

The Gretsch Story Ever Told

Did Gretsch play a role in early Shadows recordings?

Roberto Pistolessi expounds his theories and invites your comments

This story begins one day in winter of 1980 when I went into a music shop to buy myself a gift for my 33rd birthday, my first Fender Stratocaster.....

With my new toy in the boot of my car I drove home with a continuous flow of Shadows hits running through my head. Once home and plugged in, I realised how wonderful the sound was compared with that of my old Elli-sound guitar and, being convinced that this was the kind of guitar once played by Hank Marvin, I began to play along with the records.

I made my first attempts with songs like Shadoogie. Blue Star. Sleepwalk. Find Me A Golden Street, but I soon realised that the task wasn't so easy.

THAT SOUND

The next ten years were completely devoted to researching every picture available, every piece of information, every book or magazine covering our heroes in order to put down a chronological list of the gear used by Hank from the beginning of his career. I toured England several times too, meeting people like David Petersen (who co-wrote the Vox Story), Peter Friesen, Richard Harrison (of Music Ground). Jack Golder (what a man he was) and many others. Every one showed great kindness and helped to add more to my research.

During those years I put together several pieces of equipment too, including guitars, amplifiers and echo boxes of various brands. This was partly due to my job which was now amp and guitar builder in my, own one-man shop. At that time (1991) I had two Fender Strats, a 1959 and a 1960, a 1964 Burns Marvin, a Marvin copy made by Jack Golder equipped with original Rez-O-Matic pickups, a 1960 Vox AC15, a 1962 AC30 Treble and a 1964 AC30 Top Boost. a Binson Echorec, two Binson Echorec 2s (with different motors), a Binson Echorec Baby, a Dynacord Echocord, an Echolette, an Echoplex, a Roland 301 and a Meazzi Echomatic.

In spite of all this gear I was not yet satisfied with my sound. When playing Shindig, Atlantis and many others my sound was quite identical to the original. But every attempt to get the sound of Apache or Shadoogie failed without a shadow of doubt. Day by day I was convincing myself that capturing That Sound was not possible anymore, and my thoughts were supported by various live Shadows recordings on which Hank's own Strat sounded so different from the original records.

A RARE FIND

One day in December 1991 I was in London's Notting Hill Gate looking for old Shadows records. I was asked I would like something special and was shown an unlabelled cassette priced at £2. A bootleg I thought, I'm gonna buy it. It turned out to be an interview with Hank Marvin from an unknown radio source and he was answering the questions from the listeners. What follows is the complete transcription of my cassette.

DJ: You play a musical instrument, don't you?

Listener: That's right, I thought Hank might like to know that I've got his Gretsch Country Gent guitar. I bought it in 1972 from a shop near Centre Point in London.

Hank: I hope you don't want your money back!!

Listener: I certainly don't, I tell you! It's a simply superb guitar Chet Atkins style.

Hank: Right.

Listener: I just walked into the shop, off the street, looking for any second hand guitar and that was the one that you had just taken in and asked them to sell it for you. I couldn't believe my luck.

Hank: Right.

Listener: I thought you would like to know that I've it completely restored, rewired.....(*scratches on the line*)

Hank: I hope the rewiring is a bit better than the phone line.

DJ: When the salesman was actually selling to you, did he very much trade on the fact that Hank had owned it?

Listener: Not at all.

Hank: Good.

Listener: In fact what he said was "You wouldn't believe your luck," because he knew I played Chet Atkins style. He said "I've just got the guitar for you and it's not just the right model but it happens to be a particularly superb instrument."

Hank: Yes.

Listener: I'm extremely lucky to have it.

Hank: Do you know that it was the first model in the country, it came into the shop and was the first they brought into the country and it looked so great that I bought it as a spare guitar. I didn't use it very often; I did use it on some records though... Do you remember Nivram?

Listener: Did you really.?

Hank: Yeah.... I used it on that and on a thing of Cliffs called A Girl Like You, do you remember that?

Listener: My God!

Hank: It just had a different sound from the Strat.... It was just to ring some changes and I enjoyed it, but afterwards, because I was getting to the situation where really I needed to stick to the Strat sound, I decided to sell it. I wasn't using it you see, I thought it would be better off in someone's hands like you, who could play sonic nice Chet Atkins stuff, than in mine sitting in a cupboard somewhere.

