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BABICZ GUITARS

STEVEN WILSON SIGNATURE

An acoustic guitar like no other, tailored for one of Britain's brightest prog rock geniuses. Alun Lower gets all experimental...

WORDS: ALUN LOWER IMAGES: RICHARD ECCLESTONE

It's not often a signature model guitar comes along where there's a good chance that the average reader of *Acoustic* may not have heard of the guitar maker or the artist. So for those that may be sitting in the dark at the moment, a quick introduction: Babicz Guitars is the brainchild of Jeff Babicz and Jeff Carano, two luminaries from trailblazing electric guitar and bass maker, Steinberger. That name alone should probably tell you that we're going to be dealing with some unconventional new building techniques – but we'll come to that. An innovative signature model needs an equally innovative guitarist behind the wheel, so to speak, and with that reasoning we can't think of a better choice than one Steven Wilson, guitarist and singer for Porcupine Tree (not to mention his wonderful solo work). Put simply, Wilson is one of the most dynamic and creative progressive rock musicians (and producers) that our fair isles have ever produced.

So it's a pretty interesting partnership, then – and one that has resulted in a fascinating guitar that boasts an impressive list of potentially groundbreaking innovations from Babicz. Now, there is often a risk that with technically complex guitars that some traditionalists may recoil in horror at the distinctly un-Martin-esque looks and switch off for the 'techy bit', but bear with us – this is a remarkable and clever guitar, and you're going to want to read about it.

Well, where to begin? Let's start off by getting the more traditional aspects of this guitar out of the way. From the black, natural-gloss finish you'd be forgiven for thinking that another of the Babicz SW's quirks was a composite construction, but no – there's actually an all-solid partnership of Engelmann spruce and East Indian rosewood under that sleek exterior. A mahogany neck sits below a rosewood fingerboard adorned with 20 medium frets, and the strings pass through a 1¾"



“The Steven Wilson is a remarkable and clever guitar, and you’re going to want to read about it”

Graph Tech Tusq nut on the way to the smart headstock, also finished in black but accented by Steven Wilson's scrawl and the requisite Babicz branding. There's a lovely crisp white binding

to unify the guitar's design from top to bottom, and also a modern-looking elliptical pickguard. We'll admit, it's a little strange having someone's face looking out at us from the soundhole, but that aside this is a smart, modern-looking guitar that I'm sure will appeal to fans of Wilson even if some traditionalists find it a little too unusual.

A guitar like this wouldn't be complete without a comprehensive electronics system and thankfully, the SW provides a bloody good one in the form of an LR Baggs StagePro Anthem onboard preamp/EQ, a quality system that features both a microphone and a pickup, with the option to blend the two inputs to combat feedback.

With all of the technical innovations on hand (which we'll get to shortly), combined with impressive tonewoods and a high-quality electronics package, you might rightly begin to wonder if there's been a concession somewhere. The one possible point of contention is that the guitar is built in a factory in China rather than being handmade in the good ol' US of A. This is a common approach nowadays that has resulted in some exceptional high-grade guitars at prices that mortals can more readily afford. It does mean that it's usually fairly easy to spot the little mistakes and rough spots though – on this occasion the only thing we could find that actually impacted on the guitar's quality was some minor rough finishing on the frets. Largely they were fine but at this price we would usually hope for super-smooth metalwork. It can easily be fixed though, of course.

It's about time we discussed the Babicz's headline features, and where better to start than with the 'Continually Adjustable Neck'. Flip the SW over and you'll see a small plate for inserting an Allen key. This allows you to actually shift the neck back and forth to effectively raise or lower the height of the strings instantly, with



“This is an instrument that can perform any gig while still being a pure pleasure to listen to”

BABICZ GUITARS STEVEN WILSON SIGNATURE

NEED TO KNOW

Manufacturer: Babicz Guitars USA

Model: Babicz ID-DCRWSWBK-06e Limited Edition
Steven Wilson Artist Model

RRP: £1,995

Body Size: Dreadnought cutaway

Made In: China

Top: Solid Engelmann spruce

Back and Sides: Solid East Indian rosewood

Bridge: Rosewood Babicz torque reducing split bridge

Neck: Mahogany Babicz continually adjustable neck

Fingerboard: Rosewood

Frets: 20 medium size

Tuners: Planet Waves Auto-Trim Locking, gold finish

Nut Width: 13/4" Graph Tech Tusq nut

Scale Length: 25.5"

