

SAMMY THE



EVER wondered what happens to the guitars that get smashed on stage by destructive rock musicians? One man who knows is Sam Li, guitar craftsman at Yes-man Steve Howe's new instrument shop in London's Hampstead.

For a long time Deep Purple's volatile lead guitarist Ritchie Blackmore would end their show by smashing his Fender Stratocaster on the boards – and soon afterwards the guitar would find its way to Sam Li, to be fixed for the next 99.

"I repaired three until they were unrepairable. I got his Strat, once, and when I removed the plastic scratch-plate the body fell in two. When they were so far gone he'd get another and throw the old one into the crowd. Eventually, he bought a Vox Strat, copy, so he'd play the Fender for all but the end of the last number, when he'd pull out the Vox from behind his stack, get some feedback from it, and then smash it up. Then I'd get that back the next day to be fixed."

Nowadays, guitar-smashing is scarce, but the number of guitars needing repairs which find their

way to Sam Li has certainly increased.

Now in his 30s, he first became interested in guitars as a player, listening and looting from jazz guitarists like Barney Kessel. But because he never felt he could make a living as a musician, he combined his interest with wood-working, which he also found very satisfying. In 1968 he started at Selmer's West End shop, working in the repair department. While he was there (he left in '85) John MacLaughlin joined, and he and Sam spent many hours playing together.

BUSINESS

"He was an amazing guitarist then, but he'd spend every possible minute practising – day and night. And every day you could hear the improvement in his playing," said Sam.

MacLaughlin left to concentrate on playing, and Sam left to set up his own repair business.

While he was at Selmer's he built up a large clientele of guitarists, and when he left, these musicians continued to send him their guitars. Usually the roadies brought him the instruments, so he didn't

always know which band he was working for, and in fact he worked for Yes for two years before he actually knew it was Yes.

"Steve Howe was one of the few guitarists who would come around when a guitar was ready and try it out," Sam remembers, and so when Steve and Alan White decided to expand their Hampstead premises (which already includes a health-food shop) to include instrument repairing and selling, it was natural for them to ask Sam if he'd like to be in charge.

Steve Howe is well known as a guitar collector, and most of his collection, which ranges from 17th century antiques to many Gibsons and Martins, has been to Sam to be checked. "He's always looking for instruments to add to his collection or for the shop, and I expect he'll bring something back from

this States' tour; in fact he's planning to bring back a Sho-Bud pedal steel," he said.

Although Steve hopes to be involved with the purchase of instruments for shop sale, Sam expects that they'll have an agent in the States to help find rare guitars.

It's too early though, to know what sort of range we're going to be able to offer, but as well as unusual guitars we'll cover strings, picks and accessories. I may also be custom-building or customising instruments," he said.

Over the years Sam has seen some very unusual guitars – and customers.

TOADS

There was one guy, lead guitarist with a Swiss group called The Toads, and every time he wanted his guitar adjusted, either he or a friend would bring the instrument from Switzerland for me to see. Must have cost him a lot of money.

I once fixed two guitars for George Harrison, who also has an amazing collection. They were both really old Gibson Super 400s and when I got them they were in really bad shape – even the frets were rusty. Apparently they'd been lying in a garage," said a pained Sam. "They looked lovely afterwards, though."

He's built a number of guitars and the first he finished went to Slade's Dave Hill. The problem is time though, and he showed me a solid guitar body and neck that he's been working on for six years, mainly in his spare time. He wonders if it'll ever be finished.

He's concentrating mainly on the more technical repairs at present, replacing and fixing machine heads, bridges and electrics, and leaving jobs like spray-finishing to another craftsman.

Even so, with most of the sale instruments' old aesthetes, he's concentrating on the old electrics and repair jobs.

With so many instruments coming in, I wondered if he'd found any favourites. "Well, I don't

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FIXER

play much nowadays, but I really like Fender Stratocasters. I can get almost any tone I want from them.

He regrets the way the quality standards of instruments has dropped over recent years, because of the ever-increasing demand — 'even so, Gibson, Fender and Martin standards are very much higher than other competitors. It certainly isn't just the same which makes them still sell so many.' But Sam Li's shop will not be offering new models in this range. As he says, most West End shops have large stocks of these makes, and he's attempting to offer something new and unusual.

The shop is at 36 Roslin Hill Road, Honeystead, and if you've got £200 barring a hole in your pocket at this moment, get along and see what they've got.



▲ Sam Li at the workbench — as the text shows he doesn't just work on guitars

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