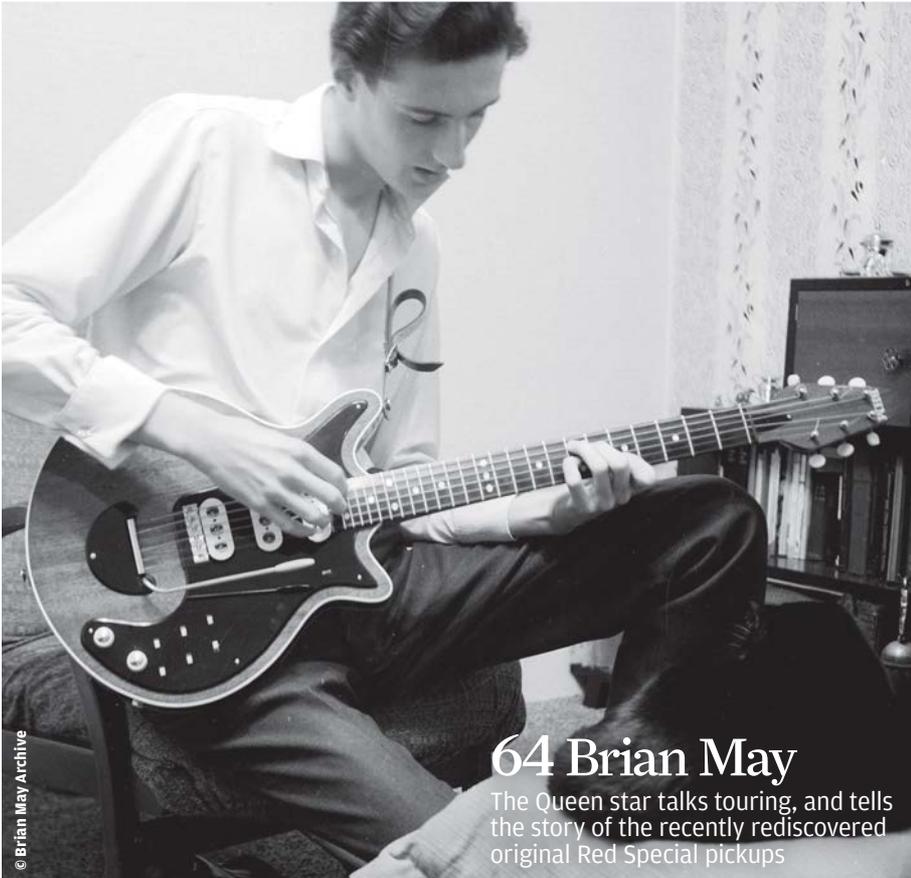


The *guitar* Magazine

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GEAR OF THE YEAR 2017

STARRING THE B&G LITTLE SISTER CROSSROADS



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64 Brian May

The Queen star talks touring, and tells the story of the recently rediscovered original Red Special pickups

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The Guitar Magazine
Revealed Inside
EAR OF THE YEAR





PRIVATE COLLECTION

GANG PLANKS

From Jack Bruce to Rod Stewart via diversion to heavy metal and punk rock, Bill Liesegang has enjoyed a varied and exciting career in music.

LARS MULLEN finds out about the equally eclectic guitars he's used along the way...

Bill Liesegang has played with many an iconic musician, taking on many guises along the way. Having grown up playing blues rock and metal, he tried the punk rock scene with success, and has since worked on albums and toured with the likes of Jack Bruce, Red Hot Chili Peppers, Robert Fripp, John Wetton, Transvision Vamp and Rod Stewart.

"I could actually blame my grandmother for my career in rock 'n' roll," laughs Bill. "It's certainly been an interesting journey. I was learning the violin at school, which was sort of okay, but being the only boy in a class full of girls wasn't cool back then for an eight-year-old, so that didn't last long. My gran was an opera singer living in Germany, she knew I was so into the British beat boom at an early age, so she sent me over an acoustic guitar, bless her. We're talking 11 years old

now, so my hands are getting big enough to hold chords on a neck but, like so many of those early guitars, it was virtually unplayable.

