

J E R R Y ' S K I D S



THE GUITARS OF GARCIA



Jerry Garcia liked good guitars. According to Steve Parish, his longtime guitar tech and sidekick, Jerry had about 25 in his personal collection. For about 70% of his time in the spotlight, though, he played just three guitars, all custom-built by the same luthier. ■ Garcia's first guitar was a Danelectro, received in trade for an accordion he'd been given for his fifteenth birthday. It's uncertain what

Jerry posed with Doug Irwin's Tiger in 1988. At right is the Wolf. The first guitar Irwin built for Jerry, it bears serial number 001.



BY JON SIEVERT

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kind of acoustic Jerry played with Robert Hunter in the days before he switched to bluegrass banjo.

When the Warlocks were formed in 1965, Garcia bought the red Guild Starfire used on the first Grateful Dead album. That was followed by a few Gibson SGs and Les Pauls, a Fender Tele or two, and several Strats, but he was unhappy with these options, declaring in his April '71 *Guitar Player* cover sto-



The creation of Stephen Cripe, a Deadhead who sent Garcia a guitar on spec, Lightning Bolt first saw action in 1993.

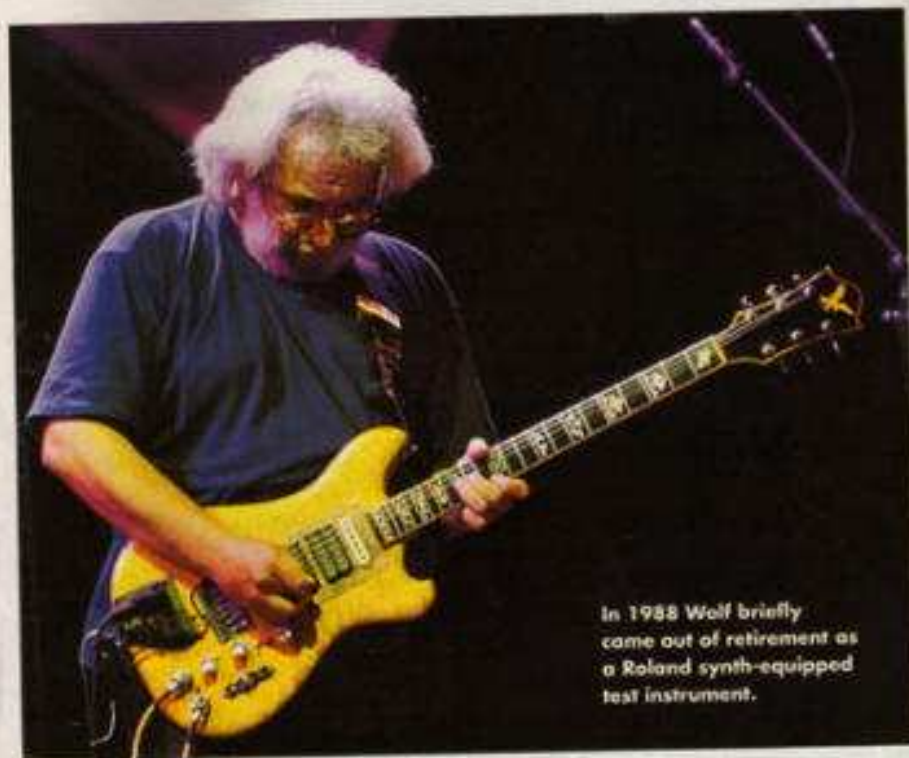
ry. "I don't like any of the guitars that are available. I'm trying to have a guitar built."

Shortly thereafter, he stumbled on a Travis Bean, an aluminum-neck creation made by a renegade Southern California builder. Parish says they both laughed at it when they saw it in a guitar store window, but Jerry quickly changed his mind when he tried it. He said the Bean finally gave him the consistency he wanted in a guitar, and he began to use it regularly. At the same time, he was also using an old blonde Strat he called the "Alligator," a gift from Graham Nash.

In 1972 Garcia took delivery on his first in-

strument custom-built by Doug Irwin of Sonoma County, California. Known as the "Wolf" due to its distinctive inlay, this guitar has a 25^{1/2}" maple neck, a 24-fret ebony fingerboard, and a blonde Western "quilted" maple body with a purpleheart (amaranth) core. The first guitar Irwin made with his name on it, its electronics are modeled after a Fender Stratocaster, with one volume control, two tone knobs, and a 5-way selector switch. The guitar also has a clever effects bypass circuit designed by Jerry. Over the next six years, Garcia primarily played the Wolf, although the Alligator and Travis Bean were also

Jerry commissioned Cripe to make Top Not as his backup guitar.



In 1988 Wolf briefly came out of retirement as a Roland synth-equipped test instrument.



During the '70s Garcia took joy in the consistency of his aluminum-neck Travis Bean.

used with some regularity.

