



John Page at work in his Oregon shop.

Boutique Quality At A Mainstream Price

Master luthier John Page, known for his exquisite custom guitars, has created a new accessible line that taps into the fastest-growing market segment

John Page has earned a reputation as one of the world's foremost luthiers, first as a co-founder of the Fender Custom shop, where he designed and built exquisite, one-of-a-kind instruments, and more recently, turning out custom instruments in his own shop in Wolf Creek, Oregon. In a new collaborative venture with entrepreneur Howard Swimmer, he is aiming to bring custom build quality to a much wider audience with the John Page Classic guitar line. The Ashburn, the initial production model, is an original Page design, manufactured in Japan and set up to Page's exacting specs. It carries a retail price of \$1,499 and is the first in what will be a complete family of original instruments, offered by the newly formed HRS Unlimited.

The Ashburn embodies Page's mantra of "uniquely familiar" design. The alder, double cut-away body, pick-ups, and headstock evoke classic, time-tested instruments. But a host of subtle but significant touches distinguish it from anything else on the market. The neck joint features four oversize metal bolts that thread into metal inserts in the neck to achieve what Page calls "a better energy transference and more complex overtones." Staggered Gotoh tuners, the same ones found on Page's custom gui-



The new Ashburn embodies John Page's design mantra of "uniquely familiar," combining conventional styling with unique and functional design touches.

tars, are used to achieve an even cut-off at the nut and, in most cases, eliminate the need for string trees. The bridge pick-up has a reverse slant, inspired by Jimi Hendrix. (A lefty, Hendrix played re-strung right-handed guitars, and the reversed slant of the pick-up provided what Page describes as "more beef in the high-end.") Other distinctive features include Page-designed Bloodline pick-ups, a Gotoh 501 tremolo bridge, and a five-way pick-up selector switch. Page, who played professionally for years, explains, "I've always wanted to feel my guitars as well as hear them. The Ashburn is designed so you really feel the vibration in a way that inspires."

The Ashburn is the result of Page and Swimmer's complementary talents. A Pittsburgh native, Swimmer began playing drums as a kid and has spent most of his career involved with music, either managing artists or promoting events. In 2009, he ventured into the instrument business by co-founding the Premier Builders Guild, a collective of boutique manufacturers including b3, Fano, and Koll guitars and Two Rock and Tone King amplifiers. The Premier Builders Guild raised the profile of these skilled artisans. It also convinced Swimmer that there was an untapped market opportunity. He explains, "I saw that there was

demand for a guitar that combined the design features and quality associated with boutique brands at a mainstream price point."

During his tenure at Premier Builders Guild, Swimmer made friends and contacts among influential instrument makers worldwide, including John Page. He quickly recognized in Page an individual with the skillset to realize his vision of an accessible "boutique" instrument. "I approached John with the idea of taking one of his custom instruments and putting it into a production environment," said Swimmer. "We started talking, and in a short period of time came up with the plan for the Ashburn. John is a brilliant designer, but he's also a great person to do business with—practical, thorough, responsible."

Swimmer believes the Ashburn has special appeal to three customer segments: the mid-tier buyer who welcomes custom design but at a more accessible price, the higher-end boutique customer who wants John Page design without the wait time, and student and novice guitarists seeking their first "real guitar." "The Ashburn embodies a meaningful value proposition against each of those segments," said Swimmer. "And the Lifetime Performance Guarantee provides even more value."

For Page, developing the Ashburn echoed his first design project at Fender. He had joined the guitar company as a teenager, working in the factory, but his talents were so obvious, he was quickly moved into the R&D department. There, he shared an office with Freddie Tavares, who was, after Leo Fender, the man most responsible for creating the Fender family of guitars and amplifiers. In 1981, Fender tasked Page with the challenge of creating an entry-level instrument. The result was the Bullet, a genuine Fender that retailed for just \$199. "The idea was to create a guitar for the kid who couldn't afford that pristine instrument on the wall," he explained. "The Bullet was affordable, but it was still a cool instrument that played well."

The Bullet significantly expanded Fender's market share and simultaneously propelled Page's career. In 1987, he was tasked to create the Fender Custom Shop in a small corner of the company's Corona, California production facility. Under his guidance, the Custom Shop created exceptional guitars for legions of top players including Eric Clapton, David Gilmour, and Pete Townshend and evolved into an important component of Fender's overall business. After leaving Fender, in 2003, he set up shop in Oregon, where he began building art fur-

niture. Three years later, he got back into guitar making, creating a limited number of exquisite hand-built instruments.

Page's custom built instruments combine unique designs, visually arresting woods and inlay work, and over-the-top craftsmanship. And, not surprisingly, they command stratospheric prices. While he takes justifiable pride in them, he's never lost interest in the challenge of producing more accessible instruments. "At the Fender Custom Shop, and at my own shop today, we make these gorgeous instruments. But, they're out of the reach of most people," he says. "The Ashburn has all the design features found in my hand-built custom guitars. It's the culmination of my nearly 40 years building custom guitars, and through John Page Classic I'm now able to make the Page custom design experience available to more people." Swimmer adds, "There's been significant growth at the mid-tier



Howard Swimmer is bringing custom quality to mainstream price points with his new HRS Unlimited venture.

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price point. By delivering John Page custom design for approximately \$1,500 we're enabling retailers to offer the tone and cachet associated with an elite custom builder in a much more accessible way."

HRS Unlimited is launching the Ashburn behind a major investment in awareness-building media including showcase spread ads in leading guitar magazines, major presence on leading guitar websites, national promotions, store appearances, and a robust artist relations program. "We know from players and dealers that once the Ashburn gets into the player's hands, they simply don't want to let it go," said Swimmer. "Our feeling is that as long as we create and sustain brand awareness, the quality and playing experience the Ashburn delivers make it unbeatable in the store."

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