

**R-series La Gitana & El Torero**

# **Teye Guitars**

*The capital of Texas, Austin, is not only an eldorado for bluesrock- and country-musicians, but also a greenhouse for excellent guitars. The special spirit of this place could not be ignored by a traveling Dutchman, who stayed there in the mid-nineties, first to make music, and then to build extraordinary guitars.*

Text **Heinz Rebellius**, photos **Dieter Stork**

Teye lives since a good dozen years in the south of the USA and has hung up the profession of musician in favor of his guitar building. Instead of starting small and modest, he went all-out with his Electric Gypsy guitars, both in optics and features, as well as in price. The R-series, of which we received two guitars for this test, represents the 'less bacon' segment, but nonetheless look spectacular and cost more than some pocket money. But this we say up front: these Dutch guitars from Texas with the Spanish names have a whole bunch of unusual and extraordinary details in their quiver.

Teye says of himself, that he started by throwing overboard all conventions and traditions in order to develop a from the ground up new concept. His modest goal: a Teye-guitar must sonically not be restricted, but must have in equal amounts power, highs, warmth, balance, clarity, lows, cutting power and sustain. The you can always filter out that which you don't want. On his quest to the perfect electric guitar he arrived at some interesting and brave solutions.

## **Construction**

That Teye has oriented himself construction-wise to the legendary English guitar maker Tony Zemaitis, is obvious, not just by the use of plenty of metal in the El Torero. Also the body shape and the dimensions are similar to Zemaitis guitars. Both neck and body are of light mahogany that was neither pore-filled nor laquered. Instead, the wood has been sealed with a kind of shellac-technique, that doesn't fill the pores but bridges them. It is without question that the special oil that Teye uses must be hand-applied.

"I use mahogany because it reproduces the low frequencies and warmth, the necessary highs I get from somewhere else" says Teye. Practically without heel, the neck is set into the body at the 17th of 24 frets, at a relatively shallow angle, so that the strings are closer than normal for such a guitar type to the pickups and guitar surface.

The scarf joint between neck and headstock also has a shallow angle of 13 degrees and pushes the strings with sufficient force into their slots in the bone nut. The headstock has been adorned with an aluminum overlay that is not just there for cosmetics, but apparently is partially responsible for the open and rich sound of these guitars. A scarf joint is often used on cheap guitars as a means of cutting cost because the blank for a neck with a scarf joint does not need to be so thick as for a one-piece neck. Teye is of course aware of this, but motivates this construction as follows: "With one-piece necks, the

grain of an angled-back headstock does not run parallel to the string pull, which negatively affects the stability and strength. How often do Gibson heads not break? And do you think that the extra labor of making the scarf joint actually saves me money? Also from the perspective of stability and strength, I build my mahogany necks as a three-piece, in which the center is turned over and glued between the outer pieces."

Medium-jumbo frets of the type StewMac 149, that are slightly flatter and wider than the popular Dunlop 6105, divide the deep-black ebony fingerboard that has been fitted with a white binding. All work like bone slotting, fret dressing etc. are flawless, which is of course to be expected in this price segment.

Two special-wind Jason Lollar Imperial humbuckers are mounted in fat aluminum pickup rings. They have been adjusted close to the strings on both guitars, which hinders the playability a little. My fingertips and nails got caught by the bridge pick-up, but I noticed after a while that I adjusted to this instinctively. This closeness of the pickups to the strings is important for Teye in order to achieve the greatest punch and clarity of tone. If this closeness is not to your liking, you of course can adjust the pickups further away.

A closer look at the controls reveals further interesting details. Next to the two volume knobs for the pickups there is a master-tone and a so-called mood-control. All controls function inter-active, if you alter the loudness of a pickup, this also influences the function of the tone control, which has been calibrated in such a way that in every position of the pot it produces useful sounds and not just filters away the highs, but constantly also adds mids. Only at the very end of the sweep is a narrow-band, muted sound achieved. Together with the mood-control which in principle thins out the sound, the further you back off this control, the more you thin out classic humbucker tones to a typical single-coil vibe, you can achieve a truly large sonic palette. The best sounds you will get from his guitars with classic one-channel tube amps that are capable to reproduce all finer nuances in detail, says Teye, who clouds the functionality of his mood-control in secrecy. Not only will he not say what exactly constitutes this mood-control, he even epoxies his electronics, so that product-pirates would bite their teeth out on it.

Instead of the expected three-way selector, both guitars have a five-way switch, that chooses the following positions:

- Neck-pickup
- Neck- and bridge pickups out of phase
- Neck and bridge pickups
- Bridge pickup plus tapped neck pickup
- Bridge pickup

El Torero and La Gitana are identical in construction, design, and features – the only thing that sets them apart is the magnificent aluminum frontplate of the El Torero, with spectacular engravings that for me do not carry the slightest hunch of Kitsch, but valuable tasteful artist work. Also parts like pickup rings, stop tailpiece and the big heavy control knobs are perfectly adapted to the overall design and contribute to the beautiful optical impression of both guitars.

That in spite of these impressive cosmetics the sound of the guitars is for Teye the most important aspect, can be viewed as remarkable in this context. But he gains sonic advantages more than anything else from the metal that you find on his guitars. "Of course these guitars look good, I want people when they see a Teye guitar for the first time to be touched by their cosmetics. But everything that I do has a reason sonically. The specific aluminum that I use, adds chrysal-clear highs to the guitar sound, like a tweeter in a PA cabinet helps the clarity. With the alloy of the aluminum and the placement, I can additionally fine-tune the sound of the guitar." The sound-enhancing aluminum is to be found on the

headstock plate, as body-plate on the El Torero, and on the bridge and tailpiece construction. "The instruments with aluminum front plate have slightly more highs than those without a front plate" says Teye, "but I have ways to also achieve enough brightness from the latter ones".