"Moving up the scale slightly to an almost playable electric, I formed the compulsory school band which was probably the coolest thing you could do at that age in the 60s. How cool I looked in my teens playing slide with a sherry bottle, just like the guitarist I had seen on TV in *The Pretty Things*."

Playing in a band would have an equally transformative impact on Bill's musical tastes, as his bandmates exposed him to a whole new world. "The older guys in the band introduced me to guitar bands like Cream and blues players like John Mayall and Eric Clapton," he recalls. "I learnt all the Clapton solos from the classic Beano album. Then Hendrix came on the



Above Bill got into session work in the 80s, where his stripped '63 Strat and double-neck came in handy

scene so we did a mishmash of blues and psychedelic rock. I had all the hair and looked the part. I was lucky enough to get my hands on a Strat and saved all the money I earned in my Dad's bakery to buy a Tone Bender and stage clothes, although starting at the bakery at 5am wasn't rock 'n' roll!"

Denmark Calling

In his late teens, Bill's family moved to Germany, but he opted to stay behind in the UK, "I was thinking, 'I'm 17, I can look after myself!'" says Bill, rolling his eyes. "My Dad sent over the money to pay for a college course which I blew on a Marshall stack and was penniless for the rest of the year. I formed a metal band called Tank, bought a van for a fiver and painted a huge tank on the side. The van was a total wreck, the handbrake failed and it rolled down Clifton Hill in Bristol where we abandoned it. For years it could be seen from the London to Bristol railway line on top of a rubbish tip, which was a reminder of a poorly spent five quid."

Like so many other young guitarists of the age, Bill was drawn to London's Denmark Street, where a job in the famous Macari's music shop provided a great education for a young musician. "I could play as many

guitars as I liked!" he enthuses. "And I got to know so many great players from that shop – all those rock stars who turned in to legends just walking through the door. Even David Bowie, who I played with at various festivals. He'd just released *Space Oddity* and was looking for a permanent guitarist, but I declined because of college."

Near-brushes with megastardom aside, there was something about an old Les Paul hanging on the wall in Macari's that kept Bill awake at night...

"Like I said, I could try any guitar in the shop, but this certain Les Paul had the sound you hear in your head," he enthuses. "I would keep moving it to the end of the wall so customers wouldn't see it! I really wanted that guitar and ended up selling most of the gear I'd acquired to pay for it."

The guitar's original pickups had been swapped for a pair of '58 PAF humbuckers, and he later added a Schaller fine-tune tailpiece and locking tuners – both of which Bill says have proved "invaluable" in the studio over the years. The original Goldtop finish had been removed and refinished in Cherry sunburst, which itself had started to fade by the time Bill took ownership. "I actually bought it the same day as I met



my wife, I'm not sure which one has faded better!" chuckles Bill. "I've played it all over the world and never had a re-fret."

Black Box Recording

When it came to the amplification side of things, Bill's head was turned by the same legendary black and gold boxes that had captivated so many other players of that era, and still does today. "A Marshall JTM45 completes the sonic equation for me," he says. "I also have a few Lead & Bass heads, which I use for studio work. That guitar and the JTM45 have helped me get some great gigs. Phil Manzanera heard me use this configuration and recommended me to Jack Bruce – which I thought was the best thing, as I'd grown up listening to Cream. I also played with Jack at Chelmsford Blues Festival about a year before he died in 2014. We did the Cream set again, and I remember we were playing White Room and he was shouting

"Working in Macari's meant I could play as many guitars as I liked! And I got to know so many rock stars"

'slower!' because he'd recently been playing these songs with a jazz band at different tempos."

Before he was jamming with classic rock legends, however, Bill had time to take a metal diversion along the way... "Back in the early 80s, I was still a poor guitarist," he remembers. "I formed a band called Xero from a previous band called The Shots with Bruce Dickinson, and we went down the New Wave Of British Heavy Metal road. Again, none of us had any money, but the thought of pawning the Les Paul didn't even enter my head."

