Under Dark Skies

Fender in the latter CBS era

Everyone has heard the now-buzz-words "pre-CBS" when talking about vintage Fender guitars. You know, when you want a primo Fender, it's gotta be pre-1966, and that chronological difference means thousands of dollars for buyers. But why? What did CBS do to ruin our precious Strats and Teles? Well, for one thing, they took away a neck bolt from the Strat, that's what!

But, that was actually Leo Fender's idea...hmm.

Well, big headstocks and bullet truss rods!

But, Jimi Hendrix played transition Strats with big headstocks...and he's pretty great...



The Hendrix "Woodstock" Strat, look at that gloriously huge headstock!

Seriously though, it's fairly well known that Fender's build quality took a dive during the '70s, especially as the decade ended. The company's bank account was feeling it, too, so CBS had to do something to get people buying again. It was to this end that Dan Smith was hired, fresh from experience with Yamaha's American branch, to revitalize the brand. His remembrance of CBS's Fender is not a good one; a corporate entity with "no soul at the top" that didn't listen to

the players on the inside or out. But Dan Smith was the man for the job, and the Strat was restored to its former glory. Ah, four bolts, as nature intended... But he didn't stop there! He, and others, knew that people loved Fender for the late '50s early '60s guitars that made the brand a household name, so Fender began releasing reissues, but they didn't make them in California.



OK, maybe CBS did go a little far...

Fender Overseas

One of the things Dan brought with him was his experience with Japanese manufacturing. So with startup funding from Yamano Music and the use of the Fujigen Factory (of Ibanez fame), Fender Japan was born! If you've ever played an '80s MIJ (Made in Japan, *not* crafted) Fender, you know of their many merits. Even the MIJ Squiers from this time are considered fabulous pieces by many. So, here is Fender in the early '80s, with Dan Smith saving the brand, and a brand new production facility that's ready for anything. A perfect opportunity to try something new. It was time for Dan Smith's *Master*stroke...



A 1984 Fender Esprit Elite

It seems fitting that the guy who brought back traditional designs to Fender's legacy models would be the guy who would spear-head one of the most "un-Fender" guitars in the back catalog. As always, Fender was seeking a new opportunity to siphon some business away from their main competitor, and Dan made his play at just that with the Master Series. When you look at the Flame or Esprit, you see a carved maple top, a set neck, and...*shuddering in fear*...3-per-side tuners! This is not your granddaddy's Fender, and no mistake. But are they worthy of the hallowed brand?

Yes

Yes! They are! After getting a chance to play a beatiful Chrome Red Esprit Elite, I can honestly say I was floored by the instrument. It plays beautifully and sounds awesome. Fender Japan's attention to detail and expert craftsmanship shines like the glossy finish. The Schaller designed pickups (that look suspiciously like Ibanez Musician pickups, hmmm) sound amazing, with a thick warmth and lots of body. The addition of coil tapping provides further tonal possibilities as

well. This all not to mention the fine materials and design, making these guitars as beautiful to the eyes and fingers as they are to the ear. The Esprit was meant to be a sort of alternative to Gibson ES models, with a larger, chambered body and symmetrical cutaways. The Flame was supposed to compete with the Les Paul, with a smaller body and slightly asymmetrical cutaways, though it was still chambered. As usual, there were different levels of the two models you could choose from: Standard, Elite, and Ultra. Both models had the same features for each level, with Elites having Snowflake inlays, a fine tuner bridge, and expanded electronics. The Ultras were the top of the line, with bound ebony fretboards, split block inlays, spruce tops, and gold hardware. Whichever the level, players ended up with a versatile, well built guitar with a gorgeous look. Fender even found an endorsee! Robben Ford, of Yellowjackets fame, who was featured with an Esprit. Whelp! That's all you need right? A well-thought out series of beautiful guitars that play and sound amazing with a famous endorsee to lead the charge! The Master Series was ready to take the world by storm, but did it?

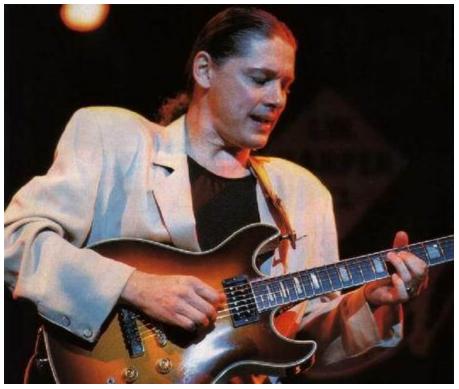


Fender? Is that you?

No

If you ask Dan, it was CBS's fault again, if indirectly. The dark CBS days would come to a close almost as soon as Dan and the boys were bringing Fender out of those dark ages. In 1984, the year after the Master Series dawned, CBS would sell Fender to its own employees. Apparently the pangs of that transitional time meant bad things for the fledgling series. That didn't stop them from trying to keep it alive, if only in a different form, with the Esprit evolving into the Robben Ford Signature. It managed to survive into the new millenium, but all of its iterations were discontinued by 2001. As is normally the case, I'm sure the reasons for the series' demise were manifold, but I can't help but suspect that haunting fear of difference from the guitar buying community. Think about it, Fender was making good ol' fashioned Strats again, and you could

even get an awesome reissue from Fender Japan at the time! Yes, I fear Fender may have been suffering one of many blows for daring to be different. This story is further tragic because there does not seem to be any reissues, or any interest at all in these awesome guitars. Indeed, I would not have known about them at all if that Esprit hadn't stumbled it's way into our shop. This is one in particular that I feel deserves a revival, or at least a bit more spotlight. If you stumble across one, give it the attention it deserves; you won't regret it!



Robben Ford with his Esprit-style signature

A quick side note

The Fender D'Aquisto model was also advertised as part of the Master Series, but it saw more recognition and was revived several times over the years. Still, a really cool, slightly obscure guitar in its own right!