DJ: Where do you play yourself?

Listener: I used to demonstrate guitars at Selmer's in Charing Cross Road and now I teach guitar.

DJ: I can just mentally see you saying to yourself "Ha-ha... the value of this guitar has upped considerably in the last three minutes, now that I know what recordings were made with it."

Hank: (laughs)

Listener: Can I just ask Hank another question?

Hank: Carry on.

Listener: Is it right that it originally belonged to Cliff?

Hank: The guitar? Oh no, no, you are probably getting confused with the original pink Stratocaster I had that, in fact, that was bought by Cliff directly from The States. The guitar you have, the Gretsch, I bought probably from the shop you got it from, in fact it is no longer in existence: the Burns shop, I bought it through them I think originally. I think so. Anyway, no, it's my guitar, it never belonged to Cliff.

DJ: Well, there you are, you have got all the history.

Hank: He (Cliff) did play it once or twice if that's any value to you.

DJ: Will have to leave you now, because the line is not good.

Listener: OK, right.

DJ: Thank you very much.

Hank: Good bye.

Listener: Great to speak to you.

GETTING INTO THE GRETSCH

At that time I didn't know that Hank owned a Gretsch Country Gentleman and I didn't know too much about old Gretsches so I assumed that the Gretsch mentioned by Hank was the one that I saw in Bruce's hands in some pictures from the Summer Holiday movie.

Although I was impressed by its sound on A Girl Like You, I didn't plan to look for a Gretsch like that because of its high price on the vintage market. Then a close friend showed me a picture in a magazine which shocked me! It was from a show at the Paris Olympia in March 1962 and next to Hank's echo box I could clearly see Hank's Gretsch – and it wasn't the one seen in Bruce's hands but a different guitar, a Country Gentleman model #6122 and not Bruce's Chet Atkins #6120.¹

It's time to buy that Gretsch I told myself. I was lucky enough to find just the right guitar, a 1960 Gretsch Country Gentleman, at Gruhn's shop in Nashville after only few weeks of searching. I fitted a set of pure nickel wound strings gauged .012 / .016 / .025w / .034w / .044w / .056w and ran it through my 1960 AC15 as I put the first Shadows album on my Garrard 301 turntable. I then started to play along with Nivram and, sure enough, the two sounds were so identical that I couldn't believe my ears. Shadoogie too, the two sounds matched perfectly!! During the following two hours I discovered that I could match the sound of almost all of that album using my 1960 Gretsch Country Gentleman and the AC15.

THINKING THE UNTHINKABLE

This was a new scenario for me to live with and it took several months of trials and evaluations to convince me that most of The Shadows' early hits were recorded by Hank using his Gretsch Country Gentleman. I think that my evaluation method is very simple and effective. Using my reel to reel Revox when playing along with the record, I send the original tune into the Right channel, and the sound of my guitar into the Left channel. Using the balance control, I can then do ping-pang sound comparisons.

Using this procedure I recorded hours of tapes and it is my opinion that the following songs were recorded by Hank using his Country Gentleman and, when underlined, the song also features Bruce playing his Gretsch #6120.

Apache / Quatermaster's Stores / Mustang / Theme From Shane / Shotgun / FBI / Midnight / The Frightened City / Back Home / Kon Tiki /36-24-36 / Shadoogie / Blue Star / Nivram / See You In My Drums / Baby My Heart / Gonzales / Find Me A Golden Street / Theme From A Filleted Place / That's My Desire / My Resistance Is Low / Sleepwalk² / Big Boy / The Savage / Peace Pipe / Wonderful Land / Stars Fell On Stockton / What A Lovely Tune.

Last but not least, using as master reference the book by Peter Lewry and Nigel Goodall "Cliff Richard The Complete Recording Sessions", I recorded Hank's solos in chronological order and realised that from the end of 1959 to mid 1962 the use of the Gretsch Country Gentleman was predominant (80%).

I have also noted during my tests that the use of different echo machines did not affect the sound, thus refuting the view that a particular echo box, like a Binson instead of a Meazzi, could drastically alter the "cutting" sound of a Stratocaster.