"I still haven't found the ultimate guitar," Jerry said in his October '78 *Guitar Player* cover story. "I'm still looking." Within a few months, however, Doug Irwin nailed it with the "Tiger," named for the brass and mother-of-pearl animal inlaid on its ebony cover plate. Seven years in the making, the guitar has an ebony fingerboard on a maple neck, an arched cocobola top and back, vermillion neck and body striping, and a Western flamed-maple body core. Meticulous scrolled inlay position markers cover the fingerboard, and much of its brass hardware is hand-fabricated. A soaring eagle over the planet Earth decorates the headstock. Sharing the basic Strat approach, it was usually outfitted with one DiMarzio SDS-1 single-coil and two DiMarzio Super 2 humbuckers. Garcia produced more notes with the Tiger than any other guitar, using it exclusively for the next 11 years. "When I picked up that guitar," he said in the July '88 issue, "I'd never felt anything before—or since—that my hand likes better."

According to Parish, Garcia understood everything that went on in his system and was meticulous about details. Pots, capacitors, and resistors were swapped, and pickups were mounted on brass plates so they could be easily replaced, since Jerry felt their output weakened after a year or two. The Tiger had Jerry's effects bypass loop, as well as an op-amp buffer/amplifier to



protect the signal from losing high end when the effects kicked in.

In the late '80s Garcia mounted a Roland GK-7 synth interface on the Wolf. Mated with the GK-50 controller, this allowed him to sound like the trumpet player and bass flautist he always wanted to be. The Tiger was subsequently retrofitted with an internally



Rosebud's distinctive cover plate hid Jerry's synth controls.

mounted GK-2 interface by Irwin and San Francisco repair maven Gary Brawer.

In 1990 Garcia finally changed guitars when Irwin completed "Rosebud," named for the inlaid dancing skeleton on the ebony cover plate. It is almost a twin of the Tiger, but two pounds lighter at 11½ pounds. (While the shape is identical to the Tiger's, the body

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inlay and the tone and volume control positions are different.) Though he continued to use the Tiger with the Garcia Band for about a year, Rosebud became Jerry's full-time Dead guitar.

In August '93, Garcia appeared onstage with yet another guitar. From the audience it looked like an Irwin, with its distinctly sculpted "dog-ear" horns and dark body. The Dead's trademark lightning bolt appeared on the familiar ebony cover plate. A rumor quickly spread that the guitar had been a gift built by a Deadhead and shipped gratis to the Grateful Dead office. Sure enough, it turned out that Stephen Cripe, a 42-year-old custom woodworker and Deadhead from Florida, built "Lightning Bolt" for his hero using nothing but photographs of the Tiger and a well-worn copy of the *Dead Ahead* video. He fashioned the body out of a piece of East Indian rosewood recycled from a small 19th-century Asian bed for opium smokers. "I liked the idea of using recycled material because of Jerry's interest in the rain forest," he says. "The cocobola through-body neck has a recycled Brazilian rosewood fingerboard." Cripe says he

Jerry's main acoustic during the '90s combined an Alvarez-Yairi body with a Modulus Graphite neck.

designed and built the instrument totally by feel. Garcia was intrigued when he got it and ordered a backup instrument. Delivered in April '95, this guitar was dubbed "Top Hat" because of its inlay of a skull wearing a red, white, and blue top hat with silver stars. It was Cripe's first-ever sale.

"My greatest fantasy was that Jerry might use one of my guitars on a recording," Cripe says. "I never dreamed he would play one onstage. And when I met him in April 1994, he was so humble; I really admired that. He mentioned that he particularly liked the access provided by the through-body neck. He also said it was accurate in the higher end, which was unusual. It allowed him to play up where he usually avoided. He expressed amazement that I'd built a guitar that fit



him so well, especially since I'd never held or seen his Irwin up close. He made a few changes. He didn't like the roller bridge, since it can affect the string spacing, and he was working on a brass nut to replace the bone I'd used." Once a Roland MIDI system was installed, Lightning Bolt became the

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The last guitar Garcia graced was this 1939 Gibson Super 400N.

#1 guitar. Because a new bridge was being installed at the time, Garcia played Rosebud at his final Grateful Dead show on July 9, 1995, at Chicago's Soldier Field.

Certainly, other guitars were used during Garcia's long career. There was the Martin D-18 used for the *American Beauty* and *Workingman's Dead* sessions and the Dead acoustic sets. Between 1970 and '74, Garcia regularly played a ZB pedal steel. Various Takamine acoustic dreadnoughts with built-in pickups were used for the 1980 acoustic shows and occasional benefits. Garcia played a graphite-neck Alvarez-Yairi acoustic on the *Garcia/Grisman* album and at their live shows.

The day before Jerry checked into the clinic, he recorded a lazy version of Jimmie Rodgers' "Blue Yodel #9" at David Grisman's studio with a stunning, mint-condition 1939 Gibson Super 400N acoustic that's seen in the video for the movie *Smoke*. It's likely the last guitar Garcia ever played. ■

[Stephen Cripe can be reached at Box 358, Trilby, FL 33593. Doug Irwin has no known forwarding address.]