

Sight for Sore Eyes

WHEN JAY JAY FRENCH'S DAUGHTER WAS STRICKEN WITH A RARE EYE DISEASE, THE TWISTED SISTER AXMAN ENLISTED A COTERIE OF FAMED GUITAR MAKERS FOR HIS PINKBURST PROJECT CHARITY AUCTION.

{ BY RICHARD BIENSTOCK }

WITH THEIR GARISH makeup, mountainous hair, and bizarre outfits, Twisted Sister were arguably the most outrageous-looking glam-metal act of the Eighties. But for guitar fans, perhaps the most striking image associated with the band was Jay Jay French's pink-hued 1978 Les Paul Standard. Originally a Tobacco Burst example, the guitar had been, at French's request, recast in a vibrant Pinkburst finish by the late Long Island-based luthier Steve Carr. "That was the Twisted Sister color," the guitarist explains. "We had pink amps, pink letters in our logo... It was the thing."

Today, it's still the thing. In 2003, around the time that Twisted Sister launched their reunion, French procured a new Pinkburst-finish Les Paul from the Gibson Custom Shop. Two years later, Epiphone issued the Jay Jay French Signature Twisted Pinkburst Elitist. Now, the guitarist has unveiled the Pinkburst Project, a fundraising initiative that brings together one-of-a-kind custom shop guitars and amplifiers from Gibson, Fender, Martin, Paul Reed Smith, Marshall, Orange, and other manufacturers—all done up, of course, in French's trademark pink tones.

The genesis of the Project dates back several years, when French commissioned Fender Custom Shop master builder John Cruz to craft a Telecaster that featured not only his beloved Les Paul's pink finish but also its signature trapezoid inlays and mother-of-pearl headstock logo. That guitar served as inspiration when, in 1999, French's young daughter was diagnosed with Uveitis, an incurable inflammatory eye disease that can lead to blindness if untreated. Recalls the guitarist, "I was trying to think of a way to help bring attention

to what she was dealing with. And I thought if I could convince various guitar companies to take their most iconic models, just like Fender had, and match them to my Les Paul, I could auction them off and donate the money to help fight the disease."

It would seem impossible to persuade a cadre of revered manufacturers to recast their most legendary designs in the image of a Gibson Les Paul, but the results speak for themselves. The Pinkburst Project collection boasts three Fenders (a Strat, a Jazz Bass, and the initial Tele), a Martin 000-18, a Gretsch 6118T, a Paul Reed Smith Custom 24, and, in a nod to "future icons," an entry from Finnish manufacturer Ruokangas. These instruments are in addition to four models from Gibson (an SG, ES-335, J-200, and French's 2003 Les Paul) and two from Epiphone (a Thunderbird bass and the guitarist's own Signature Elitist).

French says that he asked all participants to abide by two requests. The first was that each specimen sport the requisite Pinkburst finish. To that end, Gibson provided the guitarist with the exact Valspar paint formula used on his 2003 Les Paul, to share with other makers. The second was that all examples be genuine custom shop creations. "Anybody can just buy a guitar, bring it to somebody else and have it painted," French says. "The fact that these are all factory-approved, factory-original pieces is what makes the project so special."

Upon completing the collection just over a year ago, French opted to take the project a step further. He commissioned similarly iconic amplifier models from various manufacturers, each of which came delivered wrapped in custom pink Kayline tolex. The dozen pink models he secured comprises everything from Marshalls (a 1959 Super Lead, JCM800, and Bluesbreaker



reissue) to Fenders (a Twin Reverb, Deluxe Reverb, and TV Twelve) to Voxes (an AC30 and AC15), as well as a piece that perhaps best encapsulates the uniqueness of the project: a 30-watt Rocker 30 known as the "pink Orange."

All the pieces in the Pinkburst Project will be auctioned through Skinner Auctioneers and Appraisers, in Boston, on May 1. Prior to the sale, on April 29, Twisted Sister will perform a charity show at the Best Buy Theater in New York's Times Square. All proceeds from the sale of the guitars and amplifiers will benefit the Ocular Immunology and Uveitis Foundation. Says French, "A lot of goodwill from a lot of people went into this, and the whole thing is the outcome of a really intense labor of love."

If there's one drawback to the endeavor, it's that French can't keep any of the stunning results for himself. "As the instruments were coming in," he recalls, "I had to say to myself, 'Don't get emotionally connected to any of them, because they're all going out the door.' But I look at it like finding out you have gorgeous daughters, but you didn't raise them... and they're all getting married next week. I'm just there to give 'em away." **GA**