¹ *The two guitars are different in many ways. The Country Gentleman #6122 is finished in dark brown and doesn't have real F-holes, black celluloid Fs are inlaid into the top. The body is 25/16 inches deep and 17 inches wide and sported a square gold plated nameplate on the middle of the headstock which bears big Grover Imperial machines. The Chef Atkins model #6120 is finished in orange with real bound F-holes and a body 2¾ inches deep and 15½ inches wide. The headstock is inlaid with a horseshoe and bears small Grover machines. Both guitars are equipped with two FilterTron humbucking pickups and a Gretsch by Bigsby vibrato with a swivel handle and a very smooth action.*

² On Sleepwalk there is an overdubbed Gretsch arpeggio in the last part of the song.

FEEDBACK

As the above list of songs was too important to be ignored, if I was right it meant that we had used the wrong tools for 40 years, I began to share my thoughts with friends and fans around the world in order to give everyone who wanted it, the chance to reach That Sound. I quote some of the feedback I have received.

Bruce Welch (April 1996):

"You are wrong, I was there!"

Ian Kershaw (August 1996):

"Hank said that your conclusion is very interesting but adds that it just proves that you have been able to reproduce his sound with another guitar. He did not own a Gretsch Country Gentleman until about 1963."

Jim Nugent (July 1997):

"Looking at your list, I am struck by your conclusions... it's that earlier period when the Shadows sound is harder to identify... and there must have been a reason for that. Perhaps you are right... I agree, it's a mystery."

Roger Newell (of Guitar Techniques, January 1998):

"Sorry it's taken a while to evaluate the tape but I wanted to listen to it a few times before making any comment. I felt that some of the sounds weren't that close but others did seem pretty good. I also listened to A Girl Like You again last night and it does sound like a Strat, but Hank says it was a Gretsch. I wonder if that means that all the tracks recorded on that session used the Gretsch. It's all very interesting!"

George Geddes (March 1998):

"Though you have proved clearly that it is possible to obtain that sound with the Gretsch, I guess it doesn't actually prove that Hank did."

It is obvious that I couldn't get the same sound quality as Abbey Road EMI Studios with my home equipment but, as **Ronnie Gustafsson** of 1961 admitted when he came to visit me and tried the Gretsch, with that guitar he got the closest to the original tone than he had ever heard.

I spoke with many guitarists around Europe and we agreed that copying Hank's early sound is more difficult than copying the one from 1963 onwards. In fact if we listen to records performed by various Shadows copy hands, we can hear more acceptable versions of The Deer Hunter, The War Lord or Shindig, but none of Apache, Wonderful Land or Blue Star. And if we listen to various Shadows live recordings we get the same impression.

HANK'S DREAM GUITAR?

We now know, from Hank's own words in that interview, that he owned one of the first Gretsches in the country. In fact that guitar was probably his dream guitar as can be argued when looking closely to the picture in the centrefold of the booklet accompanying the 6 CD Box "The Early Years". In that picture Hank is holding his Antoria and on the collar of his coat, slightly covered by the guitar strap, he is wearing a pin with a miniature of a guitar that looks like a Gretsch. Both Hank and Bruce sported these pins on the 9th and 10th of February 1959 when they were recording the album "Cliff".

MUTING

The sound of a Gretsch sometimes is very similar to that of a Stratocaster – but when playing muted notes the two guitars have a completely different sound. Muting a note on a Stratocaster means getting a thinner sound and a loss of volume, while doing the same on the Gretsch the volume is retained and the note has a full body. Shadoogie, Apache, Peace Pipe, Wonderful Land, Theme From Shane and Stars Fell On Stockton are all great examples of the Gretsch muting qualities.

How many times, when playing the last part of My Resistance Is Low, I tried to reach that unreal 22nd fret on my Stratocaster before I discovered that the Country Gentleman had 22 frets!

THE AMP STORY

To me, the only way to reconstruct the real story of Hank's gear during those very early years is to listen very carefully to Hank's solos in Cliff's recordings in chronological order. But one must consider the amplifier too and, to my knowledge, The Shadows' amp story is not so simple as it seems to be.

George Geddes says in a two part article titled "The Sound Of Hank": "In July 1959 the Drifters changed their name to The Shadows. They began using Vox amplifiers: the Vox AC15 model, delivering 15 watts output through a 12" Audiom speaker and Vox finally came up with the legendary AC30, with the group taking delivery of four in late 1959."

