

28 For 50

Paul Smith Marks Birthday with Special Guitar

DURING OUR INTERVIEW with early-on-the-bandwagon PRS user Howard Leese (December '08), the guitarist mentioned Paul Reed Smith's latest creation. The normally reserved pro, a veteran of Heart and Paul Rodgers' bands who has seen and played every type of classic guitar, was ebullient over the latest PRS.

Smith is the visionary builder/entrepreneur who has been making guitars for more than 30 years. His company and designs advanced the Ted McCarty concept of guitar making from the golden age of electric guitar, and his advocates include Carlos Santana, Al DiMeola, Ted Nugent, David Grissom, Ricky Skaggs, and of course, Leese. That musicians of stature have for decades gravitated to Smith's instruments is a given. What does warrant investigation is his recent assertion he has hit a pinnacle in his craft.

There's something alluring about the notion that age 50 marks a milestone for a master instrument builder. It held true for Stradivarius, Guarneri, Amati, D'Angelico, Leo Fender, Ted McCarty, and others. And now Smith feels he has reached a level of maturity and depth. But, is it a coincidence, harmonic convergence, or simply the nature of evolution?

Smith claims the electric guitar is the "violin of our time." Check out the marquees of Hard Rock Cafes globally or the many guitar-shaped Budweiser signs hanging in the windows of taverns in every neighborhood, and few would argue. For years Smith has pursued the goal of building electric guitars in reflection of the fine violins and vintage guitars in their appearance, sound, feel, craftsmanship, and intrinsic value. Over the last decade he has followed that thread, studying the lives and artistry of master luthiers as he systematically applied the advances and refinements gained through painstaking experiments with sound and the electric guitar's physical structure. The result is an elite series of instruments originally dubbed "Paul's guitars" due to his obsessive hands-on involvement at the bench. Now set for release, they're called Paul's 28.

The wood is breathtaking; Smith's Private Stock maple tops are legendary, but these 28 up the ante. They also have an ultra-rare ribbon-striped mahogany back, hand-selected from

a warehouse full of wood. The color, dubbed Burnt Gold, embodies a staining method Smith has worked on for three years and enhances the already stunning appearance of the woods. Moreover, the 28 are hand-modified by Paul and finished in a thin nitrocellulose lacquer that contributes to the instruments' physical beauty, feel, and resonance. Even at the superficial level it's clear this is a sufficient step forward in the evolution of the PRS guitar. Look deeper and it's easy to see refinement and thoughtful innovation, subtle and overt, at every stage of creation – components, processes, and workmanship.

A remarkable innovation is Smith's choice of Pernambuco wood for the hand-shaped neck blank. Long used for the finest violin bows, pernambuca is arguably the most resonant and toneful material ever used for this purpose – a first for the guitar. Consequently, the 28-guitar necks vibrate uniquely and musically, and are eminently stable. Tap them and they resonate like a marimba, play them hard and they bear up like a tank.

Eye-catching appointments abound, including dark Mexican rosewood headstock veneers, fretboards of exotic black rosewood, and Celtic Cross inlays of Rippled Green Abalone, Paua Heart, and Mammoth Ivory. But, eye candy aside, every aspect of the 28 reflects the luthier's conception and execution. "There is no part that has not been deliberately chosen," Smith said.

Pickups are new PRS humbuckers that tell a story all their own. Some of the first to offer Paul's discriminating PAF pickup specs, they use rare magnets and wiring under attractive gold covers. To reinstate the mojo, Smith acquired the exact wire made on the original machine used on the vintage Gibson units of the late '50s! The company's working term is PRS proprietary 1957/2008 pickups. Smith calls them "PAFs on steroids."



A small number of these guitars are already out there in the hands of player clients like Sergio Vallin of Mexican supergroup Mana (who has two), super

picker Tommy Emmanuel, respected author-guitarist Tom Wheeler, and a couple other high-profile endorsers. The first official 28 were built in November and December, and like the initial production run, will be available to customers of dealers. The price – \$25,000 – is indicative of the quality and workmanship.

So, do you have to be a well-connected rock star or collector with deep pockets to experience the grandeur and magic of Paul's newest creation? Early indications say no. The prototype of the production version has the quality and resonance of its cost-prohibitive brethren, and all of Paul's sonic and aesthetic refinements, at a retail price of \$4,400. Scheduled for release at this year's winter NAMM, it will ship in three incarnations; Sunburst 22, Smokeburst McCarty, and Sunburst 245. Figured maple tops are standard, as are the thin lacquer finish, 1957/2008 humbuckers (with satin-finished nickel covers) and PRS locking tuners.

How does the line version stand up to its more expensive sibling? A Sunburst 22 prototype offered for examination

sports the same pickups, wiring, hand-shaped neck, and overall balance. Its maple top has the novel ultra-thin finish. Construction, materials and finish are all top-shelf. Plugged in during a recording session, the proto revealed an obvious emphasis on vibration and tone, living up to the claims made by Smith.

"I first wanted to ask Paul, 'Are you sure this is a solidbody guitar?'" said Tom Wheeler. "It has liveliness and resonance that led me to believe it must be chambered. Before I got the question out, he began to laugh; he had the exact same reaction. In fact, he had to have the guitar X-rayed to make sure something hadn't slipped past him. It is indeed a solidbody but has a special resonance I can only attribute to the many small changes Paul has incorporated, from string length and contact with hardware to thickness of plating and finish. When I strum a chord, then immediately mute, I can still hear the guitar resonate – unplugged."

"I've been playing PRS guitars for close to 15 years now," added Sergio Vallin, of Mexican supergroup Mana. "Throughout the years, I've learned how important it is to play an instrument that you know, and with Paul's guitar, I have it all. He has an amazing passion to achieve perfection; he searches for new things without losing the essence. This guitar is the closest to perfection in sound, performance and design." – **Wolf Marshall**