

ST. BLUES Blues King

HIGH-QUALITY HYBRID

By Willie G. Moseley

ANOTHER OF THE MANY interesting chapters in the history of American guitars is the saga of a short-lived upstart brand from Memphis.

The St. Blues line of guitars and basses were of excellent quality, reasonably-priced, and used by many notable players. An offshoot of Strings and Things, a guitar-parts retailer that opened for business in 1971, co-founder Chris Lovell said the idea for the store name came from an Ernie Ball t-shirt. The store grew, and also began carrying instruments and amplifiers. Moreover, the employees began modifying and repairing instruments, and their conversions of single-cutaway Les Pauls to double-cutaway models proved popular among many notable rock musicians in the 1970s.

In the early '80s, the company began to assemble Strings and Things Custom instruments, with bodies and necks supplied by ESP. The brand ultimately evolved into the St. Blues moniker.

"About all ESP did at that time was make a bunch of parts," Lovell recalled. "A guy of theirs named Toshi showed up at our store in a van; he was driving around the country, from store to store. I asked him about putting parts together so we could call 'em guitars, and they liked the idea. We did our first little run, and they weren't that great, but they were cool. That would have been in '78 or '79.

"ESP was a great bunch of folks," Lovell added. "Mr. Shibuya can't speak

much English – and my Japanese was non-existent – but he was cool. He's a vintage-guitar collector, so it was easy to talk to him about neck shapes, sounds, and cosmetics. I could say something like 'V-shaped maple neck' or '1963 Strat bridge pickup' and he'd grin, and we'd be on the same page!

"We'd get necks, bodies, and pickup assemblies from the Shibuya workshop; it was extremely good quality, and still affordable back then. Our companies taught each other a lot, and had a lot of respect for each other. Even when ESP became a full-blown guitar company, they didn't build anything like what they were building for us."

Most of the original St. Blues instruments had classic solidbody silhouettes, with the exception of the downsized, single-cutaway Bluesmaster.

"We had that one from the get-go, and it was our frontrunner from day one," Lovell recounted. "That was our way of having a guitar someone could endorse, and you'd know it, even when looking at it from a hundred feet away."

The bass in the lineup was known as the Blues King. It had a classic offset double-cutaway body, distinguished by a strip of binding around the top edge (as were almost all St. Blues instruments). The Blues King body was usually a two-piece ash item, and was usually finished in a retro-vibe color, such as vintage-style sunburst. The body also had an ample belly cut on the back. Necks were one-piece

maple, and came with a maple fretboard as part of the neck, or with a rosewood cap fretboard, and had 20 frets. The headstock had a unique silhouette with four-on-a-side tuners. Scale was 34".

The pickups were in a P/J configuration, and most early guitars and basses had DiMarzios, but according to a company official, as the line transitioned from Strings and Things Custom to St. Blues, pickups became proprietary and were made in Japan.

Controls consisted of two Fender-style volume knobs

St. Blues Blues King,
serial #35304.

and a master tone knob, and the bass had a side-mounted jack.

The Strings and Things Custom/St. Blues line made an impression on a lot of frontline musicians in the '80s, and numerous endorsers were seen playing the unique line, which had a cool retro-vibe and offered high quality. Among the bassists who played the Blues King were T-Bone Wolk of Hall & Oates, and Donald "Duck" Dunn.

However, not even a host of famous endorsers could salvage the original St. Blues line, and Lovell acknowledged that the company's financial inexperience ultimately caused the plug to be pulled in the late '80s.

"We were all about the product, not the money," he said. "And we paid a price for that. When we shut down, we had 60 to 80 dealers in the U.S., as well as a distributor in Europe who would actually match the U.S. sales totals each month... if not beat 'em. But once you can't have something, it becomes a legend. There were only 2,500 instruments total, and half of those were sold in Europe."

The St. Blues Blues King Bass is a rare and unique-looking instrument the balances nicely, has a decent sound, and offers a plethora of vintage panache. It looked retro-cool when it was new – and still does. What's more, the fact that it was made in Memphis from ESP bodies and necks gives it an unusual heritage in guitar lore. **VG**

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