courtesy of the authors)

Leo's Legacy Part 2

main product lines manufactured there: Production instruments and Custom Creations instruments.

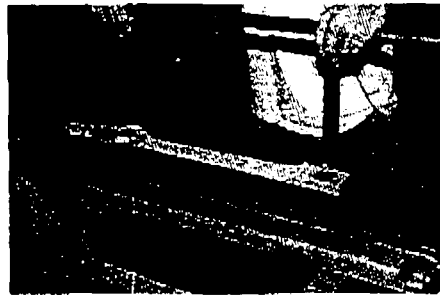
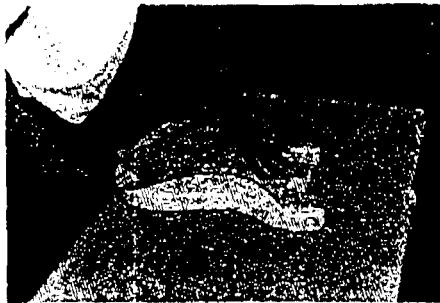
The Production guitars are standard models listed in the G&L catalog. These instruments are made on a batch basis, i.e. a batch of ASATs will be made, followed perhaps by a batch of Legacy Specials, etc. G&L is able to produce several hundred guitars a month this way while ensuring high quality. In addition, G&L offers certain custom options such as a tinted gloss finish on the neck of any production guitar. According to Dave McLaren, the most popular production guitar is (not surprisingly) the Strat-influenced Legacy.

The Custom Creations guitars are limited edition models that are generally very unique compared to the regular production instruments. This distinctiveness is attributable to the type of construction, wood selection, and pickup selection (offered in combinations not found on other G&L models). Since the inception of the Custom Creations concept in May 1998, there have been two models produced: the ASAT Classic III (100 in total made) and the ASAT Jr. (250 in total made). The Custom Creations guitars have been very successful and both models sold out fairly quickly. The latest Custom Creation model, introduced at the Winter '99 NAMM show, is a Rampage model with Jerry Cantrell specifications.

All G&L guitars are made completely by hand. There isn't a CNC milling machine to be found. Walking through the G&L factory is like taking a walk back in time, not just to the '80s, but to the 1950s: the G&L factory is very, very much like the Fender factory of the 1950s and early 1960s. If you take a look at the (1950s and early 1960s) photos of the Fender factory in Richard Smith's excellent book *Fender: The Sound Heard 'round the World* and compare them to how the current G&L factory is set up, you'll see very little difference.

There are two rows of buildings and workers scurry between them just as workers did at Fender in the pre-CBS days. Much of the machinery and tooling used today is the same as it was in the old days at Fender Electric Instruments. In fact, some of it was even constructed by Mr. Fender. Talk about entering the twilight zone! The G&L factory is something of a living fossil, and if you ever wondered what the Fender factory was like in the pre-CBS days, this is it.

While G&L is not constrained by Leo's legacy, the company is still greatly guided by Leo's philosophy (and one might even say, his spirit). They clearly view themselves as the torchbearers, and the staff and management take this responsibility very seriously. Photos of Leo can be found in the front offices of the factory and even in the work areas. His office is still maintained (shrine-like) in the condition that he left it on his last day alive. And his "presence" is obvious in that the craftspeople produce guitars as though they still have to meet Leo's approval.

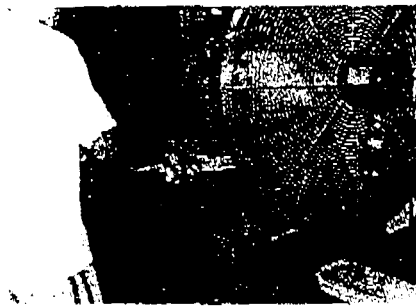


Photos, left to right from top: Worker scoring body for back contour using wooden template; Working installing frets in a guitar neck; Working radiusing a guitar neck. Note jig used determines radius; Ed Sebest, shop foreman, shaping neck with metal template on a pin router; Shaping back-body contour on belt sander; Worker performing final setup on an ASAT; Worker shaping body by hand-sanding; Co-author Greg Gagliano dons Leo Fender's magnifying visor to inspect an F-100 control plate assembly; Co-author Tim Pershing with prototype 6-string baritone guitar. It plays great! Worker assembling Dual Fulcrum vibrato tailpieces. (All photos courtesy of the authors)

