

FIRST PLAY



JOE DOE BY VINTAGE
GAS JOCKEY
£799

WHAT IS IT? Set-neck solidbody with a trio of mini-humbuckers and quite a backstory. It's a limited edition, too, at a far from limited price

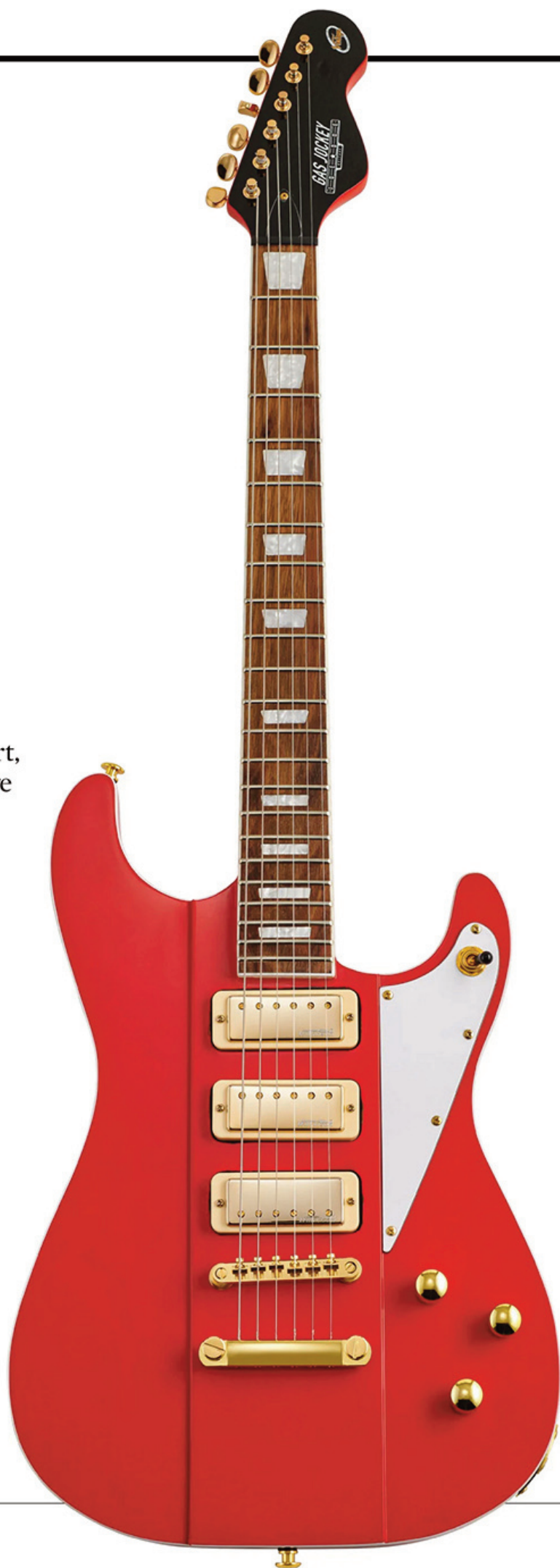
History Lesson

Designed in the UK by Ben Court, the new 2023 Joe Doe by Vintage range boasts totally fictitious history but some refreshingly different takes on the classics

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin

Aside from creating some very tidy (if highly derivative) designs, Vintage, the long-running house brand of UK distributor John Hornby Skewes, has a neat tie-up with the UK's Ben Court, the man behind Joe Doe Guitars. He describes himself as follows: "By day, I'm a screenwriter for film and TV, and by nights and weekends I make custom-built guitars with stories built in."

Our Joe Doe 'Gas Jockey' is one of three new designs released this year and its story concerns a certain "Wally 'Songman' Saban, a living, breathing, human jukebox", says the blurb. "Pull up into his New Jersey gas station on Fellowship Road and he'll not only fill your car with gas, but will play any song you can think of..." The tall tale continues over at the Vintage website, but let's take a closer look at the guitar.



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1. There's always something classy about a back-angled six-in-a-line headstock, isn't there? The Graph Tech nut is nicely cut and the tuners feel solid and stable in use

The Gas Jockey's outline is based on Vintage's Stratocaster knock-off, the V100, except here its maple neck is glued (not bolted) into a solid mahogany body. The flat-fronted body's top edge is quite cleanly white-plastic bound, and to add to the mash-up we get a slightly raised centre section recalling the good ol' Gibson Firebird, rather like the back-angled six-a-side headstock. There is a ribcage cut-out on the guitar's back and the heel is nicely contoured, too. The bright red gloss finish isn't for the faint-hearted and it's pretty well done, although at the end

With its shape and good weight, everything feels pretty familiar... The initial sounds reflect the Gibson/Fender hybrid design

of the fingerboard before the neck pickup some red paint has chipped off, which does slightly mar the illusion of opulence with all that gleaming gold hardware.

