



A late seventies Tokai 'Les Paul Reborn': few copies have been so accurate or so good

There's a well-worn saying in the record industry that goes: where there's a hit, there's a writ. And it doesn't just apply to the tunes, but sometimes to the instruments used to record them. PRS's Singlecut (read our review on page 78 of this issue) recently returned to stores after having an injunction on its production lifted: between 2004 and 2005, Gibson successfully stopped PRS from building the Singlecut on the basis it infringed trademarks. The Singlecut is now the most famous guitar to test the flexibility of guitar trademark law, but it certainly isn't the first. Indeed, it's easy to understand the ire of Paul Reed Smith, who remarked: "There are some guitars out there that are almost exact tracings of Les Pauls that have been around for 50 years. I can name them for you. Our guitar doesn't even fit in the same case."

In reality, the story of the copy electric is nearly as old as the history of the electric itself. Within five years of Rickenbacker producing their pioneering 'electro Spanish' guitar in 1933, the Japanese Guyatone company had built a replica. Few bought it, but no matter: the copy industry had taken its first few baby steps. As rock 'n' roll blossomed in the 1950s, European makers such as Grazioso, Watkins, Hofner and Framus began

producing their own electrics for customers starved of the glamorous originals made in America. There may have been few exact copies in this era but, as with many things in the world of guitars, Japan would change things...

The most famed legal battles over guitar design came in the 1970s, a period of power change in guitar-making dynasties. Rightly or wrongly, many regard the seventies output of the two big US brands, Fender and Gibson, as being mediocre. Everyman buyers may not have perceived much of a change, but discerning pros did – or could afford to. Rather than buy current models, they looked back at earlier guitars with a keener eye and on the back of celebrity opinion – Eric Clapton's championing of late fifties Gibson Les Pauls in the Bluesbreakers, for example – the 'vintage' guitar market had suddenly arrived. Fender and Gibson's response was mixed, but largely they pursued updated versions of their classic designs. There were good guitars made, yes, but the likes of the Les Paul Recording and the large-headstock'd seventies Strat split opinion, at best. At worst, new designs such as the Starcaster or RD Artist were simply unloved.

Japan's quickly maturing breed of builders seemed to understand what, at that time, America's legendary companies did not: that a lot of players wanted guitars like Fender and

Gibson used to build. They didn't want a modern twist or any unneeded or gimmicky extras. They certainly didn't want vintage prices. What they wanted was, y'know, just a really good copy of those old guitars...

BORN AGAIN CLASSICS?

For Guitarist readers of a certain age, the name Tokai will illicit a wry smile. Japan's Tokai Gakki company began building guitars in the sixties and, unlike other manufacturers, did not adopt Westernised brandnames (such as Ibanez, Greco or Fernandes) for their instruments. What Tokai did do, and did exceptionally well, was copy the American classics.

"I've owned and traded many seventies Tokais and other Japanese brands from that time," says Mike Robinson of US company myrareguitars.com. "As most people will tell you, the quality was as good as the USA made originals and in some cases, better – specifically the Les Paul copies. It is hard for some people to believe, but if you consider that most Japanese manufacturers started making guitars in the fifties – some, like Guyatone, even in the thirties – they had 20 years experience by the time they started copying the American brands."

Tokai's Springy Sound is one of the most notorious copies

These five seventies copies (clockwise, to below) are all by Ibanez

Tokai's 'Les Paul Reborn' headstock: now THAT's cheeky

"I've owned and traded many seventies Tokais. The quality was as good as the USA made originals and in some cases, better – specifically the Les Paul copies" Mike Robinson, Tokai retailer



Tokai's infamous Fender-aping 'spaghetti' logo (top) was soon changed

Tokai began building its first close replicas of 1958-1960 Gibson Les Pauls around 1976. Although 'Japanese copy' was used as a pejorative term for much of the seventies, these Tokai instruments were not intended to be low-quality knock offs. These were meant to be high-quality knock-offs. Tokai wanted the look and feel of classic Gibsons, which were prohibitively expensive. They got the small details just right – such as a flat deck between the pickups on the

otherwise arched maple top – and, unbelievably, even called their guitar the 'Les Paul Reborn'.

Gottfried Schmid, one of Europe's premier traders of Tokais, reckons that these guitars are still sometimes a better option than Gibson's own recent Historic reissue models: "I have several friends who are serious collectors and they've always complained – many times directly to Gibson – that their Historic reissue models were not authentic recreations. I stand by the words of a friend that if you're paying premium prices, why wouldn't you want the product to be as perfect and authentic as possible? The Tokai I bought isn't perfect, but it has attributes that make it more perfect than a Gibson reissue – and at \$600 versus \$4,500.

"But to me, Tokai is not just a copy. It is made not in the industry. It is made by a handful of Japanese luthiers with love and enthusiasm."

