Confessions of a Garage Guerrilla

Discovering the working-class charms of "alternative hardware"

My Bay Area hometown had a pawnshop — a corner building downtown, with guitars, rifles and shotguns lining its windows. It was a most impressive sight to a young boy in the 1960s. I had always dreamed of going in that shop with my family to pick out my first guitar, though that was never to be. I left that town when I was 12, but I never forgot that pawnshop window.

In 1976, my brother Ric, six years my elder, gave me a couple of his guitar magazines. Ric had been a guitar fan for as long as I remember. He even signed up for lessons from a door-to-door salesman a few years before, which I had refused. But by this time, he seemed to be passing on his interest in guitar to me. As I perused the pages, I became fascinated with this guitar culture — or the fact that there was one. I thought to myself, *Wow! I could be a part of this.*

Voicings

I held on to those guitar magazines like a 6-year-old with the Christmas wish book. One ad in particular lodged itself in the back of my mind and never left. It had a poster print for sale, a pen-and-ink drawing called "Super Axe Heaven." The drawing spotlighted the five most desired pieces of rock 'n' roll hardware: the Les Paul, SG, Stratocaster, Telecaster and Flying V. I remember thinking that, one day, I would own all of those.

My ascension to Super Axe Heaven would not be quick and easy, however; I would have to do my time in the trenches. I learned to play my first Jimmy Reed and Beatles songs on my brother's plywood Montgomery Ward acoustic guitar. Sometime toward the end of the ninth grade, my brother bought me a Japanese Kay solid-body bass. It was more or less a loose plywood copy of a Gibson EB-0. I was on my way.

The summer of 1978 saw me and my schoolmates in hot pursuit of cheap, playable musical gear for our new backyard band. One day, we got our coins together for a bus ride down Valley Boulevard and hopped off in a particular section of La Puente, California, 20 miles east of L.A., that had a string of pawnshops and surplus stores — just the kind of stuff to keep a teenage boy occupied for hours. It certainly made a lifelong impression on me.

Thirty years later, I still have the image in my mind: row upon row of guitars. There were some low-end Fenders, an Ibanez or two, but mostly lower-echelon Japanese guitars with names like Ventura, Orlando, Global and Cortez. Looking back, I'm sure there were some '60s-vintage, made-in-U.S.A. treasures from Kay and Harmony and the like — but we didn't know what those were yet. The Japanese guitars looked like Teles and Les Pauls, which were the cool guitars of our day.

As the summer went on, we managed to scrounge up enough gear to kick out some rough jams. A resourceful lot, we were able to dig up an abandoned Ludwig drum kit from a Catholic church. Someone brought us a broken 1x12 Kay combo amp. Knowing nothing about amp repair at the time, I found that if I put a tape recorder in front of it as a preamp, I could get enough level out of it to hear over the drums.

But the best acquisition of the summer was the Italian-made Galanti guitar that my friend Rob found in someone's trash can; it was a redburst, offset double-cutaway, Jaguar-looking affair that had been burned. The pickguard was melted, as were one of the pickups and the array of kitchen-blender pushbuttons, which were really pickup switches. I believe the body was mahogany, and it had a maple neck with a thick-slab rosewood fretboard.

We decided we were going to rebuild her. Knowing absolutely nothing about guitar mechanics, away we went. Rob would strip off all the parts and repaint it, and I would get the electronics working. By the end of the summer, Rob had that body and neck looking like a million bucks. We cleaned what hardware there was — and I re-wound my first pickup.

The only thing left was a pickguard. (This was something we had to think about; there were no discount online parts houses like we have today.) We had