It was around this time that Bill had another brush with the big time, "I went for an audition as guitarist with Motörhead," he says. "I still had a horse mane of hair, but I wore a head scarf, which Lemmy wasn't keen on, – he also said if I was a true soldier I'd have my bullet belt the other way up, in case they went off and went through my heart. I remember leaving the audition so pissed I couldn't stand up. Lemmy liked the songs I was

Above Bill used his 70s Strat on tour with Nina Hagen, but it suffered a nasty neck break on tour, and was retro-fitted with a spare from a Kramer



Top left Around the time he started playing with Nina Hagen, Bill became a Kramer endorsee, and the white 1984 Baretta became his main guitar

writing in Xero and I heard later that the album was the most played on the Motörhead bus... but I still didn't get the job!"

New Direction

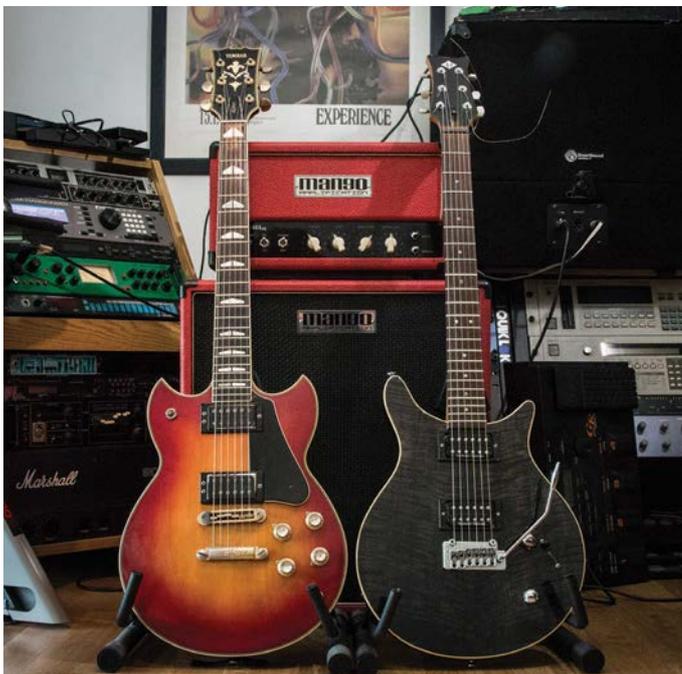
In 1984, however, Bill left the NWOBHM behind and headed in a totally new direction, but it was one that saw him leave his beloved Les Paul at home, too. "I joined Nina Hagen's band and it all changed dramatically for me," Bill explains. "It seemed the natural thing to do – in my mind I hear my grandmother saying, 'Go for it!' as Nina was also German and at the time was called the Godmother Of Punk. We toured extensively, but when the bass player had his favourite Alembic bass stolen in South America, I decided to leave the 'Paul at home. Looking back, I was grateful as Nina was so unpredictable, I was playing a Strat the night she decided to trash the stage in the USA. The drums went first, then the headstock of my 70s Strat!"

Getting his Strat totalled came with an upside, however... "I quickly needed a replacement and managed to get an endorsement deal with Kramer guitars whilst on the road," he remembers. "This was

ideal as I needed a guitar with a little more output. This was in the early days of Van Halen, and Kramer had just brought out the Baretta, which was more suited to the sound and style of Nina's songs, where I had to jump from a funky groove to full-on whammy bar solos.

"Kramer also gave me a spare neck and a Floyd Rose, which I fitted to the damaged Strat, and it became a bit of a hardware donor. I fitted the Strat single coils to my white '84 Kramer Baretta. These were the main two guitars I used with Nina. I also have a later model with a splashed paint finish."

Playing with Nina gave Bill that chance to experiment with new gear, but also a new look, and we're not just talking guitars. "I picked up my 80s Camak in Berlin, also on tour with Nina. It wasn't expensive, I just needed a back up to the Kramers. It was trendy at the time to fit a Floyd Rose vibrato system, so I had this one fitted by Steve Vai's tech when we were based in LA I also had to change my visual appearance to fit in with the punk approach in Nina's band. The most traumatic change was shaving my head after having such a big haircut, I did keep a very long blonde pony tail which Nina dyed blue!"



Better Call Bill

Over his varied career, Bill also managed to fit in session work with some of the finest record producers and artists in the pop world. But once again reaching for a new guitar to suit the occasion.

