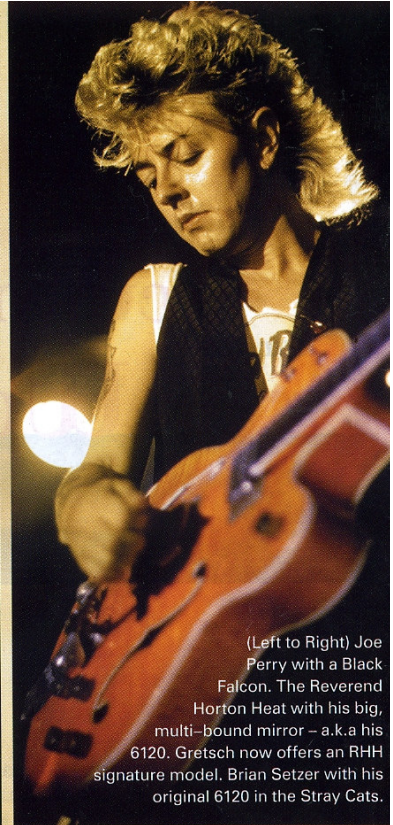
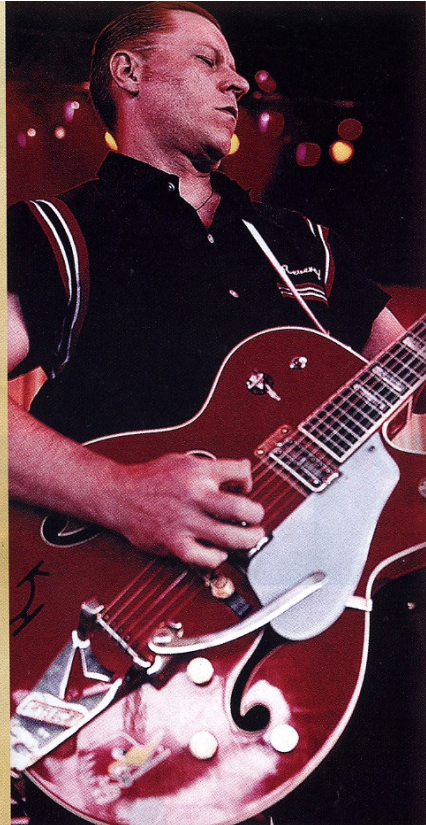


GRETSCH GUITARS

THE ARTFUL ICON



BY BILLY MURPHY



(Left to Right) Joe Perry with a Black Falcon. The Reverend Horton Heat with his big, multi-bound mirror – a.k.a his 6120. Gretsch now offers an RHH signature model. Brian Setzer with his original 6120 in the Stray Cats.

Retro-artist Sara Ray's studio explodes with World War II,-Fly Boy memorabilia. Frankly she's obsessed. Frankly, she's self-professed obsessed. And though she's famous for her Rockabilly and Classic Car art & photography, she finally... nervously... tackled the task of putting her obsession into visual form. She didn't turn to canvas or celluloid though, she went to a Gretsch guitar. "That big, sweet Gretsch reminded me very much of the curves and lines of the old bombers," Sara states.

Sara's no common mistress of the Gretsch guitar mystic – her work attests her profound individuality – but Sara like so many others, found herself swallowed up by the shark of all guitars, the Gretsch. Yet, from within the belly of this Great White (Falcon?), Sara was able to produce one of the master works of her career, The Victory Guitar. After spending some time being inspired, walking the beaches at Normandy, Sara returned home to complete the guitar on the 60th anniversary of

D-Day. The Gretsch “gives my art a voice,” Sara says.