### ***Alternatives***

Of course, here we should point out the re-vitalized brand of Zemaitis and their instruments from Japan. Those offer cosmetically comparable spectacular guitars, that are however from a sound point of view more traditionally equipped. Of course there are also smaller builders that work with metal-on-wood, like Helliver from Muenster.

### ***Practicality***

The unusually wide and fat neck lies at first rather large in your left hand, but at the same time by means of the somewhat flatter and well-rounded frets and the flatter compound radius, the playability is incredibly good – all the way up the neck to the highest positions. Pure acoustically both guitars exhibit an unusually wide and powerful 'ring' factor, that leads you to conclude the mahogany is of a good variety and that – yes! – the metal does play a role here. On this tonewood you could play congas, it is that resonant, says Teye – and that promises a sound-fest also when plugged in. Let's get busy first with the El Torero, the model with the aluminum front. Vividly alive the single notes appear, fat and transparent chords and arpeggios! With all pots turned up full, the signal is represented to the output plug without interference of tone and mood-controls. And this results in a full and brilliant sound which – it doesn't matter if clean or distorted – is of the highest quality. Feather-light on the neck humbucker, full and powerful on the bridge pickup, and pearly-clear in the mid position. Fender-esque it becomes in position 2, where the neck pickup is tapped and sounds together with the bridge pickup. If now for example you dial back the mood-control, the sound thins out further to a twangy Telecaster-like surprise. Position 4 delivers the loved-by-many-guitarists "Peter Green" sound – both humbuckers out-of-phase, thin and nasal. Not my beer. But by turning down the volumes for both pickups, you achieve again countless interesting mix-sounds of both pickups, that in conjunction with the tone and mood controls offer near endless possibilities that all sound tasteful and can stand on their own. Turn down the volume of the humbuckers a little, and smoothly a sound develops that is very much like that of mini-humbuckers, without the loss of highs and mids. This broad sonic palette is extraordinary by itself, but such an effective control panel I have really never experienced before! And its functions of course completely passive, there is neither a pre-amp nor active tone control hidden inside the guitar. To describe all of the sounds is impossible in the scope of this article, but this guitar is a goldmine for all kinds of possible sounds, to begin with the classic PAF, all the way to convincing twangy single-coil sounds. At the same time, the guitar goes on the offensive – a trusted Les Paul with PAF-pickups used for comparison sounds well-mannered and good-natured, and also less powerful.

La Gitana, the model without aluminum front, comes in principle with the same goods and choice of sounds. But she sounds a little earthier and in nuances less brilliant, something you can only conclude in direct A/B testing. All by itself, this guitar is also a wonder-source of professional sounds and versatility. And whoever shies away from the remarkable and flashy optics of a full aluminum fronted guitar, gets with the Gitana a little more decent, but sound-wise equivalent alternative.

## ***Summing up***

La Gitana and El Torero from Teye Guitars in Austin, Texas not only look spectacular, they also sound extraordinary good! As large as the versatility of pickups and switching, as high is the quality of the individual sounds. Whoever can handle a relatively wide and strong neck and is on the lookout for a really special guitar that is capable of delivering not only eye- but also ear-candy, and who also is not watching the last penny, they should absolutely get busy with this for Germany new brand!

## ***Plus***

- Many sounds
  - Quality of sounds
  - Cosmetics
  - Pickups
  - Playability
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(INSERT)

## ***Electric Gypsy***

Teye grew up in the Netherlands and started to play guitars at an early age, and modify them because the guitars that were available to him back then simply did not produce the sounds that you heard on the radio. His first really good guitar was a Dan Armstrong made of plexiglass, of which he built a copy together with his father, which he used on stage as young professional musician, to save his original. After years of touring he studied classical guitar at the conservatory of Groningen and not much after that dove into the world of flamenco – in southern Spain, where Teye had followed a girlfriend. The flamenco-gypsies, rather shying away from non-gypsies, even allowed him to join their circle, and guitarist Juan Muñoz Planton became his guru. For the next 25 (!) years Teye dedicated himself to flamenco – with numerous tours, countless gigs and the solo-album 'El Gitano Punky' (1988). In Austin, Texas he made his home in 1996, among other reasons because he played the flamenco guitar in the country-rock band of Joe Ely from 1994 until 2000. In the same period Tony Zemaitis built two guitars for Teye – that became a big inspiration for his own work as a guitar maker. "These guitars were as lively and resonant as my best flamenco guitars from Manuel Reyes and Lester Devoe" Teye tells us today. But even these instruments had not answered the question of all questions: Are you a fan of Leo or of Les? The answer he wanted to tackle with his own designs and make possible a large variety of sounds, which thusfar not a single guitar had convincingly exhibited. "I have experimented with all possibilities, to be able to call up from a single guitar fat 70's rock sounds, the special Strat tone of Jimi, the twang of Marty Stewart and Pete Anderson, and the full clear sound of Brian Setzer – of course without pre-amps and active tone controls" tells Teye of the impetus to his creation. The result are his current guitars, that he calls Electric Gypsy.