The opaque paint also hides any visual identification of the woods and whether or not that back-angled headstock is scarfed on. But the neck itself is pretty tidy, even though the rosewood fingerboard does look rather pale and, unusually, instead of a Fender-standard 648mm (25.5-inch) scale



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length, we have a PRS-like 'halfway house' scale of 635mm (25 inches).

Like that V100, we get three pickups, but these are tidy-looking Wilkinson-branded mini-humbuckers that are mounted like an original Gibson Les Paul Deluxe in cream rings. These rings sit in soapbar-sized cut-outs, which seem slightly oversized. And instead of the usual V100's Strat-style vibrato, here it's a hardtail with a Gibson-style tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece.

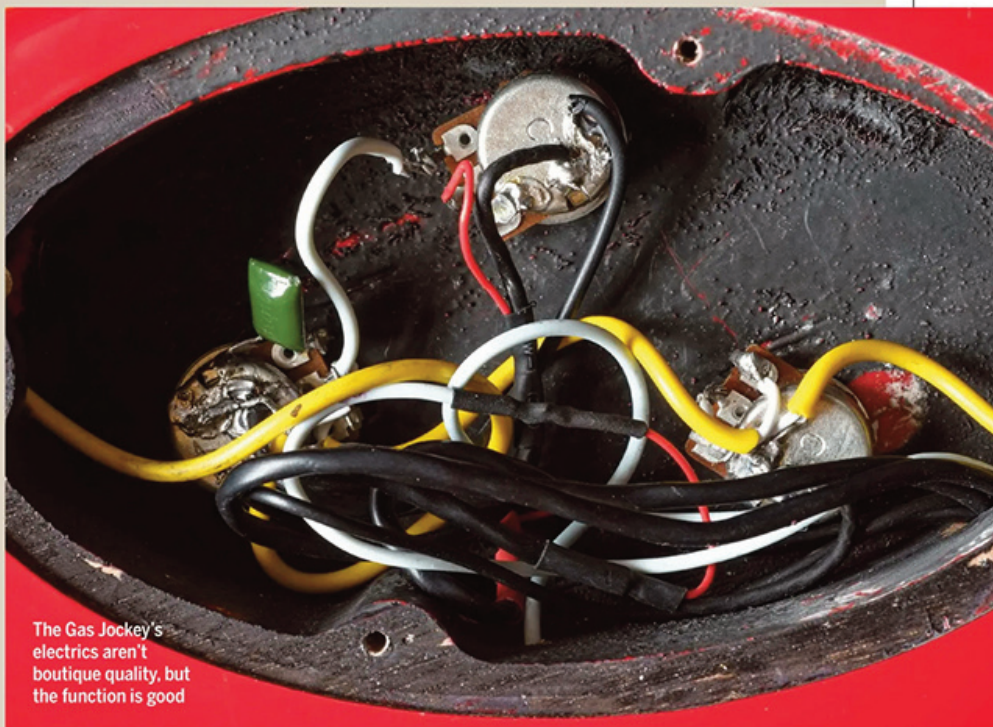
2. Along with a ribcage cut-out on the back, the heel area is nicely shaped meaning that top-fret access is very comfortable. Under the opaque finish, the neck is maple and the body is mahogany

UNDER THE HOOD

What's going on inside the 'Jockey?

As we've explained, the circuit here is pretty unusual, not least because you don't have a master volume, which actually would have been quite handy. The controls are rear-mounted in a slightly untidy cavity, though the white plastic cover is recessed flush with the back. The mini-pots have no visual identification save for their values: an audio taper A500k tone and two linear taper B500k volumes. The green Mylar tone cap has a 473J code: .047 μ f with a five per cent tolerance. It's not the tidiest soldering we've ever seen but is perfectly functional nonetheless.

When it comes to the Wilkinson WOCMHB mini-humbuckers, again, there's not too much information to be had, although Trev Wilkinson does confirm they're from his start-up M Series range, are made in China, and use Alnico V bar magnets. They have very similar DCR readings of approximately 5.7kohms, so they're not graduated for their respective positions.