But isn't this the very art and status of Gretsch; giving so many artists a voice. Not simply a twangy voice, or a sustaining voice or a diving Bigsby, “is it out of tune, or is it in tune?” voice, but a voice for their words, tones, emotions, passion, *and* image. Even God loves a Strat, but could Eddie Cochran really ever been THE Eddie Cochran

without a 6120? If there ever was an illustration to the adage, “The whole equals more than the sum of its parts,” it is a Gretsch guitar. With every blistering Setzer run, you not only hear Brian's talent, discipline, love and hate, you also feel his guitar... its history and its journey; it's womanly curves that Brian none-too-coincidentally hugs as his own.

But how did Gretsch get where it is on this evolutionary six-string food chain? In those beginning days, there were no marketing plans. There was no focus group research. Yet, for some reason the Gretsch guitar, in its form and design has become an icon. Who do we thank? Who do we even congratulate? Was it even a conscious result of the guitar maker? Gretsch guitars reached their



prominence in a time when the cart came before the horse, when guitars were made for the average man to play his average tune, not like today when guitars seem to be designed and built for that imaginary star who might some day be playing it.

To understand the revered artistic and iconic status of the Gretsch guitar, one has to first appreciate the

past. Gretsch has something but a few guitar companies can possibly emulate. Gretsch has history. The ideal of “Respect your elders,” has become a lost art in American culture, yet this is one of the very reasons so many artists, players and fans love Gretsch so much. Even with the models made in the 21st Century, lovers of the guitar can see and feel the age of the company's 123 year heritage. Gretsch has lived in 3 centuries and its age wears well.

The first truly iconic, artful Gretsch guitars showed up the same year Rhett told Scarlett, “Frankly my darling, I don't give a damn.” In 1939 Dorothy was skipping off to the Emerald City and suddenly Gretsch guitars appeared with all sorts of

visual (and technical) peculiarities. They had the Cat's Eye, Teardrop sound holes that would later plaster MTV 30 times a day in George Michael's



biggest hit, "Faith." They had the staggered, art-deco "chromatic" tail-piece and bridge that suspiciously echoed the shape of

that tower in Oz. The Synchronatic guitars were then, and still are a true Gretsch art-piece. Maybe the radical design came from the genius of Jimmy Webster who had just started to work with the company. Maybe it came from Gretsch's boredom with following Gibson's form and function approach. You couldn't imitate a better guitar than Gibson, but Fred Gretsch Sr. the president at the time was tired of living in the shadows.

Fred Sr. was truly the first and maybe the best inventor of Gretsch progress. Early in the century he had worked to make Gretsch-American drums a true masterwork of design and innova-



tion. With his ant-like colony of personnel he had developed the first warp-free drum hoop and virtually invented the throw-off snare. Later he made Gretsch the first mass pro-

ducer of drums to listen to Louie Bellson's crazy idea of the double-bass setup. Alex Van Halen says thank you. Under his guidance he also broke free of traditional guitar construction and sculpted Gretsch's first gallery-worthy guitars.

But it wouldn't be just the shape or the gadgetry of Gretsch guitars that brought them to the throne of veneration. Gretsch might just have been the first guitar maker to inject the six-string with something called "Vibe." What made Myrna Loy stand out among all actresses? She wasn't any prettier, any more glamorous. She just projected that extra vibe, that undeterminable undeniable . So it was too with the '57 Chevy and the 64 1/2 Mustang. Jayne Mansfield had the prettier face and the tighter body, but Marilyn, Marilyn had the vibe. Gretsch does too.

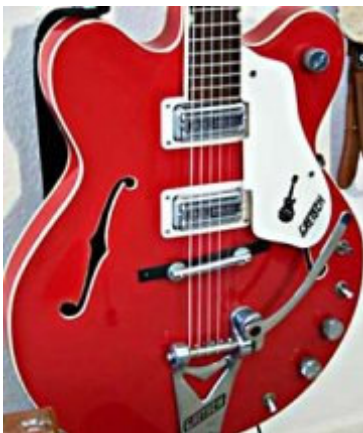
Transcending time and space and even music's worst enemy, faddishness, Gretsch has never



