





Down By The River

Named after the waterways of Maryland and beyond, the Chesapeake series is part of the diverse range of über-quality instruments from Knaggs, which has just celebrated its 10th anniversary. Where did that decade go? We go back to the beginning...

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Adam Gasson



KNAGGS CHESAPEAKE CHOPTANK JOE'S GUITAR **APPROX. £4,100**

CONTACT **Peach Guitars** PHONE **01206 765777** WEB **www.knaggsguitars.com**

What You Need To Know

1

Knaggs, who?

The guitar company founded in late 2009 by master luthier Joe Knaggs and sales and marketing expert Peter Wolf. Both are ex-PRS lynchpins, as are their employees.

2

More posh and expensive guitars, then?

Knaggs does make those, for sure, but the guitars start much lower than you'd imagine. With some 16 different designs, including basses and acoustics, each has a wide *à la carte* options list offering considerable choice. The new Kenai J now kicks off the range at approximately £2,800.

3

Who are they for?

Serious musicians, from the likes of Steve Stevens and Doug Rappaport, to our own Richard Barrett, and anyone who just enjoys the craft of the guitar made in small numbers by a hugely experienced team.

Not every guitar maker would celebrate a significant milestone with a reproduction of its prototype model. More than that, this Choptank is modelled on Joe Knaggs' own heavily played prototype, which dates back to the early Noughties. At that time, Joe was heading up PRS's Private Stock division (so hardly a novice) and in 2009 he left PRS to start his own venture. The Choptank's design was in stark contrast to the guitars Joe was building at his day job: more a set-neck Telecaster in style with a Strat's pickup and control layout.

Our review model, then, comes from a one-off limited run of just 11 instruments closely replicating the near 20-year-old original with an aged and lightly bashed gloss all-nitro finish, aged hardware and heavily worn neck finish. It doesn't look or feel 'posh' and appears very far from new.

As Joe explains elsewhere in this feature, the genesis of the design stems from the relatively thick steel bridge plate that maximises the ring and sustain that is central to Joe's build ethos. It's through-strung like a Telecaster but uses chrome-plated brass saddles (by Gotoh), which are held firmly in place by the raised and sloped rear wall. Like its original inspiration, this Choptank sticks to the correct woods: swamp ash body (centre joined) and a maple neck that has quite a vivid flamed figure. The fingerboard is Nicaraguan rosewood (some were spec'd with Macassar ebony before the CITES II import/export restrictions on rosewoods were relaxed at the end of November 2019), and Joe uses a 216mm (8.5-inch) radius, very marginally flatter than Fender's original 191mm (7.5 inches).

1. This thick steel baseplate is the genesis of the Choptank design. Note the rising rear wall that holds the brass saddles in place to prevent any sideways movement





Fralin Alnico V Blues Specials are a favourite of Joe Knaggs. They certainly help to create a muscular Fender-y voice from the Choptank

But it's the way the body is shaped that primarily reflects Joe's personal style. There's a large chamfer to the bass-side lower bout that serves as a forearm contour but also adds a distinct look and thins the 46mm deep body, making it look slimmer at the rim than it actually is. We saw this back on the original PRS Mira – designed by Joe back around 2006 – and we see a similar style on other Knaggs designs, not least the double-cutaway Severn. There's a rib-cage contour on the back, too, and the boat-bow pointed heel is a recurring theme across the various Knaggs designs. As with many Knaggs designs, they're slightly wider than the classics they're in part inspired by. Here, the body is approximately 343mm (13.5 inches) wide as opposed to a Tele's girth, which is closer to 322mm (12.6875 inches).

Noticeably flamed, the maple neck is quarter-sawn and one-piece (save for the slightly unmatched single headstock ear), and has a worn-through finish on its back. The headstock is back-angled, too – another fundamental of the Choptank's design – so we get good down-pressure for the strings over the bone nut without using any string trees or staggered height

A world-class guitar with a tonal range some way beyond what the pickup configuration suggests

tuners. It provides the only bling: a pearl disc 'moon' behind the logo and a small pearl-studded Northern Star at the head's tip, all inlaid into the thin maple facing.

