Thunderstruck
Rock N Roll Relics Thunders

BY PAUL RIAIRO
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MASSIMO GAMMACURTA

IF THERE EVER was a rock star that few knew much about, it was Johnny Thunders, guitarist for glam-rock punk band the New York Dolls and his own group, the Heartbreakers. The image of Thunders flailing a Les Paul Junior is as iconic as the photo of Elvis Costello strutting a Jazzmaster or Angus Young strangling an SG. Like Costello and Young, Thunders is known as much for the model of guitar he played as the music that he recorded.

Just about every custom shop and independent luthier has recreated historic guitars inspired by musical heroes, but Rock N Roll Relics’ Thunders model is the first to celebrate the legendary guitarist. Company founder Billy Rowe uses the last names of famous players as model designations for the vintage-inspired guitars that he crafts with a worn-in look and feel. The Thunders model—Rowe’s personal favorite—has no association or endorsement with the late Thunders’ estate, so we looked at the Rock N Roll Relics Thunders model purely on its own, as a stripped-down vehicle for rock and blues.

It’s not hard to imagine any number of guitarists influenced by bands from Guns N’ Roses to the Ramones being drawn to this straightforward, no-nonsense instrument. RNR Relics uses premium materials in its construction, including an African mahogany body and neck, a rosewood fingerboard, and a bone nut. The neck profile is a perfectly rounded ’59 style that measures .877 inches at the first fret, making it comfortably slim. The neck feels smooth all the way up to the heel, and the medium-jumbo frets are perfectly dressed and crowned, allowing for wide bends without fretting out. Weighing less than seven pounds, the guitar is lightweight, comfortable, and balanced without being neck heavy—surprising considering the set neck meets the symmetrical body at the 22nd fret.

Inside the case is a checklist of every part and material used for the instrument. Customers can order this particular model with an impressive variety of hardware and wood options.

Johnny Thunders’ ragged style was the epitome great hard-rock and punk guitar playing, so it’s no surprise that this instrument conveys that raw attitude with its distressed look. Our example has a very thinly applied, perfectly checked lemon-yellow nitrocellulose lacquer finish that’s brighter than the original version’s yellowish-beige TV finish. Rather than a single-ply black pickguard, the Thunders sports a three-ply white/black/white aged pickguard, and instead of a P-90 it has a David Allen “Phoenix” minibucker pickup with Alnico 2 magnets, a Firebird-style cover, and a cream ring. Single 500k volume and 250k tone pots are all we need here, with vintage .022 Russian military capacitors providing incredibly smooth taper as you roll the knobs down. RNR Relics uses a vintage-style wraparound bridge and bolt-bushing tuners by TonePros, and this combination keeps intonation spot on and tuning rock solid. Two stickers, one applied on the guitar’s front and the other on its back, look like the band stickers that adorned the bathroom walls at CBGB and add appropriately to the guitar’s overall punk vibe.

The Thunders model is a guitar you’ll want to play often because it sounds great and looks damn cool. With nothing more than a single pickup and controls for volume and tone, it makes its statement as a simple, no-nonsense instrument that’s all about balls-to-the-walls rock and roll. The wraparound bridge adds the snap of a Telecaster, while the David Allen minibucker sounds clear and defined through just about any amp, with a Marshall or Vox AC30 providing the most authoritative tones. The guitar snarls when pushed to overdrive, and the tone knob provides extremely musical midrange without ever getting muddy or cloudy.

Although this guitar deviates slightly from the dual-cutaway, blackguard-and-P-90-equipped Les Paul Junior that Thunders actually used, the RNR Relics model offers an updated and loving tribute that’s true to his rough-and-tumble legacy.

LIST PRICE $2,300
Rock N’ Roll Relics, rocknrollrelics.net

TRASH TALK Billy Rowe reveals how rock stars and vintage guitars inspire Rock N Roll Relics.

• Why did you decide upon a Thunders model?
I’m a big fan of Johnny Thunders and the New York Dolls. I thought it would be cool to name it after a guitar hero of mine who never had a signature guitar and never achieved proper recognition for his great talent. Johnny was a simple blues-based rock and roll guitar player who was punk before punk existed.

• Tell me about the two stickers that are plastered to the guitar.
The sticker on the front of the guitar is the title of Johnny’s first solo band, Johnny Thunders & the Heartbreakers. L.A.M.F. translates to “Like a Mother Fucker.” The back of this guitar has a sticker that says “Trash,” which is one of the songs he wrote on the classic debut New York Dolls album.

• What sets you apart from other custom builders?
My guitars are based on classic electrics mainly from the Fifties. Most are straightforward designs with a slight hybrid twist. The pickups and pickguards make it my own thing. My aging process replicates the years of abuse a guitar gets after playing bar gigs night after night on the road. Players who love broken-in instruments now have the opportunity to buy a brand-new guitar that has that authentic road-worn look and feel.