Onboard Electronics: LR Baggs StagePro Anthem
Onboard Preamp/EQ System

Strings Fitted: D'Addario 12-53

Gig Bag/Case Included: Babicz logo, arched top,
hard-shell case

Exclusive UK outlet: The Acoustic Centre

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Exceptionally innovative, great tone and unbeatable versatility. Superb plugged-in tones

Cons: Some minor fretwork niggles

Ideal for: Those that want seek versatility in one guitar

ACOUSTIC RATING

Sound Quality: ★★★★★

Build Quality: ★★★★★

Value for Money: ★★★★★

5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless

4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat

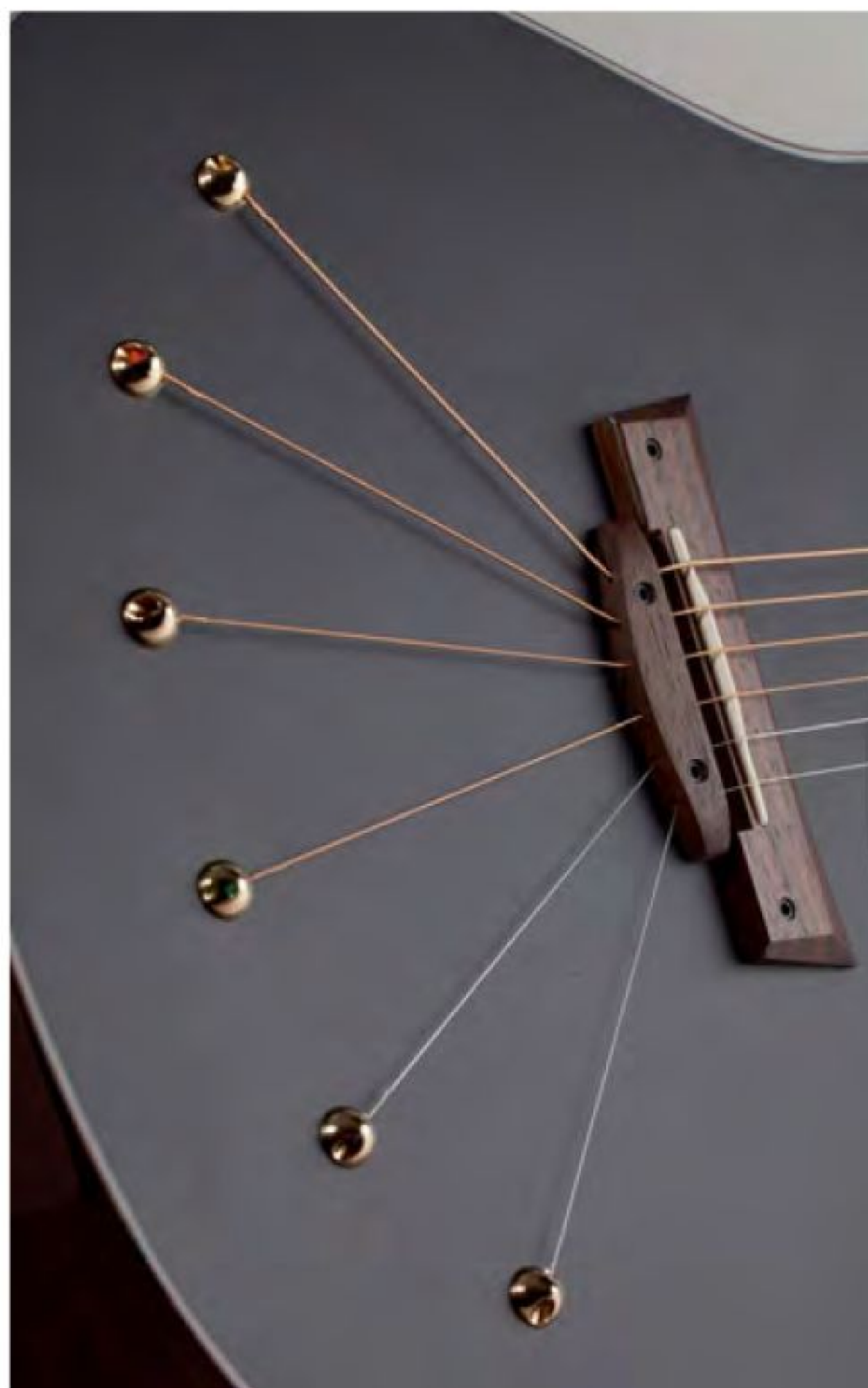
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well