Another theme we see on Knaggs designs with scratchplates is that, instead of using plastic, Joe prefers wood. Here, the scratchplate is koa-faced (a three-piece laminate approximately 2.5mm thick), which differentiates the Choptank further from the guitars it was inspired by. More regular is the Strat-like pickup layout that favours Lindy Fralin's Blues Specials – a longtime favourite of Joe's. Oh, and that US postage stamp that pictures Miles Davis, one of Joe's heroes, was clearly added later as it wasn't released until 2012. That's probably the first time we've ever mentioned Miles Davis and a postage stamp in a guitar review...

THE RIVALS

PRS has its own 35th anniversary to celebrate this year and many owners will know the work of Joe Knaggs who helped create plenty of production models such as the Mira, which returns this year in the SE range (£599) along with the new SE Hollowbodies (from £899). The USA Core-level Paul's Guitar (from £3,799) impressed us in 2019, while custom Private Stock instruments start around £6k upwards depending on specification.

Germany-based Nik Huber follows a similar path to Knaggs but produces fewer instruments per year. The Dolphin, Surfmeister and Twangmeister follow a similar Tele-inspired outline to the Choptank with varying style and appointments. Expect prices from £4k.

Patrick James Eggle in the UK is well known in these pages for his small-number builds. His Oz is based on a Telecaster, while the Macon and Macon Junior follow more Gibson-like lines but with hugely detailed build and numerous options. Prices from around £3k upwards.



Another key point of the Knaggs build ethos is this back-angled headstock to provide enough down-pressure over the bone nut without using Fender-style string trees

A theme we see on Knaggs designs with scratchplates is that, instead of plastic, Joe prefers wood

Feel & Sounds

The Choptank has quite a muscular, manly vibe to it: a gigging tool. That's supported weight wise, which at 7.8kg isn't as light as its swamp ash body might suggest but certainly gives a very workmanlike feel, as does the '52' neck shape, which is based on an early Telecaster. The nitro lacquer is removed from the back, and it's lightly oiled during the relic process creating an old Fender-y feel. Slightly narrower at the nut than the Kenai, for example, it's a relatively deep C shape, 22mm at the 1st fret thickening to 24.2mm by the 12th. The fingerboard camber feels very classic, the wire slightly thicker and importantly taller than 'vintage' spec (approx. 2.5mm wide with a height of around 1.26mm to 1.3mm). Shipped with 10s, the Knaggs' string height is pretty mainstream at bang on 1.6mm treble and bass sides with minimal relief.

It's certainly a vibrant, lively guitar as you should expect and, while it has a familiar fast attack, there's a ring and almost looped rising sustain envelope that gets to the essence of the Knaggs style. Married with



Like a Telecaster, the Choptank uses flush string ferrules to hold the strings. The numerous small dings in the is area replicate those on Joe's own guitar

the Blues Specials, there's a good body and a slightly hotter output, and although the note attack is unmistakable, it's very slightly rounded here. It means that we can get a very strong, twanging bridge voice that would grace the stage at the Grand Ole Opry played clean with lashings of reverb. Roll back the volume and tone a little to tame the attack, and kick in a little drive, and we're into more contemporary hot modern country, a combination of heat and clarity that really isn't a million miles away from early Eddie Van Halen, with a little more push. Pull back the gain and both pickup mixes hit the spot, while the neck

THE LOST TRIBES

Many of the unusual names of the Knaggs guitars come from the geography and history of Maryland. Choptank, Severn, Honga, Potomac and Patuxent, for example, are rivers, while the Tuckahoe is technically a creek. Some of these names – such as Patuxent and Choptank – also remember the lost indigenous tribes of the area. Ain't nothing to do with guitars, of course, but a welcome change from product codes.



The scratchplate is quite heavily marked in the relic process, again simulating the considerable wear on Joe's original. The scratchplate is laminated koa. Control wise, there's little surprise with a Strat-style five-way, master volume and separate tone controls for the neck/middle and bridge pickups

UNDER THE HOOD

Inside the Choptank's control cavity

The standard circuit provides a classic drive, the only nod to modernism is that we have a shared tone control for the neck and middle pickups, while the lower tone acts on the bridge pickup. Pots are CTS 250kohm with a large orange .047 microfarads tone capacitor. The cavities appear screened, but there's just cloth-covered hook-up cable.

