

Vintage Inspiration

At the launch of the Vintage Gordon Giltrap Signature earlier this year, we caught up with Gordon and the maker of the original guitar, Rob Armstrong *by Dave Burrluck*

Giltrap's original Rob Armstrong guitar, on which his Vintage signature is based, is clearly cherished. "I always loved it, the shape and the sound. I love Rob's old guitars, the art nouveau shape," says Gordon, almost misty-eyed. And it is indeed the shape that draws your attention.

"It just comes from my repertoire of shapes," says Armstrong. "I've never done a copy of anything since I started making guitars. I think I made three of that shape and moved on. That's exactly what I do: I make one-offs. I don't do repetition - I find it very difficult to make two guitars the same, a bit like an artist who doesn't paint two pictures the same. But what we've done here with the Vintage guitar, this is a print, isn't it? I painted the original picture and now someone has made a print of it." The guitar-maker-as-artist is an apt description of Armstrong and the way he works.

"I've built 815 guitars since I started making and I've not made two the same. That's kinda 40 years... about one every two weeks, but they'll all be different. That's the whole thing that keeps me interested. I just conceive them from my own mind and make them real. I don't use any machines whatsoever - apart from a bandsaw and an electric drill, that's it. The tools that I made my latest guitar with are the tools I used for my first guitar. It's a hand-made thing."

It's the first time anyone has replicated one of Armstrong's instruments. Was it a torturous process? "No, we sent the guitar over [to the factory] and they made the first one. It was remarkable. They'd copied everything I'd done. I looked inside and the struts were exactly the same. See to me the, struts are a living thing, I don't

say beforehand, I've invented this new strutting, or I'm going to use this strutting, or this X-bracing. You kind of don't know till you get going. So the strutting here was originally fixed for the size of the guitar: it's an X-brace, but the struts underneath the bridge, I didn't scallop them I kept them very tall and they're copied them perfectly. Amazing."

"The neck was copied exactly," says Armstrong. "It's quite big and chunky. You can't please everyone. Sometimes a player will go, Oh the neck's too thick or the neck's too slim. There's something about guitar making that I believe is absolutely true, which is that I believe the neck is an integral part of the guitar and there's an argument for saying that the more structurally sound it is, the more resonance you'll get from the whole instrument. I believe that."

We've had the Vintage replica for just a few weeks, but Giltrap has been playing the real thing for over a decade: so what does this style of guitar bring to the table from a playability and sound perspective?

"It's very comfortable to play on stage, but I think the bottom line with all of us who play an instrument, particularly if it's an acoustic guitar, is the sound. I just love the sound of it. My original Armstrong, and hopefully this replica too, can do everything. You can strum it and it works great on power chords. Part of my style is this plectrum technique I have with my little finger, so I can go from power chords to a very delicate style of playing and it works well for both. I have some very fine guitars in my collection but they're only made for a specific thing: they don't like being strummed... some of them like to be picked. Rob's guitars? You can do everything on them and they work."

Certainly, Rob does that with pretty much all of the instruments he makes."

"Out of preference I'd prefer the Fishman Rare Earth for the electro sound, but that's so expensive," continues Giltrap. "But what we have here is a very fine preamp [the Presys]; you've only got to move something very slightly and it can make a big difference. I'm still messing around with the notch filter. It's actually a louder system than my own Armstrong-equipped Rare Earth."

"And, that's not something I'd normally do," chips in Armstrong: "put a hole in the side of a guitar!"

"To be honest," says Giltrap, "I didn't want it to come with a pickup at all, but Dennis Drumm [MD of JHS, the company behind the Vintage brand] said it should." As Armstrong emphasises, "That's the marketing angle, the third part. It's the bit that Gordon doesn't do and the bit that I don't do."

"I think Dennis has done a remarkable job," concludes Giltrap. "I'm very pleased with what he's done in co-ordinating this whole project." 

"What I've always loved about my particular Armstrong guitar is the treble," continues Giltrap. "It sings out and you're really fighting to get the melody out of the treble [strings]. It has a very strong cutting treble on it but it's not a searing kind of treble, it's just there. And what Vintage has managed to do with this guitar is to create a great treble as well. That's what I look for. I think as you get older and play a lot of instruments I think the toughest thing a maker has to do is to try and get a good treble - to make it sound as rich as the bass and make it cut through. I think the same applies to the classical makers: to get a good treble that's even right across the fingerboard is what everyone's aiming for."



Gordon's original Armstrong is his ever-present ally