been out of sync. A Gretsch guitar is equally as beautiful in Duane Eddy's 50's rousing or Bo Diddley's 60's rhythm as it is in the ugliness of 70's glam-rock or 80's new wave. When Soundgarden forged Grunge into the pop music of the 90's, Chris Cornell slammed it every step of the way

with a cornucopious plethora of reissue Gretsch Sparkle Jets. The were gold and pearl and silver. The were ugly, dirty and beautiful all at the same time. Neil Young is infamous for stirring the masses with his Bigsby harnessed Les Paul, but when he straps on his big switch & knob-laden White Falcon, the audience lets go and melts in their seats. It's like the foreplay has finally ended. Le Grande Mort.

This is not to say Gretsch should be respected too piously. With just as many missteps as



Warhol's garish visions, Gretsch earns high marks for kitsch too. There have been Monkees guitars and Roy Clark advertisements. There have

been the too-desperate models the Viking and the Bikini. For every 6120 and White Falcon, there has been a "Committee" and a "Beast." Yet, tastelessness isn't the opposite of art, it's a part of it. And this just could be the secret to Gretsch's artful success: their perseverance. The multi-rising Phoenix coming from the lava reformed over and over. There is a kind-of art just in this method, this journey.

As for artists, Gretsch has always held a

particularly enamoring position. Probably what most musicians see in Gretsch, like all great art is; they see themselves. That certain



Gretsch guitar simply serves as a big, multi-bound mirror. An artist can pour himself or herself into those over-sized sound holes and flow back out again changed, electrified and hopefully, electrifying. Setzer does it. Poison Ivy does it. Rev. Horton Heat does too. It's a culmination of the fingers, the flash and the fins.

It's not always about the forefront though. Background men like Malcolm Young and Cliff Gallup have given the art of Gretsch a resonance that sustains beyond "the image wearing the prop." Probably not-too coincidentally both of these guitarists used solid planks of Gretsch to redefine what it means for an artist to be invisible yet "seen." While knickered-up Angus Young dances and twirls his audience into frenzies rarely seen outside of an AC/DC world, it's



the massive chunks of brother Malcolm's Gretsch tone that drives the drug down their throats. While "Race with the Devil" is a figurative book about Gene Vincent's Rock & Roll lifestyle, it was also

brought to very literal life by the piercing, distinct, lightning bolt notes Cliff Gallup reeled off his Duo Jet, back there, in the shadows.

No one knows exactly when any entity takes on the status of an icon. Jimmy Stewart was just a sweet man who acted in some interesting movies. But then one day America woke up and Jimmy Stewart was an icon. He stood for all that was good and noble and beautiful about America. So now this simple guy stands as a symbol, an emblem that other contemporaries like Tom Hanks will forever have to chase after. What makes Babe Ruth an icon and Hank Aaron not? Who decides that the Rolex is the ideal and that the Movado is just a really nice watch? (As a perfect example, my spell checker recognized Rolex but not Movado). Like falling out of love, it's just something that happens. You go to sleep one night and the next morning you wake up and it's all different. All the crying, pleading, lobbying and begging just won't make a difference. Like that feeling you have the morning after, an icon, just is.

Some would say *IT* happened for Gretsch



when George played his Country Gentleman on the Ed Sullivan show. And

no one could ask for a finer assemblage of events than that whole Beatles experience. Yet, that's just nostalgia talking. Trying to discern the exact day and time that Gretsch became an icon is like looking in a dark closet for a black cat that just isn't there. But it sure is fun.

In today's world of manufactured heroes and marketed successes it's hard to identify the true icons. We know death can help. Kurt Cobain is a Jesus and Eddie Vedder is a punch line. Yet, Gretsch is alive and kicking. Luck can be a big help too. For his lucky grass-skimming catch Franco Harris is divine in Pittsburgh, Rocky Blount is just somebody whose name sounds like someplace you go hiking. Yet for Gretsch, luck has little to do with its surviving two world wars, the Great Depression, the Baldwin Incident, two cataclysmic factory fires -- not to mention the hockey stick-bolt neck TK 300. Few could disagree that Gretsch's art and icon status is well-deserved.

