

The Fender Custom Shop and “Blackie” Your questions answered...

A few days before the launch of the Fender Eric Clapton “Blackie” Reissue, Mike Eldred – Director of Sales and Marketing for the Fender Custom Shop, was interviewed by Guitar Center for his personal account of the “Blackie” Reissue project.

GC: So Mike, what’s your role at Fender, and in the Custom Shop specifically?

Mike: I’m Director of Sales and Marketing for the FMIC Custom Division, and that encompasses all brands: Tacoma, Guild, Gretsch, Fender, Charvel, Jackson, and the amplifiers.

GC: What is it about “Blackie” that makes it so special, even within that special world?

Mike: It’s an iconic Stratocaster. The story about the guitar is really such a great story about how Eric bought the guitar--bought several guitars--and then pieced together basically just one guitar from a bunch of different parts. So he actually built the guitar, which is very unique when it comes to iconic guitars like this. A lot of times they’re just bought at a store or something like that. But here, an artist actually built the guitar, and then used it on so many different recordings, and it was so identified with Eric Clapton and his musical legacy.

GC: Then, after 35 years of ownership, he offered it up for sale. What did Fender think when they heard that Guitar Center had bought Blackie at auction for almost a million dollars?

Mike: Just that we were glad that it was sold to someone we have a relationship with. The concern that we had was that somebody was going to buy it and then just lock it away and that would be that, or some private collector would buy it or something like that. But when Guitar Center bought it at least we knew the people who bought it.

GC: In recreating Blackie, how important was it to have access to the original guitar?

Mike: Whenever we do the tribute series stuff we always work on the actual guitar. In the case of Blackie we had inspected it and actually made a body, a replica body years ago when we first looked at it when Eric still owned it, and we spent about a week with it. But when Guitar Center brought it down it was really, really nice because we got to all sit around and professionally photograph it, professionally videotape it. Todd Krause completely took the guitar apart and inspected every screw, every scratch, everything. And then once he was done, we brought in all the rest of the master builders and they kind of swarmed the guitar so everybody got a really clear perspective of what the guitar was, so it was totally valuable to be able to do that. We are very grateful that we had that opportunity.

GC: You are welcome - thanks for the invitation! Now you've been working on the guitar for over a year. What was the highlight of the project?

Mike: I don't know if there was one highlight that you could pick out. Whenever we do these types of tribute guitars and get into dissecting the guitar and making clones of it basically, it's really interesting to get into being a detective. So you have to see what has gone on with the guitar over the years. In Blackie's case, pickups have been changed, the neck had been refinished, the body had probably been refinished, you know, parts had been replaced on the guitar. So it was really neat to kind of dig in there, get all that stuff out and then try to figure out 'okay, how do we replicate a neck refinish? What do we do to do that?' And that's when you kind of come up with 'what if we did this, what if we did that?' We'll have to finish the guitar and then unfinish the guitar, and then finish the guitar again. So it's stuff like that, it really keeps us on our toes, and that really was I think one of the main challenges. But overall, this was just a wonderful exercise.

GC: Agreed. Was there anything that was particularly challenging that you hadn't expected?

Mike: The hardest thing that we came up against was the copper shielding on the underside of the pick guard. It was one piece, and to find copper shielding that wide was pretty hard. Little things like that where it really shouldn't be that big of a deal, you just sort of run into it and go, "Man we can't find this. Who has this?" And now you have to source out a vendor and then they send you a sample and it's not wide enough, or... just stuff like that. But that little copper piece gave us quite a bit of trouble.

GC: Blackie has been a famous guitar now for going on 35 years. Why didn't Fender produce a Blackie reissue years ago?

Mike: We never sat down and pursued it. There were different things we wanted to do with it. We wanted to do it with an amp. The timing just wasn't right for Eric, and there were other tribute series guitars we were doing. When Guitar Center bought it, it kind of took it off the radar with Eric now, and that really made it a lot easier for us to make the whole thing happen.

GC: Speaking of Eric, what influence did Eric himself have on the project?

Mike: Well when the first replica was finished, Mike Doyle and myself took it to the Royal Albert Hall where Eric was playing with his band and we sat down and showed him...Guitar Center was gracious and smart enough to bring the original with us, and so Eric got to actually sit down with both guitars in a dressing room and look at them side by side, and play both guitars side by side - which is very rare. And there was no denying what had happened - he had no second thoughts about anything. He played the guitar and liked it so much he actually played it that night in the concert. He asked, "How can I get one?"

GC: How did the prototype that he played that night vary from the guitars that subsequently followed?

Mike: To be honest with you, I think that the prototype was pretty reflective of what we ended up doing with all the customer's guitars. They have basically what Eric has as well. It's just like the ones they would be purchasing.

GC: Tell us about the master builders, because this is a master-built instrument. How many master builders do you have?

Mike: Right now we have about nine. There's a couple of apprentices that help and things like that, and we pulled some master builders out to do different things, so the number floats around nine. We took the amount of Blackies being built and we divided it up between the builders and they all did about an equal amount.

GC: One of the more common questions that we've had is a question about neck radius. What information can you give us about that?

Mike: The neck radius is identical to the original Blackie. We don't get into the specifics about a tribute guitar because the people who are investing in that deserve to have that privacy. It kind of lends itself to the overall integrity of the whole project. If we start saying, "well it's this, this, and this," it just takes away from the integrity and the mystique of what the guitar is. People can be assured that it's identical to what the original is.

