

AKKERMAN'S AXES

Guitar & Bass travels to Amsterdam to examine the Dutch guitarist's stunning vintage Gibson Les Paul Personal and his new signature Brandin Personal II

Story and photography **Steve Clarke**

Anyone who remembers seeing Focus on the *Old Grey Whistle Test* TV show could not fail to note the incredible playing of the guitarist in the band – Jan Akkerman. He was using a black, twin-pickup Les Paul Custom that, from early pictures of this guitar with its 'witch hat' volume and tone knobs, looks like the post-68 reissue.

Not much later, Akkerman changed the front pickup to a Gretsch Filter'Tron, and eventually another was fitted in the bridge position. He apparently wired it wrongly and it was out of phase, but nonetheless it started a lot of tongues wagging as to what was going on with this modification. Akkerman has never been afraid to try various combinations of pickup and wiring options, nor to try custom-made guitars in the quest for great tone (it's the Akkerman acumen approach!).

Today, we are in Amsterdam catching a train to Gilze Rijen, where we will meet Peter Herwegh, the owner of Brandin Guitars. We visit the factory where the Les Paul Personal that Jan also used in Focus has been brought for us to examine. Akkerman played this guitar from around 1971 in Focus and continues to do so today. It has provided the inspiration for a new guitar that has become the Jan Akkerman Personal II, made to a very high standard in Jakarta by Toien Bernadhi and commissioned by Brandin NL.

The guitars are then sent to The Netherlands, where the hardware and electronics are fitted by a dedicated team including Herwegh, Pierre Van Wanrooij and Richard Keiser. Today, *Guitar & Bass* is fortunate enough to get a close-up look at both of these fine guitars.

Gibson Les Paul Personal

The Les Paul Personal was introduced in late 1969, and the first prototype had a regular Les Paul sized body. It had the small Fretless Wonder frets that were not popular, but they were soon replaced with jumbo fretwire for ease of playing. The production model's body was built from clear grain Honduran mahogany with a centre cross-band and was 18.25 inches long, 14 inches wide and two inches thick. It had a three-piece laminate mahogany neck that was quarter sawn for added strength. With a dark walnut finish, ebony fingerboard and mother of pearl block inlays, the model also had gold-plated deluxe sealed metal tuners that were superior to the plastic Kluson button type. At that time, the Personals cost more than a Les Paul Custom and were quite heavy, weighing in between 8.5–12lbs. The total number shipped was only 146 between 1969 and the middle of 1971.

Peter brings out a case that is slightly larger than you would expect for the average Les Paul, and when I open the lid, Jan's beautiful guitar in two-tone dark burst is mesmerising. What strikes me is the shape: it has a more rounded lower horn than a Standard or Custom and is slightly wider across the body. It's in good condition, and where the XLR microphone socket at the top edge of the guitar would have been, there's a filled repair with a well-matched piece of mahogany. According to luthier Wim Heins, who has worked on this guitar, it has been re-topped, re-necked, the headstock has been broken off several times and the electronics have been replaced. A new two-piece flame maple top has been put on and it has a real three-dimensional look. The weight is

10.3lbs and it has three humbucking pickups. In early 1973, Paul Hamer of Hamer Guitars was asked to take the low-impedance pickups out and replace them with humbuckers. A wrapover bridge was fitted and the two tone and two volume controls were positioned slightly closer together than normal to facilitate Jan's technique of bowing – using his little finger to swell the note. With the body of the guitar being wider and larger, it had more sustain than Jan's black Les Paul Custom, even though it was lighter in weight.

Akkerman acquired this guitar in New York when he was recording his solo album, *Tabernacle*, in 1973. Interestingly, it was Les Paul's son Gene who was behind the desk on the session – a well-known producer and engineer who worked with many major-name acts. The guitar was also used in Focus on the album *Hamburger Concerto*. After 1975, it

seems the guitar was left with guitar builder Anno Galema for almost 20 years. Akkerman later remembered where the guitar was and drove to collect it. On arrival, it was in a poor state, totally stripped and cracked and had lost its binding. Heins restored it over a period of five months – the damaged maple top was taken off again and replaced with a new one, and three humbuckers were fitted.

