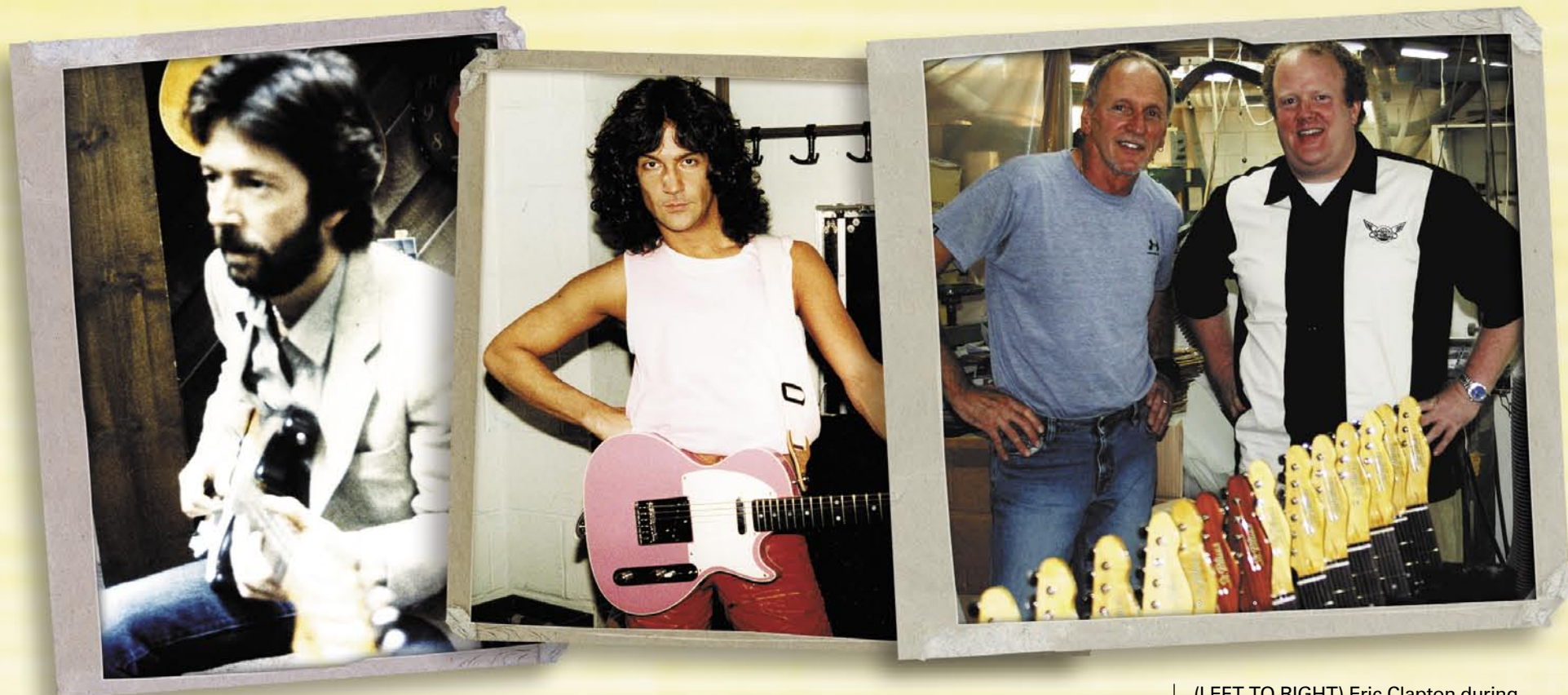


St. Blues™

THEN AND NOW BY WILLIE G. MOSELEY



Strings & Things opened in the early '70s, and quickly built a reputation for customizing and repairing guitars. Tom Keckler, who led the effort, moved to Los Angeles in 1978 to join Tom Anderson and David Schecter in forming the original Schecter Guitars. Growing tired of L.A., in '83 Keckler moved back to Memphis to head Strings & Things in marketing its own guitars. Step one in the effort was to design a unique electric solidbody, which Keckler did with the help of Strings and Things co-founder Charlie Lawing. Dubbed the Bluesmaster, the guitar had a slightly downsized single-cutaway body and six-on-a-side headstock. It became the company's keystone instrument.

Keckler, having worked with parts maker ESP while at Schecter, contacted them to carve necks and bodies for Bluesmasters and other models that were assembled in the Memphis workshop. The instruments quickly earned the respect of many high-profile musicians.

