

# SLEIGHT OF HAND

On a recent visit to Knaggs Guitars we got to experience the company's relicing process on a limited run of 'Joe's Guitar'

Words Dave Burrluck

1. Some old tuners are thrown onto the finish to add 'real-world' dings

2. A string winder with random bits of wire attached marks the headstock edge to create restringing wear

3. Another handmade tool with a couple of heavy plectrums is used to add the pick wear on the scratchplate

**M**ake no mistake, whether or not you like it, relicing (ageing, distressing... whatever you call it) is an art. Each practitioner will find their own ways and methods. One of Lukas Fronzoli's many tasks at Knaggs Guitars is to relic any order, a finish upcharge (of around £400) on gloss nitro only. Like many, Lukas studied hours of YouTube videos for hints and tips before finding his own way.

"I've done a fair amount of ageing and relicing now, so I've developed my own techniques," he explains from the workshop in Maryland.

*"I like to have the whole guitar put together before I start beating on it: it helps tell the story"* LUKAS FRONZOLI

"Occasionally, it can be pretty exciting like when someone ordered a replica of David Gilmour's black Stratocaster... but on a Knaggs Severn. I was very happy to do that!"

He starts the process with the hardware before assembling the guitar itself.

"Yeah, I age the bridge and the tuners before they go on. The Choptank's bridge plate had a nickel plating, but I sand-blasted most of that off. Then I enhanced the rust. It's the same process I use on most hardware: I tumble it in a rock tumbler for a little while to get some good surface wear then fume it with muriatic [hydrochloric] acid. Lemon juice, bleach or salt water, even, are used by some people. They actually make actual metal ageing products you can buy, too, pastes and the like. The big trick is to neutralise it – toss it around in baking soda or something to stop it continuing to age. How long you carry out the process depends on a mild to pretty trashed result."

It might surprise some to know that after the hardware, most of the ageing is done with the guitar fully assembled – Lukas does take the strings off, though.

"I like to have the whole thing put together before I start beating on it: it helps tell the story – a chunk taken out here and there. Plastic parts like the control knobs and pickup covers also go through that rock tumbler process. It does a great job on those."

The contents of that rock tumbler may surprise also you...

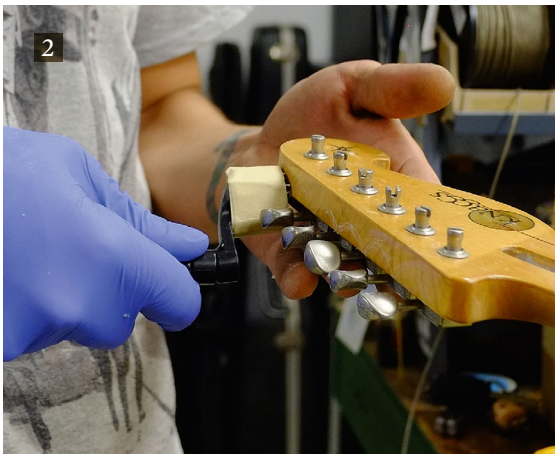
"Actually, I just use a handful of random old saddles, screws, bad pots



– random junk really. I mean, that's what puts the nicks on a guitar in the first place, right?"

Lukas is using Joe Knaggs' original prototype guitar as his guide. It's clearly had some use and there's noticeable pick wear on both sides of the wooden scratchplate.

"Adding those pick scratches is one of the fun parts," says Lukas, using specially made tool. "It's basically a dowel with a couple of hard plectrums acting like a drill bit to simulate pick wear," which he puts into a hand drill and sets to work. "Generally the dings are random, but I've used Joe's original guitar as the reference here – I'm not copying it, but it's similar. There are some noticeable gloss areas on the pickguard... I tried to make sure the rust was on the outer



edges of the bridge, like the original, that kinda detail.”

One trick he uses is to rub a stain – Vintage Amber Color Tone Liquid Stain from StewMac – into the fingerboard’s dot inlays and pickup covers leaving it to sink in and lightly ‘yellow’ the plastic. While that’s doing its job, Lukas shows us another purpose-built tool, a sort of small homemade hammer with five or six small screws in the end of a piece of maple that he uses to lightly bash areas of the finish. Also, he uses an old string winder to which he’s attached a “bunch of random pieces of guitar string and wire” to simulate the marks of a string winder on the headstock edge.

### TIME TRAVEL

“Joe’s original certainly has quite a lot of that type of wear,” explains Lukas showing us the original guitar to illustrate what he’s aiming for.

The back of the neck is worn through like many an old Fender. Like the rest of the guitar, it’s completely finished and buffed before he starts works.

“I use a combination of scraping it back with a razor blade as well as wiping it down with acetone, which softens the nitro so it’s easier to scrape off without eating into the wood. Then I rub some darker pigments that we use for grain filling into the bare wood and wipe that with mostly linseed oil mixed with a little random dirt.