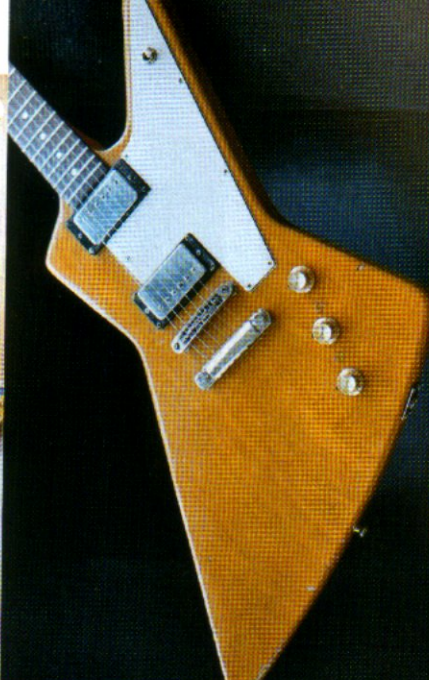
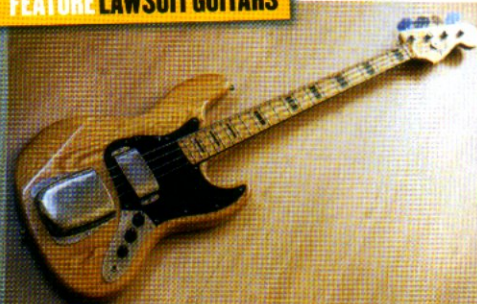
That, clearly, is over-romanticising the Tokai legend, but the factory-made guitars were undoubtedly fine. Schmid reveals that the best 'Reborn' pieces can still command up to \$3,000 – a startling figure for a copy – though rarity is a key factor.

The 1978-79 guitars actually named 'Les Paul Reborn' naturally attracted legal attention from Gibson, resulting in name changes (eventually to Tokai Love Rock) and a subtle redesign of the

trademark headstock: a dimple was added to the centre of the Gibson-alike 'moustache' outline.

Tokai were just as brazen when it came to Fender's iconic Stratocaster. The company's Strat clones were again intended to be decent guitars, but despite the 1954-style specs they weren't precise replicas: you got a five-way pickup selector switch and an Allen key-adjusted truss rod. But they looked the part, with the focus again being the headstock. Fender trademarked the outline in 1975, so Tokai were clearly infringing Fender's rights. And how. Not only was the outline identical to a bona fide Strat, it could also pass for a vintage fifties Fender from only a few metres away as Tokai appeared in a Fender-style 'spaghetti' logo. Like cheeky Top Shop-repros of haute couture's most-glamorous creations, Tokai took copyism to the limit.

People liked them, though. Among players, Stevie Ray Vaughan was just one fan of Tokais – he appeared on the cover of their 1985-86 catalogue – although the championing of such controversial guitars was clearly a touchy subject. Clone trivia fans note: the guitar SRV was holding in the photo that appeared on the cover of Texas Flood is actually a Tokai Strat-alike, but the brand logo was airbrushed out of the final album artwork. Shop around long enough and you may find a poster of that cover photo with "Tokai Springy →



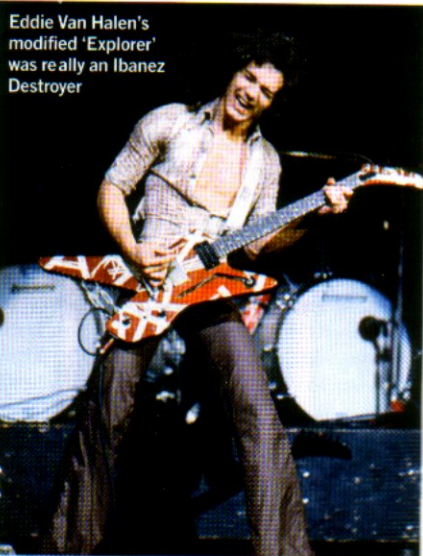
The world's best vintage guitar shop? No, all the guitars here (this page and facing) are seventies Ibanezes

→ Sound" clearly visible on the headstock. ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons – a man who knows a good Gibson when he hears one – also owns a Tokai 'Les Paul Reborn' and once played a TV gig with it, but covered the brand logo with duct tape. Truly, Tokai is a love that dare not speak its name...

REMAKE, REMODEL

If the Tokai company seems forever associated with copies or 'derivative' guitars, Ibanez in the seventies was arguably a worse offender. Japan's Hoshino Gakki company started selling instruments in 1908, producing their own instruments from the thirties, but with little presence in the west until much later. It was only after Hoshino bought a small Spanish guitar company, Ibanez, that they owned a brand name that was capable of overcoming the then anti-Japanese prejudice among Western guitar players. Hoshino bought out Ibanez's US distributors, Elger, and in 1971 Ibanez USA was born.

Forget groundbreaking JEMs or reissue Tube Screemers, the brand's main business back then was scarily good copies of Gibsons, Fenders, Rickenbackers, Dan Armstrongs and more. They sometimes skimped on certain details like set-necks (hey, bolt-ons were cheaper) but as with



Eddie Van Halen's modified 'Explorer' was really an Ibanez Destroyer

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Tokai, the Ibanez replicas looked the part. "The bolt-on 'Les Paul'-types, the SG, the Tele and Strat-type models are much lower quality than the real things," admits Harry Kruisselbrink, who is quite possibly Europe's keenest seventies Ibanez collector. "But they have their charm and a sound of their own. But in the last part of the

copy period – 1977 to mid-1978 – Ibanez quality was really great."