According to Strings & Things co-

St. Blues guitars are the epitome of a brand with a unique niche in guitar lore. Born as S & T Custom – the two letters referencing the Memphis music store Strings & Things, where notable guitarists often took their instruments for repair and modification. And it recently joined the ranks of the revitalized.

founder Chris Lovell, the company decided to change the name of the line to St. Blues, and as the brand began to get noticed, other retailers began inquiring about stocking the line – but *not* with “ST Blues” on the headstock. But Lovell said the line, at that time, was sold only at Strings & Things. And while the line is truly mass-marketed today, the Saint Blues nameplate retains an oblique reference to the Memphis store.

“If we were going to sell nationally and internationally, ‘St. Blues’ certainly sounded better,” Lovell said. “And we did start to pick up a lot of dealers. About half of our sales were in Europe.”

Players who jumped on the Strings & Things/St. Blues bandwagon in the '80s included Joe Walsh and Glenn Frey of the Eagles, members of .38 Special, Albert King, Tom “T-Bone” Wolk, Bo Diddley, Billy F Gibbons, and Billy Squier. Jeff Carlisi was the lead guitarist for .38 Special at the time.

“We were on tour, and stopped by the store; if you were a musician and you played Memphis, you went to Strings & Things,” he said. “And they had one of their prototypes. I said, ‘This is a really cool guitar,’ and they asked if I’d like to be an endorser.

“The first one I got was a sunburst

(LEFT TO RIGHT) Eric Clapton during the development of his St. Blues signature model. The guitar never made it past the prototype stage. Billy Squier in the '80s with his St. Blues signature guitar. Tom Keckler and St. Blues President/CEO Bryan Eagle in the current Saint Blues Guitar Workshop.

single-pickup; I played it in the video for ‘If I’d Been the One’; it’s special because the neck plate was custom-engraved for me. Later, I got one in a Tele configuration, and it’s one of the best guitars I’ve ever owned. I’ve compared it to '50s Telecasters, and it’s as good, if not better. It records really well, especially for rhythm parts.”

The Bluesmaster – usually with a Telecaster-type pickup layout and controls – ultimately proved to be the company’s most popular model. Its two single-coil pickups were usually wound and wired to produce two output levels, and with the push/pull Volume and Tone knobs, a player could evoke eight distinct tones from the guitar.

S&T Custom/St. Blues instruments

were offered in other versions, including another Tele-like shape known as the Excalibur and a bass called the Blues King. Almost all were distinguished by a retro-cool strip of binding around the top edge of the body. The company even created an Eric Clapton signature model, though it never made it past the prototype stage.

In 1989, when the value of the U.S. Dollar fell against the Japanese Yen, the cost of parts from ESP rose dramatically, and St. Blues, lacking an easy substitute and with sales dipping, decided to focus on the its retail custom work. The brand was discontinued with some 2,500 instruments having been made.

Fast-forward 15 years; interest in St. Blues guitars has stoked internet

chatter, online auctions, and other communication methods to the point where in early 2006, Memphis businessman Bryan Eagle thought it time to reintroduce the line. So he bought the name and designs from Lovell and Lawing. His plan was to import Korean-made guitars *and* build an upscale "Workshop" series in Memphis using –just like on the '80s models– imported necks, bodies, and other parts. The scenario shifted slightly late in the year when the company found a Korean firm that makes higher-end instruments in smaller quantities. And as the product developed, Eagle came to the conclusion that the quality of the guitars was as good as the proposed Workshop guitars

would have been, and production costs were much lower.

Accordingly, his philosophy switched to, "Why not make one guitar that's as good as it can possibly be?" So, most of the new line follows the design trail

of the original; every guitar has 15:1 tuning keys, a double-action truss rod, custom brass or steel hardtail bridges, pickups designed to American specs and made with American materials, master Volume and Tone knobs, and pickup toggle switches. The bass has two Volume controls and a master Tone control.

The Bluesmaster II sports the Tele-like configuration with push/pull tapping. The Bluesmaster IV has three pickups in a single/single/humbucker layout with a five-way switch. The Bluescaster IV has the same layout and options as the Bluesmaster IV, but on a Tele-shaped body. The Bluesmaster II, Bluesmaster IV, and Bluescaster IV have swamp-ash

bodies and a C-shaped bolt-on maple neck, all with 25¹/₂" scale.