Heins also made a beautiful birdseye maple guitar for Akkerman that was very wide with a single cutaway and was reminiscent of Jan's signature Framus guitar from 1974. A piezo-type bridge was fitted, along with two humbuckers. This guitar was also in the factory when G&B visited, and a joy to see.

Neck

Originally, the neck would have been a three-piece mahogany construction for added

strength, with a volute at the back. This neck is one-piece mahogany with a volute and has an ebony fingerboard, possibly the original one. The block inlays on the guitar are finely cut and just after the 22nd fret there is a small angled piece of binding with a half fret fitted. On the 17th fret, next to the fretwire, is a small ebony insert – ebony can chip very easily when pulling out old frets. This neck was made by Heins – even the Gibson logo was added by him – but the inlay work is by Fred Dons.

The binding has been replaced and the frets are jumbo-sized, measuring 2.62mm. The fretwire run to the edge of the 'board and sits atop the binding. This is something that Gibson now does on all of its new guitars except for vintage reissues. The neck is a very comfortable shape that's quite slim at the back and measures 53.4mm across the heel.



The Gibson Les Paul Personal, resplendent in its case



The tailpiece angle is low on the treble side



Threaded metal inserts on the bridge post

Nut

The bone nut measures 42.43mm, has a small gap on the treble side and has been cut very well and low at the first fret, but the wound strings sit a little lower than they should, which reflects Jan's playing style. The wide spectrum of his technique, especially the incredibly rhythmic parts he plays with his thumb, could possibly result in the strings popping out of the nut slots if they sat higher up.

Machineheads

Over the years, there have been some changes here: originally, they would have been deluxe sealed gears, but after Jan got hold of the guitar, Grover Imperial Stairstep machineheads were fitted, possibly taken from a Gretsch. However, the guitar today has generic, gold-plated locking machineheads. What is interesting is that the machinehead buttons are not part of these locking tuners, and I can see the same buttons (called Butter Beans) fitted on his Gretsch White Falcon; later, they also appeared on his Les Paul Custom with two Gretsch pickups, leading us to wonder if they're the same ones. They feel great and your thumb fits them perfectly; I prefer this mishmash to the stock Grover types! Jan also uses 8-gauge strings.

Across the top of the headstock, it measures 86.56mm and the thickness from around the bottom E machinehead area is 16.02mm, tapering to 14.05mm at the D-string machinehead. Heins says that the original split diamond headstock that was broken had the serial number 906011. This means that what's left of the original guitar could date from either late-1969 or 1970.

Bridge

The bridge is a non-original, Nashville-style unit. It's the type that Gibson used from 1974, but what is curious about it is the threaded metal inserts that screw over the bridge posts; the bridge is then squeezed over the top, sitting on two thumb wheels for a secure fit; this will help in tone transfer. The bridge saddles are made of graphite for less friction and are very smooth from wear and tear. The bridge width is 13.89mm and the length is 85.45mm. The tailpiece is angled down on the treble side, resulting in the top E string touching the back edge of the bridge; this is not good, as the increased tension could make the string more prone to breakages. This has been done deliberately for reasons of feel and tension, I'm sure, but lifting the tailpiece up just a little would help avoid any problems.

Control cavity

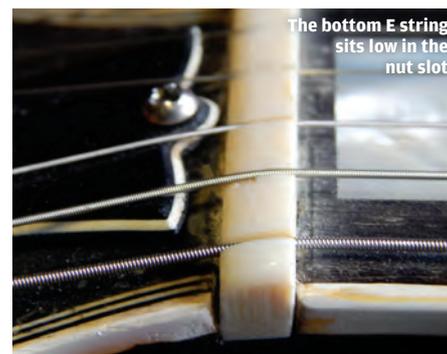
The controls sit inside metal foil that completely shields the inside, as well as the cover that is labelled "Wim Heins April 1998", which I remove. There is just one Gibson-stamped volume pot and CTS volume



Mother of pearl inlay by Fred Dons



The pancake construction from the side



The bottom E string sits low in the nut slot

“As I plug the guitar into a Kustom combo amp, I am impressed with how well balanced it is”

and two tone controls, but the lower bridge tone control is not connected to anything. The mini toggle switch delivers a variety of sounds, in conjunction with the main Switchcraft toggle switch, so really it simply has a master tone control and two volumes. The pot code that I can see reads 'EPO86 500 1017 CTS', which tells me this pot was manufactured in the 17th week of 2010.