“One thing I like to use to simulate the slight marks of general use is a handful of old tuners. They have enough random edges and corners that when you do that...” says Lukas, throwing a handful onto the guitar. “It gets you some nice little scratches and stuff. You can go a round with

a handful of them and just throw them onto the gloss.”

Lukas uses his handful of tuners to add more bursts of dings, including a bit of belt-buckle rash, commenting that “you need to kinda push them in a bit”. And then he does.

So is the key to authentic-looking ageing to use as many things as possible in the process that might have actually dinged the guitar in its imagined past?

“Yes, those tuners work real well, and I use a bass tuner to ‘carve’ in the more serious dings – there’s a couple on Joe’s original guitar that I’ve tried to copy on these replicas. I’ve used plenty of other things, as well – bags full of bridge saddles, that sort of thing.”

Still holding that bass tuner, Lukas uses it to cut back the body edges in places where they might have worn from use.

“A lot of stuff I’ll nick up quite hard then buff it over [on a buffing wheel] to make it seem more rubbed over.”

Lukas produces a large flat file and taps in some more dings to the edges. Then there’s another throw or three of the handful of tuners. The same processes are used on the headstock edges. If you’re a fan of mirror-shiny guitars, you might be feeling a bit queasy by this point...

Lukas adds the Miles Davis postage stamp – featuring a black-and-white photo of Davis from 1970, taken by David Gahr and originally used on *A Tribute To Jack Johnson* – and sticks it to the pickguard with Super Glues.

“It says 2012, so was clearly added some years after the original build.”

Next, Lukas produces a chocolate-coloured concoction, which is “more of that brown pigment, linseed oil, some more of my random



dirt and a tiny bit of solvent [nitro thinners], but it’s mostly linseed oil”, he explains. This goes over pretty much everything and seems to tone down the raw nicks and dings a little, making them more subtle.

“It also dulls down the [gloss] finish a little,” he adds, while that dirt in the mixture adds further fine surface scratches, “like rag scratches over years of polishing or cleaning”. The finish isn’t cracked on Joe’s original, “but if I was doing that”, says Lukas, “this liquid would highlight them”.

On the headstock, where Lukas has created the marks around the tuner buttons, this liquid is rubbed in and immediately gives more authenticity. It’s rubbed over the neck back, too, and the fingerboard. Lukas then wipes down the whole guitar in the order he applied the brown liquid so it has a similar time to do its job. It’s certainly made quite a bit of difference.

“Taking the edge off what you’ve already done is one of the most important parts of the process.”

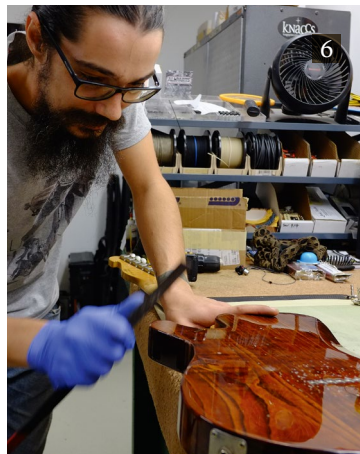
Now the wear looks a lot more natural whereas before it did look

4. Joe Knaggs’ original Choptank is used as the guide for this relicing process

5. This handmade tool has small screws in the end to add the wear you see over the page in picture 8

6. The guitar’s edge is bashed with a large flat file. Ouch!

7. Those pick marks on the scratchplate are slightly polished by using a buffing wheel, which adds gloss to the area





## KNAGGS JOE'S GUITAR: THE INSPIRATION

8. That handmade tool (shown in picture 5) has added small dings that again simulate Joe's original prototype
9. The wear on the neck back adopts an almost burnished feel to simulate a well used, and quite dirty-looking surface here
10. Light wear and some random dirt give the headstock a well-used appearance
11. The Miles Davis stamp adds a very personal touch. It's on Joe's original model, so was added here thanks to an eBay search
12. That rusted bridge plate and aged, yellowed plastic parts all add to the illusion of age

rather like Lukas was wrecking (rather than relicing) a perfectly good guitar...

"Yes," he laughs, "I'm always worrying about that..."

"Cracking the finish on a guitar is one of the most fun things you can do," adds Lukas, although it's not a feature on this ageing job. "Typically, I use a heat gun to warm it before I blast it with compressed air. To an extent, this can be quite cathartic. We spend all this time making these things beautiful and perfect and someone actually wants you to beat one up? Sure!"

And, finally, before the guitar goes to final setup, Lukas takes it into the buffing room to just to add those glossier patches on the scratchplate and to smooth over some of the edge wear. It is, like the actual build, all about the details.

There's a surprising amount of work involved – and this is after the guitar has been entirely built, finished and assembled. The process we observed took around 40 minutes, and before that the hardware itself has to be aged, not to mention the all-important neck back wear. Relicing a new guitar remains a touchy subject to many, but for the modern guitar maker it's just another finish style to offer on an options list. You choose. **6**

**For more info on Knaggs Guitars, go to [www.knagsguitars.com](http://www.knagsguitars.com)**