Perhaps the most marked departures in the new line are the Mississippi Bluesmaster and the 61 South. The

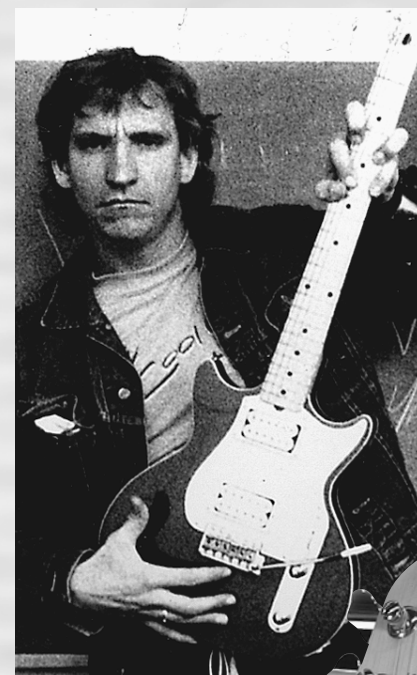
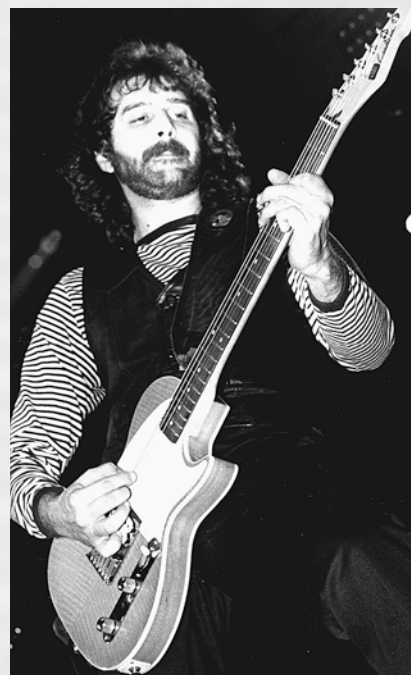
former has a mahogany body bound front and rear, mahogany neck, and two open-coil humbucker or St. Blues P90s. It has a 24³/₄" scale and in a departure, its controls are rear-loaded. The latter has a double-bound semi-hollow ash body, one-piece maple neck, dual-tapped single-coils or a P90 neck/tapped single-coil bridge, and 25¹/₂" scale.

The King Blues Bass is similar to its predecessor (profiled in "The Bass Space," July '07), except its strings are installed through ferrules on the back of the body. It has a 34" scale and a P/J pickup configuration. And where the bridges on the rest of the new lineup have cast-steel saddles, the Blues King's saddles are cast-brass plated in nickel.

On all models except the Mississippi Bluesmaster, black dots are placed on the maple fretboards, **continued on page 122 ...**

(LEFT TO RIGHT) Bluesmaster IV in Honey Sunburst. Bluescaster IV in Darkburst finish. 61 South in Tabacco Sunburst. Mississippi Bluesmaster in Antique Violin Flame finish and with P90. Mississippi Bluesmaster in Natural finish. Bluesmaster II in Honey Sunburst.





(LEFT) Jeff Carlisi in the early 1980s with his custom-made Strings & Things Custom, which he used extensively for slide. It also appeared in the video for the the band's hit, "If I'd Been The One." (RIGHT) Joe Walsh was an early St. Blues endorser.

St. Blues™

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while Indian rosewood 'boards get mother-of-pearl dots. All models except the Bluesmaster II are available with a figured top and abalone dot fretboard inlays.

The company still does all detail and setup on every instrument when it arrives in Memphis. Workers install custom-gauge Cleartone strings, cut and install a bone nut, polish the fretboard, adjust the neck, and set the saddle screws and intonation. Tom Keckler has been brought back onboard as a product specialist. The company also recently added a list of options for the line, including Lindy Fralin and Seymour Duncan pickups, Switchcraft jacks and switches, CTS potentiometers, and others. The company is also studying possible Memphis production of full-on custom instruments – one-offs built completely by hand, with more options in neck shape, radius, fret size, pickup routes, and tuners.

If all goes well, Eagle says his new Saint Blues Guitar Workshop will expand and could eventually implement CNC machinery for an in-house American line.

"Dealers are realizing we're not building a starter guitar at these prices," said Eagle. "Real players with collections and high-end instruments are the guys buying these – they like the look, they see the appeal, and they might remember the brand from the old days. Once they pick up and plug it in, they're sold. We probably have the best guitar on the market out there for under a thousand dollars. I feel like we really got it right this time."

To learn more, visit saintblues.com.



King Blues Bass in Cherry finish.