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Trace Invaders

1982 was the year of three million unemployed, the Falklands war, Chariots Of Fire, and those first rottenly-mastered albums on CD. On the good side, mind you, UK guitarists could buy themselves a Tokai. Andrew Munro tells the story of the copies that changed our world

We're so used to great replicas these days that it's hard to recall how we felt when we first saw guitars like the two above. At first glance, it's a black-guard '70s Strat and a tasty custom-colour metallic green '57. But look again. They're not Fenders: they're a Tokai Silver Star and a Tokai Springy Sound... guitars which made Fender sit up and pay attention to what was happening in their market place.

By the late '70s, the major American guitar makers were paying the price for long-standing

quality issues. As the big, blunt crayon of history has it even today, '70s guitars were terrible – a decade of wobbly necks and poor finishes. By contrast, players were becoming all dewy-eyed about instruments of the late '50s and early '60s. For Fender fans, 'pre-CBS' had become an indicator of high quality and great sound.

Of course, the reality was less clear-cut: even the Strat's legendary '56-'57 era V-shaped neck may have initially arisen from poor quality control and a new guy on the cutting machine.

Be that as it may, by the late '70s both Fender and Gibson were suffering from severe reputation problems. At the same time, Japanese companies had improved the quality of their output and had uncovered a market longing for affordable access to the looks and sounds of those near-mythical guitars of the '50s and '60s. Greco and Ibanez were among the first to satisfy this demand, but Tokai quickly became recognised for the attention to detail of its replicas and, not least, for the sheer cheek of its badging.



Tokai worked with Joe Walsh, Billy Gibbons and Rick Nielsen, dismantling originals and taking photos

NOT SO NEW KID IN TOWN

Founded in 1947, Tokai Gakki Co. Ltd already had a deal to supply parts for Martin's acoustic guitars when, in 1976, it launched a Les Paul replica complete with a Gibson-styled 'Tokai' headstock logo. They even wrote the words 'Les Paul Reborn' in the same script as Gibson's 'Les Paul Model'. In 1977, Tokai followed this with the Springy Sound, modelled initially on a 1957 Stratocaster. With this model, the company copied not just Fender's famous 'spaghetti' logo, but all the other lettering too: 'Fender Stratocaster' became, 'Tokai Springy Sound', 'Original Contour Body' became 'Oldies But Goldies' and 'With Synchronized Tremolo' became, even more cheekily, 'This is the exact replica of the good old strat'.

It wasn't just this temerity that so affronted Fender and Gibson: the guitars were seriously good. At a time when Fender was being driven by the cost and bottom-line imperatives of being part of the CBS conglomerate, Tokai was



taking its time, working with the likes of Joe Walsh, Billy Gibbons and Rick Nielsen to examine original models, dismantling, measuring and taking hundreds of photographs. In fact, they did exactly what the big boys now celebrate in the press for their current reissues: they paid attention to detail. Also, and particularly with its LP models, Tokai enjoyed an advantage over its US counterparts in that the company had access to woods of the highest quality, such as Brazilian rosewood (the US signed up to the CITES treaty on endangered species in 1974; Japan joined in 1980).

Progressively, Tokai got the specs more and more accurate. For example, early Springy Sounds with rosewood fretboards had a 'skunk stripe' on the back of neck. On the original Fenders, the skunk-stripe only appeared on solid maple necks to cover the truss rod channel. Rosewood board models had the rod inserted from the front before the board was fitted, so a separate skunk stripe was unnecessary. By 1979-1980, this anomaly was phased out. By 1981-82, Tokai had reached the peak of accuracy with their higher end models, even using cloth-insulated wiring.

Two Springy Sounds from 1980-'81: (below left) a two-tone sunburst ST80, (right) a three-tone ST60



WORLD DOMINATION AND LEGAL BACKLASH

Though the guitars were originally aimed at the domestic market, by the early '80s Tokai was exporting worldwide. In the UK, Blue Suede Music started importing Tokais in 1982 with their eye-catching 'Tokai is coming' ads featuring a naked girl cavorting with a Springy Sound (the model was the girlfriend of Blue Suede's owner).

By now, however, Fender and Gibson had woken up to their shrinking market share. Fender entered into a joint venture to establish Fender Japan in 1982, and launched their first serious reissues on the US market (the 1957 and 1962 Vintage Strats). Battalions of lawyers, and Tokai's own desire to enter the US market more fully led to more 'respectful' replicas: the LP-style Reborn became the Reborn Old, then the Love Rock; the pseudo-Fender logo changed (in the UK) to a black, block-capital TOKAI (1983) before moving worldwide to a gold lettered script that couldn't be mistaken for the famous Fender one.

In 1984 the Springy Sound became 'Goldstar Sound' and, for the US market, the Fender-style headstocks were reshaped to a less attractive and less litigious pointy shape. The 'lawsuit era' was over, and Fender and Gibson filled the market with increasingly faithful reproductions of their

Tokais may not be as vintage-accurate as the best of the new reissues, but they are still great guitars

respective back catalogues through low-end brands like Squier and Epiphone and increasing numbers of reissues under their own premium brands. At the time of writing, Fender offers 44 separate Stratocasters of which a quarter are vintage/classic/reissue models and a further quarter are Artist models arguably driven by the same dynamics. The Custom Shop site offers even more. And, to add a further twist of irony, for the last 10 years, the Tokai factory has built solid-body guitars for Fender Japan.

