

Guitar

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'DRINKING AND RECORDING: THAT'S WHAT WE DO'

Gomez

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MINISTRY

MACHINE HEAD

MEGADETH

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AMPS: THE TRUTH

REVIEWS: GIBSON ACOUSTICS • MESA/BOOGIE • YAMAHA SEMIS • OVATION • GORDON-SMITH
TOM ANDERSON ELECTRIC • MARSHALL FX PEDALS • WARWICK • BRIAN MAY REPLICAS

PLAY
GET MYSELF
ARRESTED &
WHIPPIN'
PICCADILLY

BRIAN MAY REPLICAS

Mayday!

The Red Special, the Fireplace, the Old Lady – Brian May's famed and much-nicknamed guitar ranks alongside Clapton's Blackie and Jimi's Woodstock Strat as one of the most fabled tools in rock history. Sean Walker recounts the story behind a most esteemed plank – and its many imitators...

The Red Special was born in 1953, the result of 18 months hard work and development between Brian and his genius electrical engineer father, Hansie. Disenfranchised with the coveted Strats and Les Pauls of the day – and, anyway, unable to afford any of them – the pair set about designing and building their own interpretation of the perfect electric guitar.

The guitar earned its nickname 'The Fireplace' because the huge one-piece mahogany neck was laboriously hand-carved using a penknife from just that – the column support from an old minor-type fireplace that a family friend happened to be throwing out. At the nut the Red Special's neck is about 40mm wide, with a string spacing of 40mm; most production electrics vary between 41–43mm at the nut with a string spacing of around 34mm. Add a depth of 20mm at the 1st fret (thickening to 31mm at 12th) and you've got a chunky affair that puts even Jeff Beck's 'baseball-necked'

Strats firmly in the shade. The glossy pickboard is actually made of oak, painted black with that classic British DIY substance known as Rustin's Plastic Coating and dotted with hand-filled pearl buttons pinched from Brian's mother's sewing box – as was a knitting needle end that would soon find a new home as a vibrato arm tip. The guitar featured 24 frets – 'a nice, neat double octave,' according to Brian – with a zero fret and a loose-tensioned 510mm (24") scale length – the latter, in theory, making for a more bend-friendly playing experience despite the 184mm (7.25") fingerboard radius which toughens the feel of May's favourite .009"–.042" strings.

The neck joins the body via a peddle-like heel extension which slots into a rectangular cut-out in the body, stopping just short of the bridge pickup. Although originally designed to be glued in, the snug neck/body joint is also secured by the single bolt visible on the back of the guitar. This bolt also acts as an anchor for the brass-red end which the Mays bent into shape on the kitchen cooker.

The central section of the body was formed from an old oak table. The rest – including the distinctive curves – were made up from two layers of blockboard, hollowed out to create acoustic chambers, then stuck onto the sides of the oak insert. These acoustic chambers are the key to much of the guitar's incredible high-gain resonance (in truth, May originally planned an I-hole but never got round to it). The whole body was finally covered in a mahogany veneer, stained a deep brick-red colour and then lacquered with Rustin's, rounded off by binding sourced from some readily available shelf edging.



Speaking, recently restored Red Special

But the May's ingenuity didn't end there. Brian wanted a wide-travel vibrato that would drop an octave and (gasp!) actually return to pitch after use. They realised that most vibratos of the day were riddled with flaws, the main culprit being friction in the strings' path of travel.

After building a few prototypes they settled on a design which used six individual aluminium bridge pieces screwed straight to the body, each supporting a low-friction steel roller saddle. Intonation was handled by small slots cut into the top of each bridge piece; if the intonation was out on an individual string, the roller could be popped out of its slot and moved back or forward accordingly to an appropriate slot. Behind these, a handmade brass block rocked against a case-hardened steel knife edge hidden under the top



Red Special, 30 years of gigging has taken its toll

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