2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor

CONTACT DETAILS

www.babiczguitars.com

www.acousticcentre.co.uk



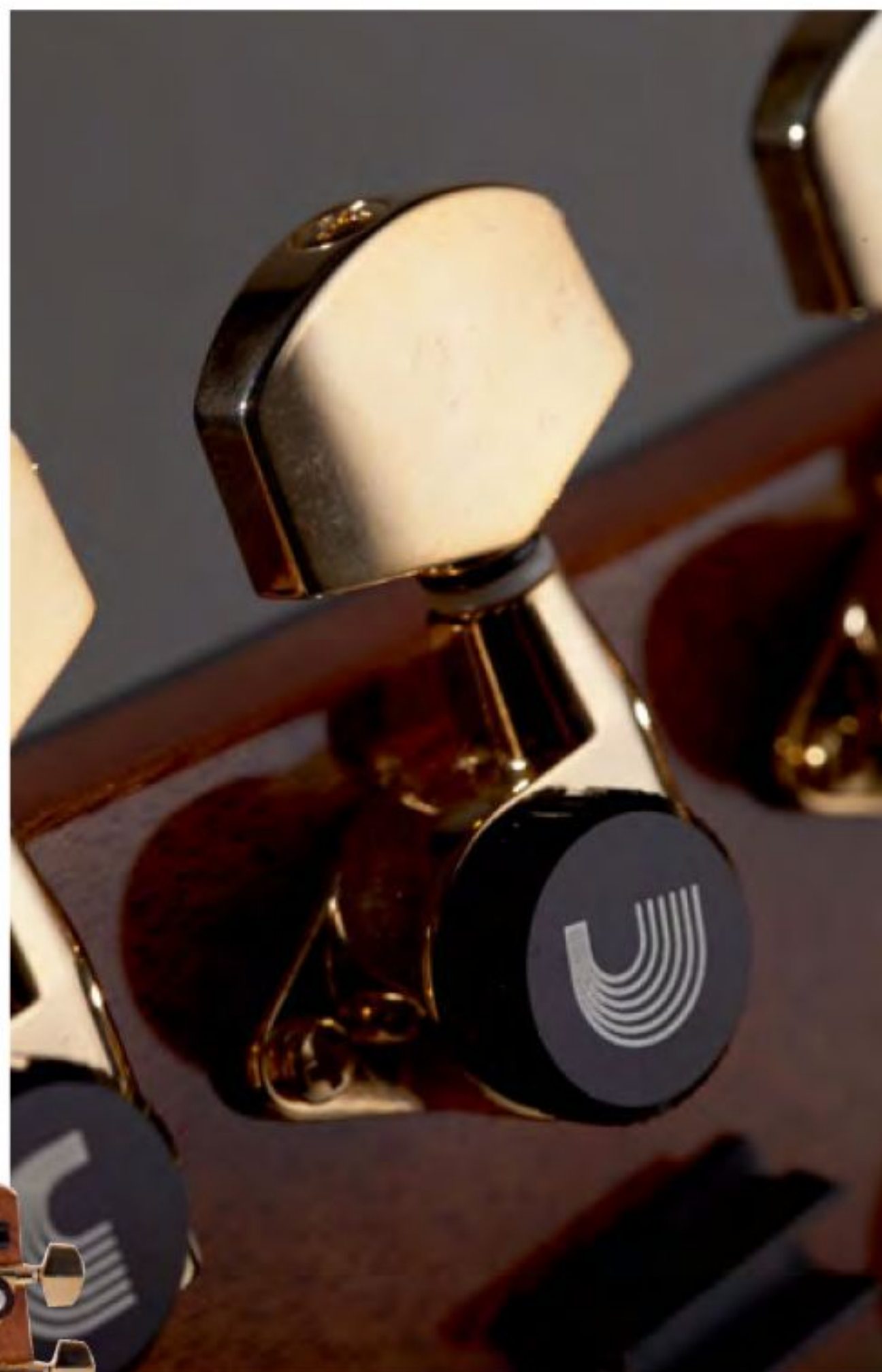
little to no impact on intonation whatsoever. If you're someone that likes playing across multiple styles and tunings this is a borderline-miraculous ability. By setting the string height low you can play the guitar almost as easily as an electric, and then switch to a much greater height that would be more suitable for slide, in just a few moments. With any other guitar this would probably result in serious intonation problems at best, and at worst... well, something would probably break off! But that's where Babicz's other innovations come in.