21ST CENTURY VINTAGE

So what of those guitars today? Were they all secretly bought up and crushed by a wrathful Fender and Gibson? Have they paled in comparison to the reissue market which they spawned? Well, in fact those guitars - now

officially 'vintage' themselves - are alive and well and exchanging hands for increasing sums of money. Appreciation of early Tokai build quality, along with awareness that the company is now building 'genuine' Fenders for Fender Japan has seen prices double over the last four to five years. To the detail of the originals you can now add that intangible mojo that comes with 20-plus years of play, wear and maturing. They may not be as vintage-accurate as the very best of the new reissues, but they are still great guitars.

Peter McGovern, an authority on early Tokais who worked for Tokai Music Australia during the 1980s, has noticed the value of old Tokais increase over the years with high-end Love Rocks like the LS120 having 'tripled in price in six years'. Similarly, Springy Sounds have doubled, with even the lower-end ST50s maintaining a premium over their successor, the Goldstar Sound.

According to McGovern, there is a lot of ill-informed snobbery and prejudice surrounding the different models with, say, a 1980 Springy Sound being more valued than a 1984 Goldstar Sound when they are essentially the same guitar. Another interesting subject of prejudice is the Silver Star, Tokai's replica of the large-headstock 1970s Strats. McGovern has worked on hundreds of Fenders and Tokais over the years and is clear that the Silver Star is a far better guitar than any of the CBS Fender originals; 'Even the tilt-neck works, which CBS never managed,' he observes. Tokai used the same high quality



1981-'82 Tokai Silver Star, a '70s replica complete with black plastic, bullet truss rod, large headstock and Micro-Tilt neck





A metallic green ST55 Goldstar Sound, 1984-'85. Note the '50s-style serial number and the '55' sticker, originally indicating the price in thousands of yen



There are fakes out there: bizarrely, the increasing value of Tokais has led to copying of copies

BUYER BEWARE

What should the potential buyer look for? As ever, overall condition is important and there are some great, near mint guitars out there. The Japanese market has woken up to the price increases overseas and a number of those early guitars are appearing out of closets and attics to be sold in the west. Also, traditional colours are much in demand: two-tone sunburst on '50s style Springy Sounds, three-colour sunburst on the '60s style and blonde on the Breezy Sound Telecaster replica. The high-end ST80 and ST100 Springy Sounds - all of which had V necks and nitro-finish bodies - are sought-after. On blonde and sunburst models at and above the ST60 level, Tokai used good quality ash, usually in a one or two piece body. Custom colours like metallic blue are also well-regarded, as are the relatively small number of Goldstar Sounds with colour-matched headstocks.

There is, however, an increasing volume of fakes out there. Bizarre as it sounds, the increasing value of Tokais has led to people copying the copies. This is compounded by the fact that there is no detailed, recorded history of Tokai models. 'There are no records

of those early models,' says Peter McGovern, 'and we'll probably never know all there is to know about them.' Even the format of serial numbering changed over the years to mimic the particular Fender model being replicated.

This leaves the way open for many unscrupulous sellers to position their wares as 'custom' models or as a higher-end model than in reality. In the '80s there was a trend for players to scrub the Tokai logos off their guitars, again creating uncertainty in the future. In turn, this has created an opportunity for firms to offer 'replacement' Tokai logos; fantastic news if your guitar has been defaced but also a huge 'whoopie!!' for the unscrupulous. The Tokai Forum site and its sister Tokai Registry are fantastic resources for would-be buyers to learn as much as is known about the firm's production and model history.

For the more patient, McGovern is currently writing what he hopes will be as close as possible to a definitive history of vintage Tokais. In the meantime, as ever, caveat emptor - but also trust your ears and hands. Pedigree and investment potential don't count for much if it plays like a dog and, equally, there are some very fine mongrels in loving homes around the world.

Thanks to Mike Davies for letting us photograph his fine guitars and to Mark Fletcher for technical assistance. From more information on the inside world of the Tokai enthusiast visit www.tokairegistry.com



components on the Silver Stars as they did on the Springy Sounds; they were in production at the same time (in contrast to the originals which suffered from CBS's approach to quality). However, tainted by the guitars which they replicate, Silver Stars have not seen the same increase in value as their siblings.

Will Tokais continue to increase in value at the rates of the last few years? Maybe not. There's a natural 'ceiling' generated by the price of new US models, and as prices get close to the 'real thing' albeit new rather than vintage, buyers will begin to compare 'real' versus 'fake'. Add to that an unstable market for genuine US vintage guitars and it's clear that, as with any investment, you need to take all the available information and form your own conclusion.

With guitars, however, you get the added benefit of having a great instrument to play while waiting for the slow-motion roulette of fashion and value to kick in. Great Tokais from the late '70s/early '80s still sell for figures in the hundreds of pounds rather than the thousands asked for Fenders from the '50s and '60s.