You will see pictures of this guitar in its many guises, but to summarise, in 1998 it had cream pickup surrounds and a Stetsbar vibrato; then, in May 2000, it was seen with three black surrounds and still had the split diamond headstock, bonnet knobs, tuneomatic bridge and tailpiece. In 2005, we saw it with a mini toggle switch on the upper tone control, and the headstock was plain. Around 2010, Dons added a mother of pearl inlay to the headstock, which depicts Akkerman cradling an archtop (see above).

Pickups

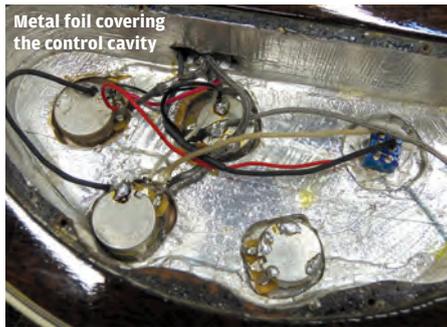
The neck pickup is a Gibson '57 reissue and its DC resistance measures 7.86k ohms. These pickups were intended to be closer to Seth Lover's original specifications and the hand-winding process aims to replicate the inconsistencies that are such an important part of the character of the originals. These units utilise alnico II magnets and, unlike original PAFs, are wax potted in order to minimise microphonic squeal. Two-conductor braided wiring was used on the originals – as

can also be seen in this case. The middle pickup has a PAF sticker on the bottom plate and handwriting in black marker pen that says 'mid historic PP'. It has a DC resistance of 8.12k ohms.

Lifting out the bridge pickup reveals a white sticker with '57 Treble Classic Reissue' written on it. There's a black wire coming from the underside of the pickup with a white insulating cover. It's most likely a ground wire, as the braided pickup wire emerging from the other end of the unit leads off into the control cavity. A small piece of foam is situated underneath the pickup; this could be there either to stop movement or to ensure that the pickup sits parallel to the strings. DC resistance is 8.26k ohms. The routing for the pickups is neat, but doesn't replicate the typical dimensions and shape used by Gibson. The front pickup surround is stamped 'M69' and looks to be an original from Kalamazoo, but the middle and bridge surrounds do not – the edges of the plastic are serrated rather than smooth, indicating that they are from a different supplier. The toggle switch surround is gold plated, as is the switch tip, which ties in with the premium status of the Les Paul Personal in the Gibson catalogue.

Sound

As I walk across the workshop to plug the guitar into a Kustom combo, I am impressed with how well balanced it is. The extra size >



Metal foil covering the control cavity



The volume control has been removed from the cavity



A mystery black wire on the underside of the metal plate



The middle pickup is marked 'Mid historic pp'



The '57 Reissue pickup is closer to Seth Lover's original design

distributes the weight well between body and neck. Starting with the front pickup with mini toggle in the middle position and the main toggle switch up, there's a great tone with not too much of the kind of bass boom you often get from neck humbuckers. The tone control takes out all the treble with a smooth taper that has lots of interesting possibilities when used in conjunction with the mini toggle. When the mini toggle is in the up position, the middle pickup is on and when the main toggle switch is in the mid position, front and bridge are on together – a kind of out-of-phase sound that's perfect for some of Akkerman's rhythm parts. Flipping the mini toggle to the down position switches all three humbuckers on; the up position on the mini toggle changes nothing. The lower volume control also blends the coils when rolled back slightly but the lower, bridge tone control isn't connected to anything.

