

GRETSCH POWER JET

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

WHEN USED FOR HEAVY-ROCK SHENANIGANS, Gretsch guitars are usually considered to be a little out of their comfort zone. Sure, the antics of Malcolm Young, Billy Duffy, Chris Cornell, and Billy Zoom have proven that even a vintage Gretsch can be made to rock. But these instruments were designed for refined country and jazz playing, and even their popularity with '50s-era rock-and-rollers seemed to fly in the face of the sonic mission Gretsches were intended for.

The extremely accurate reissues that Gretsch is now producing are perfect for those who relish the charming idiosyncrasies of the classic models. But those with more practical and up-to-date needs should check out the Power Jet—a '50s-style Gretsch that has been tweaked for improved power and stability. Outwardly, it's a standard black Duo Jet, circa 1958, with a semi-solid mahogany body and pressed-arch laminated maple top, two humbucking pickups, a narrow headstock, a G-cutout tailpiece, neo classic position markers, and revised switching (the old master Tone control was replaced with a 3-way switch to accompany the 3-way pickup selector and individual and master Volume controls).

However, the Power Jet benefits from two subtle but considerable changes. First are its pickups, which look like Gretsch Filter Trons, but are actually ballsier Power Trons made in the U.S. by revered Gretsch-style pickup guru TV Jones. Secondly, the "floating" bridge base is pinned to the top to prevent it from being knocked out of place during heavy power-chord thrashing. The Adjusto-Matic bridge mounted atop is essentially Gretsch's version of the Gibson Tune-o-matic. It's a more intonation-friendly bridge than the Space Control roller bridge or "rocker bar" options, and it doesn't impede palm muting like the stylish but fussy Melita reproduction can.

The new Japanese-made Gretsches are fully deserving of the name, and the Power Jet is a real sweetie. The finish and setup are both first rate, and I found this guitar more playable right out of the case than the majority of vintage Gretsches I've sampled over the years. The neck has a rounded, U-shaped profile that almost approaches a soft V. It affords great grip for chording, but isn't hard to get behind for soloing. The medium-jumbo frets also facilitate lead work, and the light weight

of the chambered mahogany and maple veneer body makes this guitar a pleasure to strap on for extended periods.

I've always had a soft spot for a Bigsby on a Gretsch—and a Bigsby option is available on this model—but, for slashing rock rhythm work and wailing, deep-bending leads you can't fault the improved stability of the fixed tailpiece. The only drag was that the pickups sat a little high on the guitar, and the low-E would occasionally buzz out against the neck pickup's polepiece when picked hard. Happily, the action was set low enough that I could raise it to remedy the problem without sacrificing playability.

POWERED UP

When this guitar arrived for review—in a box emblazoned with the slogan "That Great Gretsch Sound"—I thought, "Probably not this time, fellas." It just seemed unlikely that a model with stronger pickups would retain that classic Gretsch bite. Well, beware of rash conclusions my friends, as the Power Jet remains a Gretsch through and through. It has all the grit, sizzle, and twang any long-time fan could hope to achieve from a slightly harder-rocking instrument.

TV Jones has achieved what seems a small miracle in making these humbuckers powerful and punchy while retaining the kind of spank, sparkle, and clarity that is more often associated with single-coils. Plus, they avoid any hint of muddiness. Sure, there's grit aplenty when you ram them through a cranked amp, but none of the wooliness or flabbiness that even many good Les Pauls succumb to in some settings. All in all, the Power Trons make a fantastic marriage with the routed mahogany body/maple ply top construction—which provides more open mids than many solids, along with spanky, snappy highs, and a round but not flabby bass. Played through my TopHat Club Royale and Dr. Z Z-28, the neck pickup got just a little soft on the low-E string, but, otherwise, the tones remained explosive and percussive.

The bridge pickup runs the gamut from clean country picking to pop jangle to stinging leads. Through a Marshall JCM800 half-stack, the Power Jet did a lot of tricks you'd hope to achieve with a good Les Paul, but with more available twang when the volume was wound down. The neck pickup is one of

SPECS

- 1 1/16" nut width
- 24.6" scale ebony-on-mahogany neck (soft "V" profile)
- Chambered mahogany body with maple veneer top
- Two TV Jones Power Tron humbuckers
- Individual Volume controls, Master Volume, 3-way Tone switch and 3-way pickup selector
- Adjusto-Matic bridge on pinned rosewood base
- 22 medium-jumbo frets
- Factory Strings: Fender nickel plated, .010-.046
- 6.8 lbs

INSTANT GRATIFICATION GRETSCH POWER JET

WHO'S IT FOR?

Rockers seeking vintage styling and power-hungry rockabilly slingers who love the compactness of the classic semi-hollow Duo Jet.

KUDOS

Well made. Captures classic Gretsch sound with more punch and power.

CONCERNS

Low action caused some string buzz against neck pickup polepieces.

PRICE

\$2,675 retail / \$1,949 street; \$2,875 retail / \$2,075 street with Bigsby vibrato tailpiece and Sperzel locking tuners

CONTACT

Fender Musical Instruments, (480) 596-9690; gretschguitars.com

A GREATER GRETSCH SOUND?

In 1969, Gretsch first offered a rock-ready Jet in the form of the Roc Jet—a somewhat more Les Paul-inspired semi-solid model that carried a pair of high-octane Super 'Tron pickups. The big difference—aside from the fact that the Japanese-made Power Jet is quite simply a better guitar than many American-made Gretsches of the early '70s—is that the Power Jet packs a greater punch while still sounding entirely like a Gretsch. No mean feat. The credit for this rests largely with the Power 'Tron pickups. As TV Jones explains: "The 'Power' name might be a little misleading—think of them as Filter 'Trons on steroids. I used taller coils to obtain more output, but I retained the same wire gauge used on the original Filter 'Trons to preserve brightness and clarity."

Despite being humbuckers, vintage Filter 'Trons [and accurate reproductions of them] are pretty low-output pickups—which is part of what allows them to retain sharper highs and more clarity and definition than standard Gibson PAF-style humbuckers. The Power 'Trons are more powerful, but definitely aren't high-output pickups by modern standards. In fact, the DC resistance of the neck-position Power 'Tron is just around 5k ohms, while the bridge unit hovers in PAF territory at around 7.8k ohms. —DH



U.S.-made TV Jones Power 'Tron pickups and a pinned bridge base are the main factors differentiating the Power Jet from the standard Duo Jet model.

the real surprises here. It has enough breath and roundness for great touchy-feely blues playing, but there's a sizzle and definition I have rarely heard in a neck humbucker. If anything, some players looking for that ultra-warm, silky smooth neck 'bucker sound might be disappointed. The bassiest setting on the Tone switch approximates that sound, but it's a little too muffled to quite nail it.

Still, there are many refreshing alternatives here, and you can't fault a guitar for having its own voice. I found myself mostly sitting on the middle position on the tone switch—which is the brightest setting—although the somewhat nasal, mid-heavy down position worked well for chunky, slightly crunchy rock rhythm sounds. Fun stuff—however you whack it. ■

