



GUITARS THE BLUES LEGENDS PLAYED

by Paul Brett

It has been fascinating to watch the vintage guitar market grow into a world wide feeding frenzy for both players and collectors alike. From the humble individual with a few quid to spare, to Corporations and those individuals fortunate enough to have huge Wall Street and City bonuses to splash around. Even when the volatile stock market and yes, even house prices have dipped.

The vintage guitar market has steadily increased in value, none more so than the last few years, where prices for Gibson and Fender electrics have reached Mars orbits. Even spares have hit the roof. The Acoustic side has been more than healthy, especially in the interest for guitars that the Blues Legends played.

I think everyone will tell you that it's impossible to find a modern guitar that will give you 'that sound', that's why people look to the past to the early makers and pioneers of these instruments. The most satisfying aspect of collecting guitars is that you can sit down and play them, unlike a William IV table. They are easy to transport across the world and certainly less expensive than an antique table !

Apart from Gibson and Martin (whose vintage guitars are now extremely expensive, especially Martins,) there are the much sought after and now legendary **Stella and Sovereign** guitars made by **Oscar Schmidt**. Still affordable, though rare in playable condition, these guitars were the first choice of many early Blues pio-



neers. **Leadbelly**, Blind Willie Mc Tell, Barbeque Bob played Stella 12 strings. Blind Blake, Son House, Blind Lemon Jefferson, B.B. King and the daddy of them all, Charlie Patton played Stella 6 strings.



Oscar Schmidt

Schmidt himself was a German immigrant from Saxony, just like C.F.Martin. He left Germany for America to start a new life. The Oscar Schmidt Company was founded in 1879 and incorpo-



Oscar Schmidt factory 1910

rated in 1911. It was based in a factory at Ferry Street in Jersey City.

Schmidt made all kinds of instruments which were sold either through their Catalogue or by their statewide salesmen. They sold to the rural towns where no outlets existed for such a trade, except in small town furniture and dry goods stores. Probably the main reason for their success lay in the fact that they were cheap, starting around the \$2 mark. This was probably the main reason for the early Blues players to own them, especially in the poor communities. Schmidt prospered opening branches worldwide, even setting up regional Music Schools. The decline began, like so many other US businesses at the time, with the fall of the stock market in the 1920's and Schmidt himself died whilst on one of his overseas trips. His Company did survive the bank collapse that held it in trust, but in 1935, production was taken over by a man named John Carner. It was during this period that Leadbelly's famous Stella 12-string guitar was produced.

In 1940, everything was sold to Harmony. They continued to make Stella and Sovereign guitars, but they didn't have the same impact, although the Harmony Sovereign deluxe models, were said to be the best flat tops Harmony ever produced. It was from 1940 to the early 60's that Gibson introduced their first 12 strings to the market, as Stellas prior to that, were the only commercially produced 12 strings on the Us market. For more in depth information on Oscar Schmidt and Stella guitars visit Neil Harpe's web site www.stellaguitars.com where you will find a few of these rarities for sale or buy Neil's excellent book on Stellas which comes with a CD, demonstrating the sounds of these early guitars. If you are lucky enough to get a Stella, then if the paper label survived inside the gui-



tars, it should look like this. *Stella Label (Fig.1).* A 1908 Sovereign (Fig. 2) A 1920 Sovereign



Fig. 2. A 1908 Sovereign



Fig. 3. A 1920 Sovereign Double Neck.



Fig. 4. A 1930's Stella Floral

Double Neck.(Fig. 3 .) A 1930's Stella Floral (Fig. 4).

Kay was another brand that Bluesmen favoured. From the late 1890's until being taken over by Jukebox maker Seeberg in 1965, Kay was possibly the second largest manufacturer of musical instruments in the States. It made instruments carrying brand names like Stromberg, Kay Kraft, and Recording King (Gibson also made these), Dobro, National, Oahu, Paramount, S.S. Maxwell, Airline, Supertone and Silvertone for Sears and other catalogue companies, the most notable being Montgomery Ward. It is said that Kay was on a par with Gibson in the 1950's with endorsement models from the great Barney Kessel and Jimmy Reed. It's interesting to see other Bluesmen who used Kay. Sleepy John Estes, Muddy Waters, John Lee Hooker, Buddy Guy, Lightning Hopkins, and the great slide player Elmore James, who played a Kay dreadnaught with added electrics, specifically a DeArmond Rhythm Chief Model 1000. Kay built cheap and expensive guitars and under the Stromberg Voisinet and Kay Kraft brands, they produced the innovative Venitian style guitars as well as the Kay Kraft adjustable neck models. These could transform from classic style to steel by the adjustment of a mechanism located in the heel joint of the neck. (Figs. 5 & 6) In fact, they carried two large internal wing nuts for this purpose. Ry Cooder is one notable user of these guitars,



Fig. 5. Kay Kraft adjustable neck

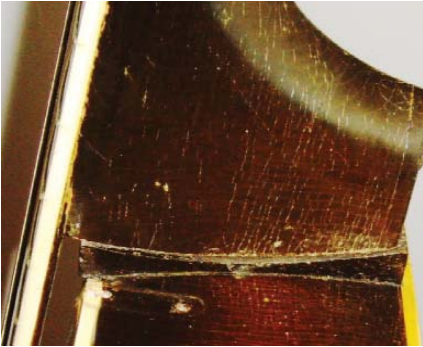


Fig. 6. Kay Kraft adjustable neck

Hurt who played a Regal Dobro Model 19. Lyon & Healy actually brought the Regal Trademark in 1904 but it is unclear what happened between 1904 and 1908 when Regal re-emerged, it's centre of production in Chicago. It is said that Regal also built guitars for Weymann, Bruno, Stahl and indeed Lyon & Healy. They seemed to stop making Dobros around the early 1940's. The whole affair was sold to Kay in the early 1950's and re-licensed to Fender in the late 50's. In the late 80's, the brand was re-introduced by Saga Musical Instruments and are now made in Korea. (Fig. 7, Regal Dobro model 25).

Washburn started making guitars in 1883 in from their Chicago outlet. Being credited by many writers for their involvement in the "Delta Blues" movement. It is reported that the musicians who worked at Washburn also played the guitars they made. One Street in particular, Maxwell Street became a gathering place for new immigrants from the African Continent, African Americans as they are now called. Things would have been a lot different and tougher for them in those days and they would have been treated by the mostly white population in an extremely derogatory way and certainly called different names than today. Delta Blues was a powerful, emotional style of music that became the number one style of Blues that

which have become very collectable recently. In 1967 the company was again sold to Valco, the parent company of National and Supro.

The Regal Manufacturing Co. of Chicago is name synonymous with guitars over many years and are even strong today, especially in the production of resonator style guitars. These were favoured by bluesmen such as Mississippi John



Fig. 7. Regal Dobro model 25

later, was to change the early sounds of rock and roll.



Fig. 8. A Washburn Fancy inlaid Guitar from the late 1800's.

Modern bands owe plenty to these early bluesmen. The list of endorsees over the years has been endless, yet Washburn to this day are still a world force in Guitars. (Fig. 8) A Washburn Fancy inlaid Guitar from the late 1800's.

For more information on The Guitars the Blues Giants played visit www.early-blues.com This is a great UK site for everything Blues.