The bridge pickup has great bite with the main toggle switch down and the mini toggle in the middle position, and there is good balance across the strings, but when the mini toggle is in the down position, the bridge and middle pickups are on. Again, the mini toggle in the up position does nothing. There is an incredible variety of tones available here. A ceramic capacitor is connected to the bridge volume control and is difficult to see, as there is a lot of wire around it. I don't move this in case anything comes off, but it looks like it is .022 value, a cap commonly used with humbuckers.

I notice a fault on the bridge volume control and mention this to Peter, who replaces it when I move on to the Brandin guitar later. That said, one of the things that stands out for me is that there is little drop in volume: it does not lose the character of these pickups and it has an array of interesting sounds. This guitar has undergone many changes over the years, with Akkerman in continual pursuit of great tone, but following much experimentation he has, since late 2012, settled on this combination of hardware.

Brandin Jan Akkerman Personal II

It is clear from first impressions that the Brandin JA Personal II has taken inspiration from some of the features of both the original Les Paul Personal and the Les Paul Custom that Akkerman used extensively. Indeed, Akkerman himself has played a significant role the development, adjustment, design and redesign process behind this instrument.

The Steff Pierre-designed humbucker on the Brandin model is based on both the classic PAF and the humbuckers that Jan has in his guitars. The instrument I'm handed is actually the prototype: the colour is Violin Sunburst and is similar in appearance to the Gibson Personal guitar. There are also black and white models.

The front pickup is a TV Jones Classic Filter"Tron, but the Steffsen humbucker is missing from the bridge. You cannot fail to be impressed with the look of this guitar, even with most of the hardware missing. I particularly like the slanted cut at the end of the fingerboard.

Nut

I take a measurement of 42.44mm (very close to the Gibson LP Personal's 42.43mm), which is quite impressive for a manufacturing tolerance. Peter tells me that he works on the frets when the guitars arrive in Holland for a nice, played-in feel. This prototype hasn't had that treatment yet, but they are still very well seated with no noticeable sharp edges. The other thing I do is tap each fret and listen for a certain tone: this determines whether the tang of the fret wire has made contact with the wood: in this case, they all have. The nut is a dark brown plastic, but is of the kind that is very hard and good for tone – not all synthetic nuts have the same density, and some have a small molding channel underneath, which is far from ideal. This is a solid piece, hand cut with impeccably cut slots. The way that the back edge of the nut is slanted away from the take-off point of the strings gives greater freedom of movement to the strings and should reduce friction.

The headstock outline is very sympathetic to the aesthetics of the instrument. Sometimes a great-looking guitar can be let down by an unbalanced design, but not this one. It has a simple shape that's not too wide, with a distinctive arch on the top edge. Akkerman's signature adorns the face of the headstock in gold script.

The tuners are gold-plated Kluson MS33G units, smooth in operation and, unlike the often default option of Grovers, do not add any unnecessary weight to the guitar. The headstock thickness is slightly thicker than the Gibson at 16.55mm, and the headstock pitch is 14.7 degrees. Gibson's original headstock pitch was 17 degrees but this changed to 14 degrees from 1965–1973, and the company introduced a volute around 1970



Prototypes of the Jan Akkerman Personal II in the Brandin factory



The maple cap before the finish is applied



Brandin headstock with Akkerman's signature



Tidy neck joint and binding on the Brandin

“The top of the guitar is finished in a beautiful tiger stripe maple with excellent book matching and is not a veneer”

for added strength, before reverting to 17 degrees with some models in the interest of vintage correctness later on.

Neck

The Personal II's neck is constructed from three pieces of mahogany, with a Macassar ebony fingerboard with 22 medium jumbo frets measuring 3mm, and the frets sit on the edge of the binding. The mother of pearl block inlays are very cleanly executed, with none of the usual filler around the edges. Macassar ebony is very smooth; the grain can vary from one board to the next, as can the colour, but the density will undoubtedly contribute to its resonance. It's similar in

appearance to rosewood and very strong indeed. At the 12th fret, it measures 52mm in width – exactly the same as the Gibson.