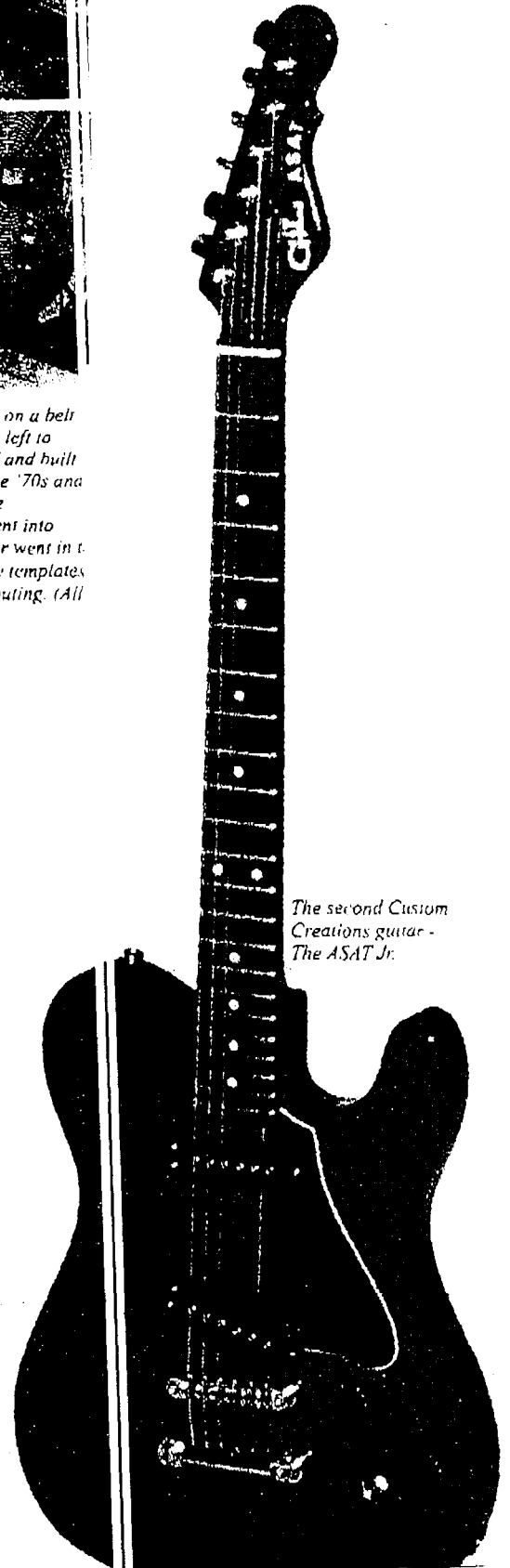
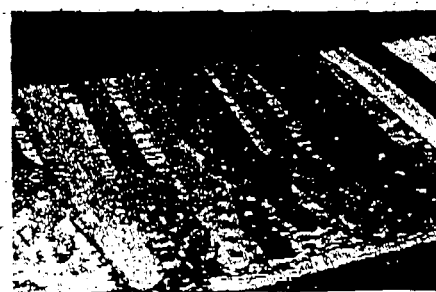
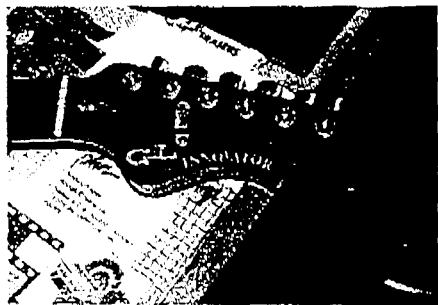
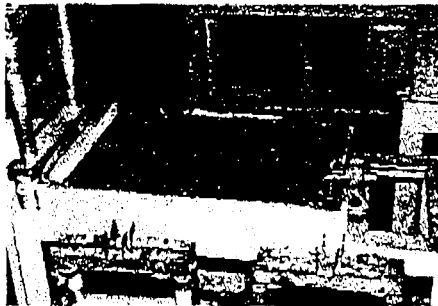
modern manufacturing techniques, the factory refuses to abandon the low-tech approach. Pickups are still wound by hand and potted in wax. Talk about low-tech... the potting wax is melted in an electric deep fryer! Bodies and necks are still shaped on pin routers, just as it was done in the old Fender days. They seem to revel in doing things the old-fashioned way, not as a gimmick but because they obviously embrace this philosophy and style of California electric guitar making.

