

# Jimmie Vaughan on His Passion for Hollowbody Gibson Guitars

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As Jimmie Vaughan walked through the doors of Austin Vintage Guitars one morning last summer, his eyes were drawn directly to a cluster of early Gibson acoustic archtops designed by the company's legendary chief luthier Lloyd Loar, hanging on the left side wall. And his feet followed.

"This is the kind of stuff I like," he said, pulling his fingers across the strings of a worn [Gibson L-5](#). "I like guitars that are old and have a classic sound, like you can't get out of the ones they make today."

Vaughan's known for making old – or at least timeless – sounds. Some consider him the finest blues guitarist alive, a master of perfect tone, taste and technique whose phrasing cuts to the soulful heart of the genre. He was the major inspiration for his younger brother when Stevie Ray was just starting to pick out "Mary Had a Little Lamb," and through Jimmie's own playing the spirits of Johnny "Guitar" Watson, Freddie King, Earl King, Jimmy Reed and Albert King all seem to sing.

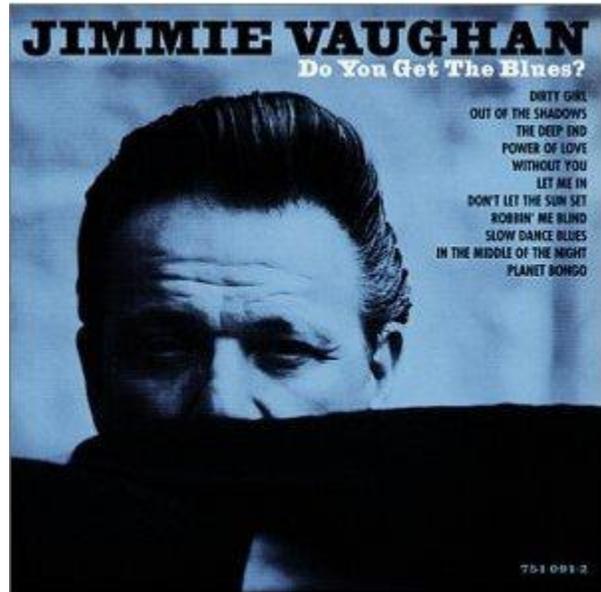
Retro-cool pervades both the musical and personal lives of Vaughan. He collects vintage cars, wears authentic '50s sunglasses like Roy Orbison's, sports a pompadour and strings his main guitars with sets of flat-wounds to nail the thick, sticky, hard-plucked tone that pervades his latest solo album, *Blues, Ballads & Favorites*. And Vaughan's favorites include numbers like Jimmy Reed's "Come Love," where his vintage '50s Kay ThinTwin provides an era-perfect chanking rhythm, and Memphis proto-rocker Billy "The King" Emerson's "The Pleasure's All Mine," where Vaughan's attack is as bright and prickly as a savagely terrific guitar tone can get.

His next destination that day in Austin was Top Hat Recording, the studio on the outskirts of town where Vaughan cut his *Blues, Ballads & Favorites*. And on the agenda was a show-and-tell session with some favorite guitars from his personal collection. In addition to his brother's instruments, Vaughan has most of the guitars he's owned in nearly five decades as a performer.

"I'm not really a collector," Vaughan allowed. "I like old guitars and old cars. I play the guitars I own and enjoy driving my cars. I'd never buy anything for an investment."

For Vaughan, it's all about recapturing the magic of his boyhood. "The world was quieter back then," he said, "yet it was such an exciting time. Music was changing, and cars and guitars were changing, and it was all part of the same thing – a kind of ultra-modern and cool style with gorgeous curves on everything from rocket ships to the back fins of a '61 Cadillac.

"I use my guitars to recreate my own Top 40 – the sounds I heard on records being played around Dallas in the '50s and '60s," he explained. "Those sounds were big and pure and honest, and if I can make other people feel the way I felt when I heard them, I think that moves beyond just making music into something spiritual."



Vaughan noted that he was once offered one of [Albert King's Flying Vs.](#) "I wish I'd bought it so I could put it in the museum I'm going to start one of these days with my stuff and Stevie's," he said. "I don't have any guitars that were owned by old bluesmen or anything like that. If a guitar does a certain thing that I like or if it's a model that was played by one of my musical heroes, like my Kay Barney Kessel, I might get it. But I feel like I've pretty much got all the ones I want now."

That includes the first new guitar purchase he ever made, which – contrary to what many of Vaughan's fans might expect – was a Gibson.

"I'd already owned some pawnshop guitars including some [Les Pauls](#)," he explained, "but ever since I heard Freddie King play 'Hide Away' I wanted to get an [ES-335](#). When I went out shopping for the first guitar I bought new with my own money in 1966, I planned to get one."

Instead, thanks to a salesman who wowed the budding bluesman with B.B. King licks, Vaughan walked out with an [ES-330](#) that he paid for on an installment plan his father, Big Jim, co-signed. He still has that guitar today plus other models from the ES family, including a 58-year-old cherry sunburst ES-350 that's among his very favorite instruments.

"Chuck Berry played the ES-350 before he switched to the thinner models," Vaughan says. "I wanted one of these since the first time I saw him and I finally got this guitar about 11 years ago," he said as he rested the vintage Gibson on his lap and plucked a few slow phrases that revealed a rich hefty tone even sans amp.

"I still have the bill of sale in the case, from Fretware Guitars in Franklin, Ohio. I saw it listed in an ad in a guitar magazine and called them up and ordered it, sight unseen."

The asking price for one of these hollowbody charmers in good condition is around \$7,000 – a far more modest tag than the \$30,000-plus an early ES-335 commands today. But that's the going rate for a vintage model that hasn't been played by a legend. Vaughan's ES-350 appears on several of his solo discs and is all over his 2001 Best Traditional Blues Album Grammy winner, *Do You Get the Blues?*

When it comes to playing hollowbody and semi-hollowbody guitars, Vaughan is clear on his preferences: "I like Gibson hollowbodies because they sound so good."