"I was also heavily into session work in the USA and UK during the 80s working with talented record producers like Trevor Horn on many songs in different styles, from punk to pop. Transvision Vamp's *Baby I Don't Care* and Rod Stewart's *Downtown Train* saw me back playing Strats once again, with my '63 Strat the main contender. I saw it advertised in *Loot* – it was fairly cheap as it had been re finished with gloss paint! I used paint stripper to try and get it off, but it had soaked into the wood which has left a pink hue. I wasn't too fussed how it looked and it sounded so much better unfinished. My Fender twin-neck is a bit of a hybrid and obviously another great studio guitar. I don't know that much about it, I believe it dates from the 80s."

While he always loves the classic guitar brands, his time with Nina gave him a penchant for more esoteric fare. "My German-made Duesenberg Schmitt, was originally made for Michael Schenker and looks like a cross between a Gibson Explorer and a Flying V," he observes. "It has a crazy vibrato system that also has a lever at the back of the guitar so it can be operated by thrusting your thigh. Apart from making you look insane on stage, it went out of tune every time I shook a leg, so the road crew disabled it!"

Another result of his time with Hagen was coming across smaller luthiers out on tour. "I was approached by Design4Sound from Austria when touring there with Nina," he recalls. "They wanted me to play their Electric Babe guitars. The pickup permutations tip their hats to Strats and Teles but after that, they're totally off the wall both with 'female' body shapes and names. They called the white one Lily the black one Lola. They're built really well with quality parts and sound excellent."

"I'm sure working in guitar shops all those years ago is one reason why I like alternative guitars. For example, my Switch Vibracell guitars, which are from the Wild series designed by Trevor Wilkinson. The twin-

humbucker model actually has the closet recorded sound to my Les Paul. They're both fitted with Roland GK-3 MIDI systems. I have written a lot of TV scores where these have proved invaluable, along with my Yamaha RGXA2, where I installed an XY MIDI pad touchscreen – it's so handy to control modulation effects in the studio and the guitar itself is really light for those two-hour gigs."

Coming Up For Air

While his band career has been primarily electric-focused, his studio life saw him become more comfortable as an acoustic player.

"I more or less got into recording with acoustic guitars when I was producing albums for bands based in LA, like 101 South and Harlan Cage, which both sat in the AOR category along with the likes of Foreigner and Journey," he confirms. "I have a nice Martin, which speaks for itself, but I also love the sound of some early basic acoustic guitars and I think sometimes if you want that sound, you have to have one from that period. The oldest acoustic I have is this archtop which I'm told is a Framus Black Rose from 1959."

Another acoustic in his collection could have been missed if he hadn't been paying attention on the tour bus. "I clearly remember shouting, 'Stop the bus!' when I saw an early 50s Horst Dietrich nylon-strung Schrammel double-neck," he chuckles. "I was touring through Germany and saw it in a dusty old shop window. I shouldn't have been so surprised how good it sounded, as it's made with such love and affection. It's designed really for the fretless fingerboard to play open bass notes while playing chords on traditional fretted board. I figured it would take years to play in this style, so I use the unfretted board as drone strings, you can hear this on a track called *Midnight Surfer* from my album *No Strings Attached*, which features Glenn Hughes and John Wetton in 2009."

"Unlike my rock/metal days, I didn't have the hair for that band. I actually met up with Lemmy again when I had the blue pony tail, he said, 'Kin' 'ell Bill, if you'd turned up for the audition like that I might have given you the job!'" 

Opposite top Three of Bill's more airy guitars – (l-r) a 2001 Hofner President, an '86 OPI USA Dobro and most uniquely, a 1950s Horst Dietrich nylon-string Schrammel double neck

Opposite bottom left Bill's Yamaha SG2000, and his prototype JJ Guitars single-cut electric

Opposite bottom right A PRS Santana II and his Yamaha RGXA2, which has been modded with an XY pad



Want to see your guitars, amps or effects featured in the pages of *The Guitar Magazine*? Email the details and a few taster pics to theguitarmagazine@anthem-publishing.com to be considered for a future issue

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