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“IT’S RED AND IT’S SPECIAL!”

BRIAN MAY SIGNATURE GUITAR

Jason Sidwell • Guitar Techniques • August 2013

Originally launched in 2001 by Burns, this version of Brian May's Red Special guitar was released in 2006 by Brian May guitars, a company headed up by Barry Moorhouse of House Music, Pete Malandrone (Brian May's tech) and Brian May himself.

As you'd expect, this guitar is available in red (antique cherry) just like Brian's own guitar but there are other options if you hanker for the design and tones but not this colour. Natural, blue, all black, black/gold, gold, white, green, three tone bursts; there's much on offer.

While the design brief was for a guitar that offered 'best product at an affordable price', there's not a huge apparent difference between this model and Brian's own. Certainly from a distance, they look very similar as regards body shape, pickups, controls and dot arrangement for the 24 frets.

Up close, the main differences are bridge type (here it's a Wilkinson bridge), the whammy bar (this one has a unique curve where it connects to the bridge), the type of volume/tone dials, no pickup surrounds and the headstock décor. The mahogany body (the original is oak with a mahogany veneer), also features an acoustic chamber that aids resonance at louder volumes as well as making for a lighter weight guitar.

For a guitar in this price range, there are some noticeable bonuses too; the Grover tuning lockers, combined with the graphite nut (a zero fret is present, just as on the original), helped tuning stability even when going for the bigger whammy bar dives that Brian favoured during the late 80s.

There's also the workmanship on show; joints, frets and paintwork are pretty much faultless. For the more discerning, we liked the fact that the nut width of 45mm at the 1st fret is a little more than other guitars that typically favour 42-43mm.

The neck isn't as deeply contoured as Brian's own but it is more substantial than many modern rock axes; with the nut width and neck contour we found it very comfortable to play. If you've found open string chords like A major a bit of a squeeze on a standard electric, you'll love the room two extra millimetres affords here.

Talking of playability, each guitar comes strung with a .009 gauge set of strings enabling easy bend strings and smooth finger vibrato.



Tone

Having used this guitar over a period of several months – most extensively during show work for We Will Rock You – we're happy to report that the tones available are not only unique but also very reminiscent of Brian's own.

This is down to the three retro single coil pickups that ape Brian's own Burns Tri-Sonic pickups. These are wired in series (instead of the more common wired in parallel) which means that each pickup turned on increases output volume. Three pickups may not be that unusual but two sets of switches certainly are (white here, same colour as on Brian's red special); the higher placed set turns the pickup on/off and the lower set is for in/out phase reversal. If two pickups are on and one is reverse phased, the resulting tone is minus the sonic elements that are shared by both pickups.

This can result in some very unique sounds, from round humbucker based tones (in phase) through to thinner, almost vocal sounding tones that can help a solo cut through a band mix (out of phase).

From Bohemian Rhapsody and Fat Bottom Girls through to One Vision and I Want It All, this guitar undoubtedly gets you much closer to Brian's tone than any typical Strat or Les Paul. Of course, to get even closer you'll want to factor in choice of pick (Brian favours old sixpence coins, sometimes fingers) effects (treble boost, delay, phaser, chorus) and amplifier (Vox AC30 with top boost, the Deacy amp) but this guitar is a substantial aspect to May's magic. With over 20 pickup setting options, it's certainly one of the most tonally versatile guitars on the market!

In Use

While the amount of pickup options can seem overwhelming, some are favoured more than others by Brian. So we spent much time on his favourite tone; the bridge and middle pickups in phase. Used for various solos (check out his lead licks on Brighton Rock), it's a thick sound with a specific bite that's great for soloing (eg the scalic runs in It's A Kind Of Magic proved great for this) as well as low string playing (eg Ogre Battle's busy 16th note riffing). Certainly, it's the closest option if you're chasing a typical bridge humbucker tone but with an appealing raspy edge if you dig in on the lower wound strings.

Combining neck and bridge pickups (out of phase) has a thinner, almost honky, tone that paired with amp distortion (ideally a Vox AC30) is pleasingly unique. Check out the solo on Liar (from Queen 1) for reference.

Another favourite tone of Brian's combines the neck and middle pickups for a warmer option than bridge and middle; listen to the solo on Roger's Rocket (from Queen 2). A variation of this, features the middle pickup set out of phase which is vital if you want to duplicate the harmonically rich lead tone for the solos on Somebody To Love and Bohemian Rhapsody (add a little phaser effect to the latter song for extra authenticity). With the light string gauge and easy playability high up the fretboard, playing the Bo Rhaps solo was a very joyous experience!

Conclusion

Brian May fans will love this guitar; great price, attention to build quality and an obvious visual appeal tick the important boxes. The tonal options also make it a must have but not only for those that hanker to emulate him. The variety and uniqueness on offer here make this an outstanding recording guitar when you've run out of options on your usual guitar collection. Based on these factors, it's easy to justify how special this Red Special really is!

Specs

- Mahogany body, with acoustic chamber + pinstripe binding
- New two-piece scratch plate
- Mahogany neck
- 24" scale (Depth : 22mm at 1st fret, 24mm at 12th fret)
- 24 fret ebony fingerboard
- Fingerboard width : 45mm at 0 fret, 57mm at 24th fret
- Grover GH303 locking tuners
- Dual truss rod
- Graphite nut
- Wilkinson bridge with brass saddles
- BM Custom tremolo arm
- 3 x Brian May retro style, series wired, single coil pick-ups
- Master volume & tone controls
- Original BM switching system
- Individual pickup in/out phase and on/off