Keith Pattinson worked in UK guitar shops for 10 years from the mid-seventies, dealing in many Ibanezes (and their UK-branded offshoot, CSL). "The Les Paul and SG copies, were good; the Strat copies, not so much. And the Dan Armstrong and Rickenbacker copies looked good, but played awful. But some of those Les Paul-style guitars were better than the Gibsons – even some with the bolt-on necks. And their version of the Explorer was brilliant." Interestingly, an early fan of Ibanez's Explorer-alike Destroyer model was Eddie Van Halen: the guitar pictured on the cover of 1979's *Women And Children First* album, even though it had the tail 'fin' hacked away by EVH, is a Destroyer.

Gibson's corporate owners of the time, Norlin, objected to Ibanez's Gibson-clone guitars and filed a lawsuit against them. As with Gibson versus Tokai, it focussed on headstock detail: in this case the 'open book' or 'moustache' design that Ibanez had copied. According to John S, of the website Ibanez Collectors World, the legal threat, "was not over the exact copying of body dimensions or construction. These guitars were metric. Don't believe me? Just try putting your Gibson stop-tail posts in one of those 'exact' copies."

Gibson's action of 1977 was settled out of court,



“I’d say to Fender and Gibson; if they were really interested in protecting those body shapes, they had the opportunity for 40 to 50 years to do so” Ron Bienstock, US guitar trademark lawyer

as Ibanez had changed its headstocks anyway in 1976. That they then chose to seemingly copy Guild’s design is another matter entirely: but by 1978 Ibanez had begun making guitars based on its own designs.

“When the headstock changed, they became harder to sell,” recalls Pattinson. “Ibanez’s heyday – back then – was their copies.” But while some of the copies were undoubtedly good, it’s a mistake to think they represented the zenith of the company’s work. “Ibanez became better and better,” insists Harry Kruisselbrink. “From 1978 they switched to their own designs. They were smart: by analysing the big American brands they knew more and more about the way guitars should be built. And when they had enough know-how, they went their own way...”

COPIES COPIED

There are numerous episodes of lawsuits and legal pressure when it comes to guitar design. Takamine put out some Martin-alike acoustics that were pretty accurate in the seventies. The acoustic Brian May used on *A Night At The Opera* (see *Guitarist* 269) was basically another Martin copy, produced under the Hummingbird brand (by Tokai Gakki). The Heritage guitar company

– set-up by ex-Gibson employees in Gibson’s old Kalamazoo factory – was reportedly made to change its LP-alikes’ volume pots to 250K, just so they didn’t sound so much like Les Pauls. According to one buyer *Guitarist* found: “I just changed the pots to 1Meg and the Les Paul balls showed up!” And Fernandes guitars still have different (non-Fender-ish) headstocks for USA-sold models, a result of the country’s tighter trademark laws.

Right now, Fender is attempting to copyright its body shape to the Strat, Tele and P-bass also. These days, though, not too many cases make court. As noted American trademark lawyer Ron Bienstock tells *Guitarist*: “There have been battles for years, and I’d have to be off the record to tell you half of them. They get settled. But the crux remains: what’s too close in terms of design? It’s unusual in almost any other business, that people in guitar making locked on to certain shapes and designs as being acceptable.”

The free-for-all days when companies could copy both outline shape and headstock are, however, gone for good.

“The outline and the headstock are two different things,” explains Bienstock. “And the headstock’s important because that’s what companies chose to fight about in the past. And because Fender and Gibson didn’t even talk about the body shape

in those seventies cases [against Tokai and Ibanez], they’ve kind of waived those rights to the body shape. I’d say to Fender and Gibson; if they were really interested in protecting those body shapes, they had the opportunity for 40 to 50 years to do so.”

Ultimately, the Japanese copy guitars of the seventies remain an unusual part of guitar history. Copies have possibly never come so close, and some remain so collectible they’re now being faked themselves. In January 2006, *Guitarist* found a fake ‘early eighties Tokai’ for sale on Ebay. The seller admitted it wasn’t a genuine Tokai Springy Sound; he’d just bought a replica Fender-alike ‘spaghetti’ Tokai decal and made it look like a nice early-eighties model. He’d even relic’d it to look 25 years old. As counterfeits go, it was very considerate.

“There’s a bloke in Germany who is faking Ibanez copies,” laughs ex-salesman Keith Pattinson. “It’s unbelievable. If I’d have known this would happen, I’d have been stockpiling guitars from 1975...”

Thanks to Harry Kruisselbrink, Gottfried Schmid, Bill Gilbreath, Michael Martin and Dave Corten for help with pictures. Special thanks to Ron Bienstock for being generous (and for a lawyer, free!) with his time.