GC: You're only making 275 guitars. What would you say to someone if further down the line they ask you to make a black Strat with similar markings and electronics in the future?

Mike: We tell them "No. We don't do that."

GC: What kind of pickups and electronic wiring were used?

Mike: The thing with Blackie, the original Blackie, is that the pickups had been changed out. When we do these Tribute Series guitars we take them as the guitar sits right now, and it has pickups that have like a plastic insulation on them and we did that. We replicated everything that's on the guitar right now, down to the capacitor and actually the jack had a co-axial wire on it, which is kind of rare. And we did all that and we shielded it the same and everything. And this is I think probably the first guitar where we really replicated the insides of it, down to the capacitor, the electronics, getting down to the shielding, and the wire, and everything, the wire gauge—everything.

GC: Did you have to make a custom pickup, or was it a fairly standard style?

Mike: No, we had to make a custom pickup. We don't have a pickup that we use on anything in the shop right now that was similar enough to use in the Blackie replica. So

we sat down with Abigail Ybarra who has been with Fender since 1956. She was hired by George Fullerton and she runs our pickup department at the Custom Shop. We gave her all the specs and had her look at the pickups and everything. She said, “Okay, let me make a set of them,” and then she made a set of them, we tried them out; we liked the way they sounded. It was very accurate in every detail, so we said ‘okay, let’s do the sets like this.’ So she oversaw the winding of each of those pickups in that set, and made everything to the correct specs.

Doyle: Can you please explain Fender’s serial number philosophy? I notice that you don’t have a “001” or a “002”, and it doesn’t say “1 of 275” etc - which is somewhat different from other manufacturers when they do limited production guitars.

Mike: Yeah, the problem that we have is that dealers literally come up to me at NAMM shows and put me against a wall—literally—and hold me against the wall and tell me I need to get them the first ten serial numbers, or four of the first ten serial numbers. It was at that point I realized, “You know what? That philosophy detracts from the people who end up with number 99 or number 67 out of 100, you know? You get number one and I get number 72—the perception is that your guitar is more valuable than my guitar, and we try to eliminate that by not numbering things “one of 100, two of 100.”

And if we do ever do that we usually take the first ten serial numbers and hold those back so that people don’t get into that mind-set. And in the case of a lot of the tribute series, because they are so valuable and they are in such high demand and they are highly collectible instruments, we don’t do that at all because it just kind of detracts from what it is. We want everybody to walk away saying “I have one of 275.”

GC: Blackie is notable for having one of the most worn and distressed finishes of any guitar. Did the Custom Shop have to learn any new techniques to replicate those unique markings?

Mike: On the neck, mostly, we had to, because the neck had been refinished. And when they refinished it—if you play the guitar and you wear the finish off - there gets to be sweat and grime and dirt worn right into the wood, and then if you go to refinish it, that sweat, dirt, and grime kind of stays in the wood unless you sand the wood and change the shape of the neck. And they hadn’t done that, so basically there was dirt underneath the finish and we had to figure out how to do that. It wasn’t real hard to do it, but it was just another step, and it was like I said before—it’s like part of me has to be a detective to kind of figure out “okay, how do I do this? How do I make this look like this—like it’s been refinished, but it’s a brand new guitar.”

GC: And speaking of the finishing on the neck, when we were comparing the original Blackie with the limited production tribute guitars coming off the line from Fender, the reissues had a slightly lighter tint to the neck than the original. Can you explain the reasoning for that please?

Mike: Yeah, the original has a lacquer finish on it just like the replica does. The problem with lacquer though is that it yellows over time, so if you match the yellow the way it sits now...ten years from now you're going to have an orange neck. So we didn't want people down the road to go, "Oh look, this doesn't match." The longer they own the guitar, the closer the neck color will match. It's going to yellow up over time, even if you don't play it, even if you just store it, it's just kind of what happens with lacquer, it just yellows up. It has a real nice kind of amber look to it.

GC: Was there anything notable about the body, other than markings? Was it notably light, or particularly heavy?

Mike: Without getting into too much detail, the body's a three-piece body, and that was kind of weird because most of the spreads we do in the Custom Shop are either one piece or two piece, so we had to have custom spreads made. Also the guitar was noticeably heavier than what we were normally doing. A lot of people when they get a custom guitar made they want it light, so we had to kind of go backwards and sort out heavier body spreads.

GC: Did you have to scrap any bodies?

Mike: Yeah, we did. And I think you can see this in the video when you get the DVD with the guitar. Even with the detail we go through, the guitar's black. So even under the finish if there were stains or marks that normally we would just leave on a black guitar—we didn't use those bodies. So I think there was one body in the video where you actually see Todd Krause kicking it out. He's like, "No, this ain't gonna make it," so they'll take it aside and they would use it for something else or they'll scrap it.

GC: Thanks for your time Mike. Any closing thoughts?

Mike: Just that some people don't understand the concept of this guitar, and as with other Tribute Series guitar's they may come back and say, "Hey I don't see how you can charge \$24,000 for a Stratocaster that's brand new." What they don't understand is that this is a collectible instrument, and it is a valuable instrument and it'll continue to increase in value. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity.

GC: Thanks Mike for your expertise and diligence during the course of the last year working on "Blackie" with Guitar Center. It's been an honor and a pleasure.

Mike: It's been an honor and a pleasure for us too. We're excited and looking forward to getting up bright and early on Friday and have it be a memorable event.