Madonna's first guitar was a Gretsch. Check out the VH1 special on her life and career and you can see some grainy home video footage of her playing in her boyfriend's band before he allowed her to steal the microphone. She later traded in that little solid-body Corvette for a bit of super-stardom, but Gretsch did always have a funny way of turning up in some funny places.

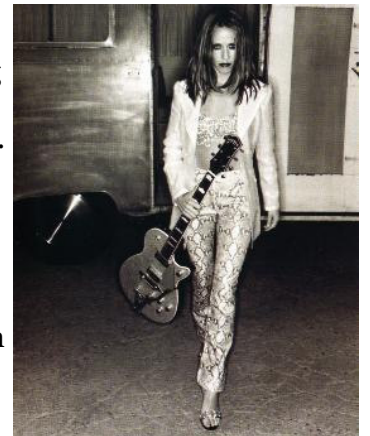
Right away you know Matthew Broderick's character in "Ferris Bueller's Day off" is spoiled because he has a White Falcon leaning against the wall.

Gretsches can also be seen in non-musical movies "Hope Floats," and "The Dish," as well as the really cool opening to "The Kids in the Hall." Robert Duvall won an Academy Award hacking at a Rancher in "Tender Mercies," and everybody danced the "Hand Jive" to a Jet Firebird in "Grease." Gretsch guitars also had obvious starring roles in musical movies like "Help," "Cry Baby," "The Girl Can't Help It," and "La Bamba."

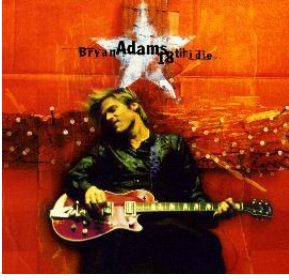
But Gretsch's real home is not in the movies, it's in the music. From the serious-simple plucks of Duane Eddy to the genius-generous licks of Chet Atkins there's the music that transcends the generations to be imitated, altered and mutated in a never ending 60 cycle hum. Dave Widerman, the artist relations manager at the Hollywood Guitar Center supplied a Gretsch Red Sparkle Jet for a photo shoot for Brian Adam's red-flavored "18 'til I Die." Yet, after Adams got hold of the guitar, he loved the sound and the tone so much, he not only bought the model but ordered a second G6129TR as a backup. On a different note, Sheryl Crow used a Gretsch for the cover art on her self-titled album yet, finally gave up on the guitar as its Bigsby's Vibrato worked against her obsession

with perfect-pitch tuning. The Gretsch Silver Jet worked perfectly though for the monochrome trailer trash art design.

Gretsch guitars have always carried more than their own weight when it came to being an ultimate status symbol. We crushed "keeping up with the Jones" under our gigantic SUV wheels long ago into the territory of label-status nirvana. And though Gretsch certainly would seem to be more utilitarian than superficial, the guitars have figured prominently as a status symbol. At the turn of the 20th century, better than a third of Gretsch guitars were bought by baby boomers brimming with expendable income. Few barely remember how to play the guitar, but wanted their Gretsch as a symbol of their success. Because after all, for the throngs brought up on Beatles' music, Gretsch was the ultimate holy grail.



Artists are no less guilty of this status-conscious methodology. Too many have tried to take the short-cut path to immediate respect by strapping on a Strat, a Les Paul or, of course, a Gretsch. They might have the budget for it, but the artists that gain the respect are those who



“deserve” to be wearing that Gretsch. This is why all the great Gretsch artists came to the guitars early in life. To be a Gretsch player, one has

to spend years to learn all the mysteries and puzzles from these electric conundrums.