Next up is the Babicz 'Torque Reducing Split Bridge'. This differs from your average acoustic guitar bridge by being secured to the body not by glue but by special fasteners, meaning that the bridge itself can be repositioned to correct any intonation issues. It also features a split



design (note the lack of bridge pins) that relieves pressure from the soundboard and holds the bridge down, which is where the final innovation comes into play.

The fan/web-like arrangement of the strings across the top of the guitar is likely one of the first things you will have noticed, and this is another vital component of the instrument's construction. By anchoring the strings in such a way, the pressure that is normally exerted in the top (particularly in the centre, where the wood is most fragile) is spread out, meaning that the traditional 'X' bracing is no longer required to stop the top of the guitar from buckling under pressure. As you'll probably know, bracing design is so important because of the skill in supporting the top while allowing it to resonate – in other words, the more reinforcement under



the top, the less it can flex – which compromises tone. By using some clever bracing (not dissimilar to an archtop guitar's 'tone bars'), string vibration is directed to the two primary braces, across the entire length of the soundboard. It's astonishingly clever.

Acoustically, the Babicz impresses right from the off. Thanks to the innovations outlined earlier in the article, the guitar features a remarkably open and full sound. Bass response carries incredibly well all the way up the neck, which is a subtle difference at first but really impressive when you notice it. It's punchy, defined and expressive but does get compromised a little if you raise the neck to near-electric levels (which is totally expected). The more string height you have, the better the tone but if you're playing primarily through the electronics system then you can enjoy the benefits of increased playability while still boasting a superb plugged-in tone. Indeed, the LR Baggs system proves exceptionally easy to adjust – there are a myriad of great, natural tones waiting to be found and all without a hint of feedback or that dreaded piezo quack.

We had some concerns too about the clarity and richness of the sound across different

string heights – but no matter what settings we tried we always found the sound to be crystal-clear. No muddiness, no buzz, no issues with string-balance... nothing. Remarkable. Naturally the tuning was affected slightly between more dramatic changes, but even then it wasn't like it went that far out.

Without knowing the methods behind this guitar's construction, you wouldn't believe such a thing was possible. A mastery of physics combined with a knowledge and passion for music has resulted in a guitar that manages to be both technically astounding and musically inspiring, and that's really genuinely incredible. It's not going to be the guitar for everyone – there will be those that want something more traditional or something that feels a little more handmade, perhaps – and that's

fine. But if you're the kind of guitarist that loves supreme versatility, then a Babicz guitar will be a high-on-revelatory experience. This is an instrument that can perform at any gig for almost any purpose, while still being a pure pleasure to listen to acoustically. You'll find yourself actively thinking about what this guitar could do next and push your creativity to that next level. There is no one else out there doing what Babicz does, and for that reason we think it's something pretty damn special. ■

WE ASKED STEVEN WILSON, THE MAN BEHIND THIS SPECIAL SIGNATURE MODEL, FOR A BIT OF BACKSTORY.

"I first became aware of Babicz Guitars in 2005. I was playing the West Coast of the US with my band at the time, Porcupine Tree, and the two Jeffs [Babicz and Carano, founders of the company] came to see us at one of the shows with some of their guitars. At that time, they were a pretty new company so I guess they were looking for some artists that they could partner up with. Even though Porcupine Tree weren't very well known at the time, there was a professional and musical credibility around what we were doing.

"I'd been having a lot of trouble reproducing convincingly the acoustic guitar parts from the albums on stage, and the Babicz guitars immediately solved all of those problems; they sounded and felt good with no feedback issues, even on smaller stages. I got on very well with both Jeffs, which was important too.

"Some time later, Jeff told me that over the years they had sold more guitars as a result of me playing them on stage than almost any other form of marketing they'd done, so it certainly made sense to think about launching an official signature model at that point.

"As time went on, we'd discussed what my requirements for the model would be, which included various requirements regarding the electronics involved, and the cosmetic aspects, which are important to me too.

"The primary use for my guitar will be for touring duties. I have a few acoustic guitars in my studio, including the Babicz, which I use for writing and recording. Certainly I will be using it there too, but the primary use is in concert where it's fundamental to the show, and has been for a long time. In my current solo show, we have a number of them in different tunings, or with capos.

"It's a really beautiful instrument; it sounds good, feels wonderful to play, and it looks incredibly striking. I'm very proud to have my name on it."



Rocco DeCarlo