Body

The body is mahogany with sound chambers that also help to keep the weight down to a very manageable 8.14lbs (which will change slightly when more hardware is added). The top of the guitar is finished in a beautiful tiger stripe maple with excellent book matching and is not a veneer. It is nice to see that the Brandin Akkerman guitars with this finish have consistent tops and no mismatching. The other thing I notice is that the lacquer is not overly thick; this can stifle resonance,

especially when using polyurethane finishes. The thickness of the body is 47.58mm, and 43.2mm without binding, with a maximum width of 356mm.

Bridge

The bridge is made by Gotoh and now comes with Graph Tech saddles (early ones were metal). It's adjustable using two slotted posts that fit tightly into the bridge, which again is good for tone. The tailpiece is also machined to a high quality, with only slight movement in the securing studs.

Pickups

The neck pickup is a TV Jones Classic, measuring 4-ohms, and is based on the '59 Filter'Tron version; it looks the part on this guitar. This idea obviously goes back to when Jan would've had a Gretsch pickup in this position on his black Gibson Custom in around 1973. TV Jones pickups attempt to recreate the sound of vintage Gretsch units >



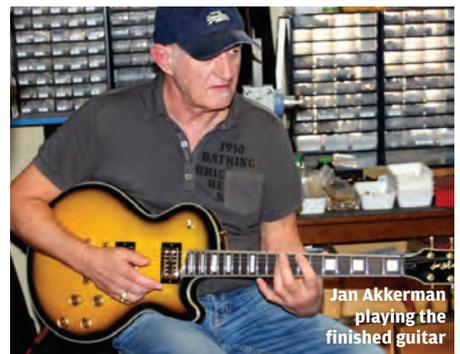
The original prototype (right)



The 'work in progress' control cavity



The TV Jones 'Filter' Tron



Jan Akkerman playing the finished guitar

“The front TV Jones unit is very clear. It has amazing depth on the bass notes without being too muddy or losing articulation”

by using a period-correct manufacturing process and American-made materials that were used back in the 1950s and 60s. The hand-wound Steffsen PAF that would usually be in the bridge is a perfect match for the TV Jones pickup at around 7.5k ohms.

Control cavity

The four CTS volume and tone controls in this guitar date from the 48th week of 2011 and the 25th week of 2012. The orange drop capacitors are marked 'SBE225P 10V 73k 1226', which dates the guitar to the 26th week of 2012. The routing is very clean and tidy and, if the prototype is anything to go by, the solder joints are substantial, with quality wire having been used.

Sound

Across the factory, I take a finished Brandin Jan Akkerman guitar from its wall bracket

and I notice the diagrams on the wall for its construction, dated 6/8/13. There have been various prototypes and tweaks along the way.

Plugging back into the Kustom amp I dial in a clean tone. The front TV Jones pickup is very clear in reproducing each note played and it has amazing depth on the bass notes without being too muddy or losing articulation when strings are played arpeggiated. Putting the toggle switch in the middle position brings in the Steffsen PAF, which gives a kind of out-of-phase sound without being too thin with an almost electro-acoustic ring to it: the TV Jones pickup, I'm sure, is responsible for this, along with the chambered construction. It is voiced beautifully with the bridge humbucker: I would use this combination more than any other twin-humbucker guitar because it doesn't sound too mushy, as sometimes happens with higher-output humbuckers.

The bridge pickup has a great attack – some humbuckers in the bridge can be a little too hot, which distorts even a clean setting on your amp; and when overdriven can sometimes obscure the character of your guitar altogether; this is not the case here. The strings just pick up very pleasing overtones without any of the nasties.

Summary

If this guitar didn't have Jan Akkerman's input in its design, I would still regard it as a very high-quality, versatile instrument that rewards you with long sustain in overdrive mode. Akkerman has a unique expression, and that's why he chose the hardware, pickups and electronics to reflect the need for a guitar that can produce a wide range of tones. It comes with a Brandin leather strap, extra strings, certificate of authenticity and Akkerman's album *Minor Details*. 🎸

G&B thanks Jan Akkerman, Peter Herwegh, Pierre Van Wanrooij and Richard Keiser for their help with this article.

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