Since George's article was published, further information has come to light in the form of published photographs and the Cliff Richard "Hit List" video. This undermines the theory that The Shadows' early hits were recorded by means of the AC30.

February 9/10th 1959:

The Shadows recorded the album "Cliff". Hank played the Antoria and Bruce the Grimshaw through two Selmer Truvoice Stadium amps. A good picture is on the booklet of Cliffs four CD "The Rock 'n Roll Years", just four pages before the end.

Cliff Richard Show, May 1960:

On Move It Hank played the 1959 Stratocaster and Bruce the Jazzmaster through Selmer Truvoice amps. This is from the Cliff video The Hit List. Jet has his Precision.

London Palladium, May 1960:

With the same guitars, Hank, Bruce and Jet played through three two-tone Vox AC15s. This is from the book "Cliff & The Shadows Around The World In Pictures With Dezo Hoffman".

Cliff Richard Show, July 1960:

Gee Whiz It's You, still with the same set up.

31 December 1960:

I Love You, another from The Hit List video. For this occasion our heroes used AC15 TV fronts, and Bruce his Gretsch 6120.

Cliff Richard Show, 1961:

Theme For A Dream - AC30/4 TV fronts.

Then, on March 5th, 1961, at the Wembley NME Pollwinners Concert:

The Shadows performed using three AC30s. (Shadsfax issue 17)

As you can see, if my amp story is correct, we should consider that all early hits may have been recorded with a Selmer or a Vox AC15.

I think that a closer look at the various amplifiers might be useful here.

Selmer Truvoice Stadium:

Two channels, the first with one input and the other with two, separate Volume controls, Tremolo working on one channel only with Depth and Speed controls, Treble and Bass Controls working on both channels. The pre-amp section is equipped with three EF86s and one ECC83 valve and the power-amp section is equipped with a push-pull of two EL84s and one ECC83 as driver, while a negative feedback network helps to reduce distortion; the supply stage employs an EZ81 rectifier valve. This amplifier is equipped with a Goodmans Audiom 60 speaker.

1960 Vox AC15 TV front:

Two channels with two inputs each. Speed and Vib-Trem switches for a vibrato or tremolo effect working on one channel only, separate Volume controls for both channels. a Brilliance switch working on the channel without Vib-Trem and a topcut control working on both channels. The pre-amp section is equipped with one EF86. two ECC83s and one ECC82 valve and the power-amp section is equipped with a push-pull of two EL84 valves and one ECC 83 as driver with no negative feedback applied giving more power and different distortion than the Selmer; the supply stage employs an EZ81 rectifier valve and the speaker is a Vox/Celestion G-12 – the father of the well known Vox Blue. (Early AC15 models, like the two-tone covered ones, differed from the above being equipped with a Goodmans Audiom 60 and Vib-Trem on a separate panel).

1961 Vox AC30/4 TV front:

This amplifier differed from the AC15 only for employing two more EL84s for doubled output power and twin Vox/Celestion G-12s; the increased power required larger transformers and a GZ34 rectifier in place of the EZ81. Apart from the increased power, the sound is like the AC15 only with more bottom end due to the twin speakers.

1961 Vox AC30/6 smooth black/dark grey 3 leather covered handles:

As seen in the picture related to the Calais tour (June 1961, "The Story Of The Shadows" by Mike Read page 95), this (Bruce's one) is a three channel / six input that differed from the above AC30/4 in having a channel added by means of employing an ECC83 in place of the EF86 that, with the increased power of the amp, tended to become microphonic and begin adding its own internal ringing to the sound. Unfortunately with the replacement of the EF86 valve the amp tone suffered a little, forcing Dick Denney to find new solutions (the AC30 Treble and the subsequent TOP Boost unit were retrofitted on regular AC30s). See "The Vox Story" by David Petersen for more detail and Mark Lewisohn "The Complete Beatles Chronicle" pages 62 and 113 for AC30s with retrofitted Top Boost units.

Looking closely at the pictures available I noticed the following oddities. The very first AC30/6 had the Vox logo in the upper left corner of the black front stripe and Hank's one sported his initials HBM just in the centre of that black stripe. (Possibly just an ornament or a way to identify his AC30 from the other two.) These first amps didn't have the double side gold trimming, it only appeared on the subsequent AC30s that now had the Vox logo in the lower left corner of the black front stripe.