The icon and art status of Gretsch guitars is as strong today as it has ever been. Bono of U2 ordered a specially made “Green Falcon” and adorned it with a pickguard that says “The Goal is Soul.” Though he rarely plays guitar, it can be seen on stage with him at all times, like a recent Saturday Night Live performance where the guitar simply rested on its stand projecting everything Gretsch. But not resting on its laurels Gretsch can still be seen as the workhorse guitar of many top selling and especially top touring artists. With the pre-Baldwin vs. post-Baldwin debate pretty much concluded – The new guitars are simply made better – Gretsch is proceeding to produce instruments and alliances that will assure its continued status.

For a time Gretsch’s reputation was overshadowed by controversies surrounding its buy-back from Baldwin. Baldwin had purchased Gretsch in 1967 and most guitar aficionados would agree Gretsch suffered slow degradation in quality and style during Baldwin’s reign. Thus when, Fred

Gretsch III bought back the company and reissued the most popular models again, it would seem fans would be happy, they weren’t. It didn’t matter that the quality was better and the guitars were a durable and attainable instrument again, traditionalists detested that the guitars were made in Japan. Yet, the guitar sales grew mightily and the new Gretsches quickly continued the tradition of gracing magazine covers, album covers and number 1 hits.

Brian Setzer could be credited with a large part of Gretsch’s continuing status as an icon. From the 1980’s through current times, Setzer



amassed a huge blend of hits, credits and accolades. From Rockabilly to Big Band to Movies, TV and outright Pop, Brian Setzer has kept the Gretsch guitar at the forefront of popular culture, all the while becoming an icon himself for resilience, versatility and of course, extraordinary talent. All this has culminated in a very successful line of signature models, every bit as popular as many former Chet Atkins guitars (though time will tell if they will reach similar icon status). Like Atkins before him, Setzer has taken a direct hand in designing and refining his signature line.

Whether many Gretsch guitars will be hung on the walls simply as art, in a Rembrandt-like fashion, it is yet to be known – more than a few are

now. But if black-velvets of dogs playing cards can reach such status Gretsch can too. Duke Kramer relates a story of how in the 1930's, for some odd reason, Gretsch realized they were selling a ton of their banjos to dentists. The ortho-
sect were found not to be playing ragtime, but they simply liked the instruments for office decoration. Who knows, the steel and fastener-laden instrument could have been the inspiration for the latter-century phenomenon: kids' braces. They do look similar.

Gretsch guitars have become such a timeless icon mainly because they have lived in so many generations. Every model conveys its era's fashion, style and self-image. To look at a 70's White Falcon, one can see its jagged, "blade" pickguard and know the times then were stilted and edgy. Post-war 50's Gretsches carried the beauty and the hope of the new world with their inventive features and positive emblems: Was it just coincidence that headstocks were adorned with lucky horseshoes and knobs had arrows that pointed up, up & up!? In the sixties, the times were-a-changin' and Gretsch threw away traditions such as single cutaway bodies and began to cater to the youth



movement with guitars like the Twist and the Corvette. In all their inventiveness Gretsch guitars were not beyond copying trends either. Long-known for following the successful designs of Gibson, Gretsch could have been a pioneer of reverse engineering and marketing. Taking apart what was successful in others' guitars, Gretsch would throw in a witch's brew of its own characteristics and refinements to invent something as new-yet-familiar as Chris Isaak's music or Steven Spielberg's films. Not only Gibson, but Harmony, Martin and Epiphone should all be flattered with Gretsch's sincerest form of imitation.

And in this neo-retro world of ours where everything comes back, Gretsch has something for everyone.

Maybe the icon and art status of Gretsch guitars is due to the amalgam of images the guitars represent. This is why so many logos carry the Gretsch body shape. Matt Umanov's world-known guitar shop carries it. And so does Starr's Guitars. As artist Sara Ray would attest, art is in the mind of the beholder. And Gretsch guitars are always in the minds of many, representing the angst of country, the lust of rockabilly or the power of rock & roll.