Fralin classes its Alnico V Blues Specials as "the perfect balance between warm and bright" and these units are the company's second-best-selling single coil behind the

More regular is the Strat-like pickup layout that favours Lindy Fralin's Blues Specials – a longtime favourite of Joe's

Vintage Hots, "wound with five per cent more coil than the Vintage Hots, making them sound five per cent hotter and thicker", says the company. They are hum-cancelling (RWRP) in the mixed positions and the bridge is slightly hotter with measured DCRs of 6.75kohms (bridge), 6.02k (neck and middle). Adding to the Tele vibe of the bridge is the Fralin-stamped steel baseplate on the bridge pickup – always a part of the Choptank concept.





It might have a 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length and originally be inspired by a Telecaster, but this model, like all Knaggs' designs, has a glued-in neck. Note the slightly pointed boat-bow heel

pickup, rather like the bridge, is deceptively chameleon-like. The well-voiced and graduated tone control is your friend here – and pull back the volume a little as well and it's easy to cover late-'50s classic-era jazz guitar, combining depth with some bite. Visually, the pickups suggest a certain voicing, which, yes, we do have, but the body, ring and resonance allow for a wider palette of sounds.

As this is a relic, we didn't think twice about taking the Knaggs out on a lively pub gig. The whole experience was a pleasure: it's a very comfortable guitar and the tuning is extremely stable, but it's the commanding depth of its voice that is quite remarkable, giving immense power to the neck pickup's woody percussion, noticeably more depth to the bridge's Tele-like twang, and almost low-power humbucker voicing on the middle pickup with a little tone roll-off. Above all, it just feels like an instrument you can rely on and trust to get the job done.

Verdict

Let's start by saying that the base-specification Choptank kicks off at around £3,700 and a comprehensive options list means your version could be considerably pimped. As we say, though, this is a recreation of the guitar that started the company, a real blue-collar workingman's vibe. That kind of phrase might be used

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disparagingly but not here: this is a hugely fit-for-purpose gigging tool that looks like it's already been on a world tour or three thanks to the ageing and light dings. On paper it might look pricey – and it is – but when you get one in your hands and fired up, well, if you can't see, feel and hear the quality, we'd suggest you might need to reset your compass. Experience drips from the instrument: wood choice, neck shape, weight and balance, stability, and that proprietary bridge design all combine to create a world-class guitar with a tonal range some way beyond what the pickup configuration suggests.

We've been lucky enough to play and test quite a number of Joe's guitars over the past decade and whatever their dress they share a commonality: high-level classic making always with a twist or two. Call 'em boutique or custom shop if you like, but Joe prefers we view his team simply as guitar makers. "We're a guitar workshop," he says. Although we'd have to add – one of the finest ones out there. **G**



KNAGGS CHESAPEAKE CHOPTANK JOE'S GUITAR

PRICE: approx. £4,100 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Swamp ash

NECK: 1-piece figured maple, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.1mm

FINGERBOARD: Nicaraguan rosewood, 'clay' dots, 216mm (8.5") radius

FRETS: 22, 'tall thin'

HARDWARE: Knaggs Chesapeake hardtail bridge (aged black plated with chrome-plated brass saddles), Kluson-style vintage tuners (aged nickel-plated)

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53.5mm

ELECTRICS: 3x Fralin Blues Specials, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck/middle), tone 2 (bridge)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.55/7.81

OPTIONS: Only finish on this limited run. The standard Choptank starts at £3,700 and has a large options list (see website)

RANGE OPTIONS: The 25.5" Chesapeake range includes the best-selling double-cutaway Severn, the Severn X and the 'offset' Tuckahoe with the same start price as the Choptank

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: English walnut (as reviewed) Butter Scotch – aged gloss nitro



9/10

PROS Build, feel and sound; an uncanny replica of the guitar that started the company

CONS Too much money for many...