Another interesting picture shows Jet Harris playing his Precision in Abbey Road Studio 2 through a Leak mono preamp and a Leak TL25 Plus power amp linked to a big enclosure, and it seems that this was a common practice at EMI as Paul McCartney used the same set up in March 1963 to record "From Me To You".

Carrying on with my researches I am convincing myself more and more that recordings need a different approach than stage shows and as my target is to match the sound of the records, I am trying to open my mind to different solutions than the ones we have trusted for decades.

ECHO

I cannot go on without mentioning echo machines. Recently a very good two-part article by Alan Jackson was published by Shadsfax. I love echo machines and I own a number of them. I am sure that Hank's echo machine worked very well on stage due to the expertise of Dick Denney, but I wonder why Hank would have been using his own instead of the one in Abbey Road Studios. From 1958 they were operating with a series of magnetic delay drums with their outer faces coated (as with magnetic tape) to allow recordings to be made on them. These recordings were picked up via numerous playback heads placed strategically around the drum's circumference. Why not use a Ferrari when one is available?

Those who still think that a Stratocaster or Burns Marvin and a JMI AC30 Top Boost are the only tools to get That Sound exactly (apart from Hank's wonderful playing of course), are invited to send me their recordings and ask for mine.

Roberto Pistolesi, Via Rivolta 2811,
56029 S.Croce s/Arno (Pisa), Italy.
Phone/Fax +39 0571 34481.
Email: r.pistolesi@leonet.it

HANK'S GRETSCH - AN INSTANT RESPONSE by Jim Nugent

Roberto has provided a well-researched article providing food for thought, and while I don't wish to step directly into the argument about "Fender v. Gretsch", there are several points I would like to make by way of clarification and emphasis. These are mainly to do with historical accuracy; after all, had Hank realised he would be asked about it years later, he'd probably have made notes!

First, in the quoted radio interview remark by Hank, he says: *the guitar you have, the Gretsch, I bought probably from the shop you got it from, in fact it is no longer in existence: the Burns shop, I bought it through them I think originally*". But that can't be right – in another pan of the interview, he confirms that he used that Gretsch 6122 Country Gentleman to record both *Nivram* and *Cliffs A Girl Like You*, both of which were recorded in the very early 1960s (no later than mid-1961). That was well before Burns opened their fondly-remembered retail shop on the Centre Point island. Hank must have bought the guitar somewhere else. The second point merely reinforces that first: Ian Kershaw of SCOFA is quoted as saying that Hank "...did not own a Gretsch Country Gentleman until about 1963". Again, that can't be right - *Nivram* (on which he undisputedly used the Gretsch) was released in September 1961!

Roberto provides an excellent description of the Gretsch 6122 model in his footnotes but omits one vital detail – Hank's Country Gent, being a 1960 model, was of the original single-cutaway design, and not of the double-cutaway design later made so famous in the hands of George Harrison (who used the later 1962 or 1963 model). Hank's guitar was pictured in a photo used on the "centrefold" (pages 14-15) of *Shadsfax* issue 20 (May/June 1 998), so there is no room for any doubt on this. The most well-known colour photograph I can think of for this single-cut model was used on the cover of Chet Atkins' 1963 LP "Guitar Genius" – get a look at it if you can.....

Finally, I think a comment or two on the amplifier section is required. Roberto, quotes George Geddes as having written that the Shads started to use their first Vox AC30s in 1959 and then goes on to disprove it. It is important to note that George wrote this many years ago, before the release of the various videos and film-clips which have made research in this area rather easier. In retrospect, it is now obvious (looking at, for instance, several 1961 clips of the Shads playing *FBI* on TV) that the group was using AC15s at least as late as the early part of 1961. The ATV 'Cliff Richard Show' clip of this number shows the Shadows with their first batch of Fender guitars (the famous red Strat and the sunburst Jazzmaster and Precision Bass) and "TV-front" Vox AC15s, whereas a slightly later TV performance (the legendary "Crackerjack" appearance) shows the matching set of red Fenders and a trio of Vox twin-speaker AC30s, though the amps are placed so as to make exact model definition impossible. It thus appears that the Shadows acquired their trademark red guitars and AC30s at about the same time, though it was not their first use of either Fender or Vox equipment.

That's my comment - what do others think?