Despite the low-tech nature of G&L construction, the company is clearly making its finest products since the "golden age" of Leo Fender. The current quality of these small-run and completely handmade guitars exceeds anything that Leo had previously done, even during the '80s at G&L. Yes, there are a core group of collectors ("G&L Heads") who will only bestow "the vibe" on the Leo era G&Ls, and who will disagree that the changes made after the BBE takeover were "good." But "players" (independent of collectors) tend to bestow more value on utility, quality and proven design, rather than on intangibles such as "who was alive when." In that regard, today's G&Ls are some of the most satisfying electric guitars and basses ever produced.

To be sure, the G&Ls from the '80s are fascinating and wonderful instruments, but there's is no argument that the new owners brought G&L out of relative obscurity and into the mainstream with many logical refinements. Leo demonstrated that his designs were "works in progress" by upgrading them (think pre and post-'57 P-Bass, for one) and G&L is simply following in the traditions of its founder by making guitars better for the working musician. And it's evident that the



Photos, above: Worker shaping a neck on a belt sander; Worker routing a body. Below: left to right from top: Fret slot saw designed and built by Leo Fender; Some leftovers from the '70s and '80s. The T-400 was a precursor to the Broadcaster and ASAT, but it never went into production; The Innovator model never went into production; Finished necks; Bass body templates. Metal and Lexan neck templates for routing. (All photos courtesy of the authors)



The second Custom Creations guitar - The ASAT Jr.



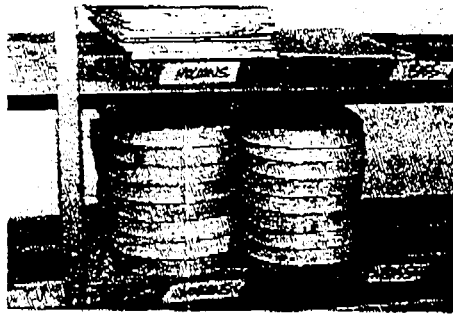
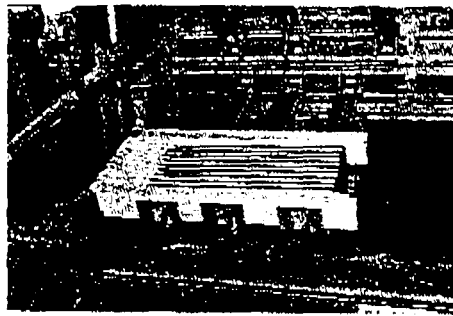
guitars being made by G&L since 1995 have raised the quality benchmark a notch above the already high quality of G&Ls made in previous years.

While touring the production facilities and admiring the skill of handwork being performed, we wondered how many of the employees were familiar with Leo's legacy. Most of workers we spoke with were well aware of Leo's contributions and designs and seemed genuinely gratified to be a part of his legacy. Many had worked at G&L while Leo actually ran the joint, including shop foreman Ed Sebest. Ed related that Leo was the ultimate tinkerer always looking for ways to make improvements. Ed said that Leo would sometimes call him into his lab and ask how a new pickup sounded. Before his Parkinson's Disease became debilitating, Leo would pop into the production areas to see how things were going.

G&L after Leo Fender is also flourishing, and in a way that honors his proven designs and methods, as well as his spirit of improvement and invention. The authors wish to thank David McLaren Manager, Export Sales for being their tour guide through the G&L factory. Also, thanks to Ed Sebest and all the craftspeople at G&L.

About the authors: Greg Gagliano simply loves all of Leo Fender's designs from the Jaguar to the Stingray Bass to the ASAT. He can be contacted by e-mail at ggjaguar@aol.com.

Tim Pershing is a leading authority on student model Fenders, most notably the short-scale guitars made from 1956-69. Tim can be contacted by e-mail at duosonic@puchell.net.



Photos, left to right, from top: Raw wood fingerboards glued to maple necks are squeezed on this press. Pickup winding for Comanche, S-500, L-2500 and Legacy. Roughed-out semi-hollow bodies. Finished bodies ready for buffing. Tooling for old style G&L models including G-260. Body gravers and - those didn't meet G&L's high quality standards. Pickups ready for putting in war table in break room - it's an ASAT Classic Signature' neck blanks with glued fingerboards (left) and book-matched body blanks (right). Leo on left, Tim Pershing (left), Dave McLaren (center) and Greg Gagliano. Dave is holding a Custom Creations ASAT. All photos courtesy of the authors.