The Gas Jockey's electrics aren't boutique quality, but the function is good

Mounted like a Les Paul Deluxe from the 70s, these Wilkinson mini-humbuckers all have pretty much the same DCRs. If you fancy a change, you could upgrade them or fit standard single-coil soapbars



On to the controls and again the Gas Jockey is different, with two volume controls: the control closest to the bridge is the volume for the bridge *and* neck pickups; the next one down from there is the volume for the middle pickup only; and the control lowest to the base is the master tone control.

Feel & Sounds

With its shape and a good weight of 3.62kg (7.96lb), everything feels pretty familiar. The neck feels a little wider than it actually is, 42mm at the nut, along with a perfectly good relaxed C profile that measures 22mm in depth at the 1st fret and 23.2mm by the 12th, a well-chosen middle ground. The fretwork on the 305mm (12-inch) cambered fingerboard is also pretty good but does use quite a wide and low wire, which measures around 2.75mm wide by 1.1mm high – definitely more 'Gibson' than 'Fender'. The frets are well polished, though, and the setup is very mainstream. To be honest, although we'd probably up the string gauge to 10s, with zero adjustment it's a pretty good player.

We did need to adjust the pickup heights, and a couple of the screws were a little tight and needed a bit of help to get moving. However, the initial sounds we hear reflect the Gibson/Fender hybrid design, the relatively low-output mini-humbuckers sitting rather well between the humbucker/

The Gas Jockey really mixes up the influences: a Strat-style body shape, set neck and Gibson-like tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece



JOE DOE BY VINTAGE GAS JOCKEY

PRICE: £799 (inc case)

ORIGIN: China

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany

NECK: Maple, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/42mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, pearloid trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium/jumbo

HARDWARE: Wilkinson Tune-o-matic-style bridge, Wilkinson Kluson-style WJ55 tuners – gold-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: 3x Wilkinson M Series WOCMHB covered mini-humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector, volume 1 (bridge and neck pickups), volume 2 (middle pickup) and master tone control

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.62/7.96

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: Other Joe Doe guitars for this year include the T-style semi-hollow Gambler (£649) and LP-style Hot Rod (£699)

LEFT-HANDERS: Not in the Joe Doe by Vintage range

FINISH: Gas Pump Red (as reviewed), Sparkling Gold Sand – both limited editions of 100 only

John Hornby Skewes

01132 865381

www.vintageguitarsrus.com

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PROS Interesting hybrid design; good build; neck shape; setup and playability; good voicing to the mini-humbuckers

CONS A few untidy points; unusual control circuit; wide 'n' low fretwire won't suit everyone

single-coil benchmarks, clean and clear with a smooth high-end and uncluttered lows.

Turning the second volume control off, the guitar acts like a two-pickup guitar via the three-way toggle switch. There's good contrast between the vintage-y honk at the bridge and that clear, fuller neck voice. The mix jangles nicely, too. That said,

Overall, the Gas Jockey comes across more as a pawnshop prize than a boutique beauty

there's quite a bit of bite here, especially at the bridge, that's very 60s garage-rock, and overall we could do with a little more depth to the voices.

Adding in the middle pickup creates some subtle mixes and there's plenty to play with. With the middle fully up and combined with the bridge pickup, there's an almost out-of-phase-y character, although the neck-and-middle position doesn't really capture the pronounced 'quack' of a Stratocaster. The middle pickup on its own has a good gnarly character with a bit of grit from your amp, and overall the Gas Jockey comes across more as a pawnshop prize than a boutique beauty.

Verdict

A lot of thought has gone into this guitar; it's certainly not just another copy in a limited colour. We get a tidy Joe Doe-logo'd hard case, certificate of authenticity and some very 50s-looking stickers that all tie in with that pretend backstory. None of that improves the guitar, of course, but again while it's quite an ambitious build and despite a couple of untidy bits, it feels good and plays well. The control circuit is a little odd but does offer plenty of subtle tonal shades, although the low-output pickups do veer on the bright and light side.

It would certainly be a very valid instrument in Vintage's standard range, too, especially in an ivory or black gloss finish. But as is, it's refreshingly different with a modern-retro mash-up vibe. Nice job. **G**

Unusually, we get one volume for the neck and bridge pickups, another for the middle pickup, plus a master tone – a system that might work better, especially for a live musician, if there was a master volume

