

This is the End

As discussed in the last post, the oft-maligned CBS era of Fender went down with somewhat of a fight from the higher-ups. At least, from the brilliant minds they hired, like last week's Dan Smith, and the future Fender Custom Shop founder John Page. Page was not hired for damage control, but rather had been with Fender since 1978 and by the end of the CBS era was deep into Fender's R&D department. So it was natural that he would be a part of the ship-saving efforts in the early '80s. And while the Master Series targeted the Gibson-buying market, there was a newer market emerging in the '80s.



So Pointy, So Eighties

Catalog Excerpts from Charvel Jackson (left), Kramer (top right), and B.C. Rich (bottom right)

Big Hair and Pointy Guitars

The '80s saw the rise of heavy metal, and the specific variety topping the charts was Glam Metal. This flashy exhibition was full of hairspray, tight pants, and really loud guitars (in both sight and sound!). But the guitar heroes of the LA Metal scene weren't playing Fender guitars, they were all converts of the new craze of super Strats and dangerous looking instruments with sharp curves and bright colors. To this group, the vintage stylings of the Fender catalog were likely overplayed and archaic, and lacking that pageantry associated with Glam. Builders of choice at the time were B.C. Rich, Kramer, and Jackson, and even though the godfather of Shred, Eddie Van Halen played a Strat, it was unrecognizable by the time he'd finished with it. It was quite obvious that Fender had no stake in this fledgling market, but John Page wanted to change that.



An excerpt from a Fender Japan Catalog

Starting in 1982-83, Page began designing a radical departure from Fender's normal fare. A wild, and pointy, design that even had a redesigned logo. The first designs were for a bass guitar that was meant to be the top of the line Jazz Bass, with a super thin neck and 24 frets. The 6-string version would come later, with a pair of angled humbuckers, a locking tremolo, and 24 frets as well. Page has also said that his original design featured a more Fender-like headstock, but that the final design was out of his hands, when the manufacturing of the model moved overseas. The model, that would be dubbed Performer, was meant to be made in the USA, but around the time when CBS finally sold the company, American operations were shut down temporarily, meaning that all production shifted to the newly founded Fender Japan. Apparently the Japanese producers took some liberties with the design.



A Gorgeous Performer Bass in Olympic Pearl Finish

Corporate rigors aside, the guitars were well made by the already proven FujiGen factory. They certainly looked the part, with that wild shape that Page alleges was inspired by the shape of the contours on the back of a Strat. The humbuckers provided the necessary volume and the 24 frets and locking trem made it a true shred guitar, ready to rock the music scene and secure Fender's piece of the action.

“Bad Timing”

So what happened to the Performer? The lofty heights envisioned for the bass especially would never be realized, and the guitar would never rock a stadium in the hands of a big-haired shredder. Well, one of the main factors in the Performer's demise is certainly timing, which already made big changes in Page's plans for the series as mentioned above. But furthermore, the deal with CBS did not involve manufacturing assets, so Fender was forced to contract manufacturing to outside factories. That issue combined with what must of been a myriad other hurdles forced the new owners to make some tough decisions. One of those decisions was to not continue the radical new series. So undeniably timing was part of it, but part of that decision to end the Performer was based in the unproven and radical difference of the model and the legacy models. It makes some sense, too, with the uncertain nature of new management it was

a safe move to focus completely on Teles, Strats, P-Basses, and J-Basses. I hesitate to say that lack of interest was part of it, because the Performer had a pitifully short life and not near enough time to prove itself, but by this time I'd bet that Fender's new owners learned that radical doesn't sell to the Fender playing community.



A Fender Performer Guitar

Technically the Performer Bass would see a bit longer life, with a proto-custom shop Elite version being released. This version had back-routed electronics, 3 single coil pickups, and an ebony fretboard. These basses were built in the USA, as well, but were discontinued in 1987. There was also a 5-string prototype constructed as well, that Page said ended up with Cars bass player Ben Orr.

So Page's shredder was tragically short lived, but his career with Fender would last until 2003. His work in the Custom Shop is well known and loved, and he continues building with his own

brand, John Page Classic. Maybe, if we all hope hard enough, Page could collaborate with the Fender Custom Shop one more time for a Performer reissue. Yeah, come on everyone! Hope with me! But seriously, these awesome guitars are becoming quite the collector's finds, so if you find one, snag it and treasure it; they're awesome and they'll make you awesome too! (This statement not meant to guarantee awesomeness under any circumstance.)