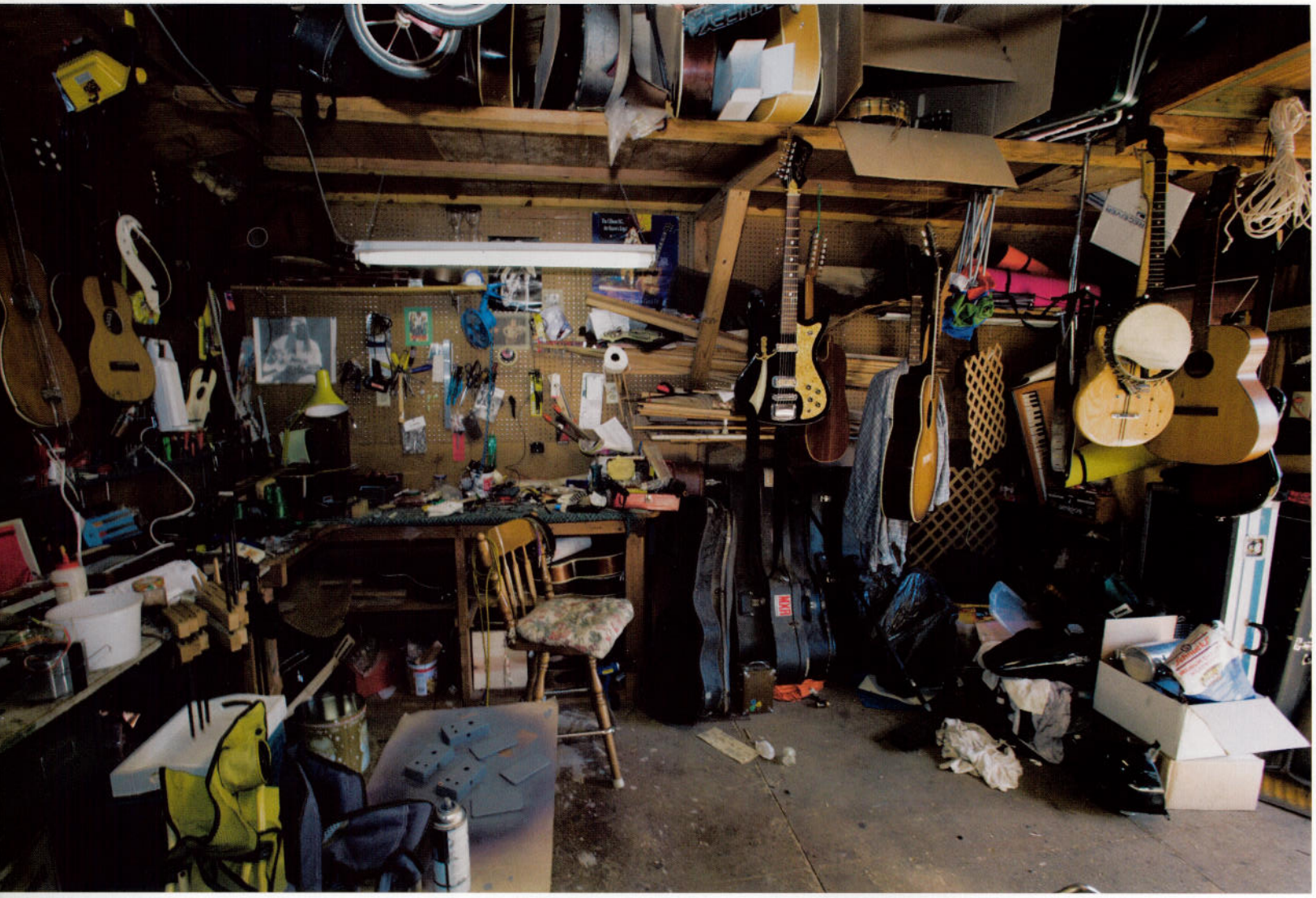
Alvin Youngblood Hart strums on a 1930s spruce-top Stella six-string he found at a parking-lot flea market in Oakland. He paid $62.
JOSH MINTZ

no clue where to get the material we needed. Maybe some of my dad's countertop laminates . . . Oh well, we had plenty of time to think about it. I stuck the newly re-wound pickup in my brother's acoustic guitar and carried on like that for a while.

Another major source of DIY inspiration in 1978 was the guitar player in a new band that had just come out, named Van Halen. Turns out this guy was assembling and playing his own guitars. He tracked down the parts, he cut the pickguards, he re-wound the pickups — a true Frankenstein who wasn't afraid to mess up a guitar if it helped him get to where he was trying to go. Oh yeah, he was a pretty good player, too.

In 1987, I found myself in the U.S. Coast Guard, stationed in Natchez, Mississippi. One day, I dropped into the Old South Pawnshop, made a walk through the shop and calmly walked out. I returned with a Winchester 12-gauge shotgun, worth about $175 at the time. After a few minutes and a handshake, the shop manager took possession of the shotgun, and I became the proud owner of a 1964 Gibson SG Junior and a 1964 four-knob Fender Princeton amp.

For the next two years, I would continue to mine the pawnshops of Natchez and its cross-river neighbor, Vidalia, Louisiana. I left Natchez in 1989 and wound up back in the Bay Area in the spring of '90. It wasn't



Hart's workshop in Memphis is home to a range of instruments in various stages of development. JOSH MINTZ

long before I ended up on that corner in my hometown, the same one where, as a kid, I spied treasures in the pawnshop window.

The big pawnshop was gone; however, there were two smaller storefronts displaying the three gold balls, symbolizing buy, sell, trade . . . Pawnshops! It was in one of those shops that I scored what I still think of as my greatest pawnshop find: a mid-'70s custom-color (fawn) Marshall 100-watt head, a favorite amp of one of my favorite players, Robin Trower.

As my playing experience progressed and job opportunities improved, I found my way to all the official status-symbol guitars. I spent most of my time in the '80s buying, trading and somehow experiencing the still-affordable Fenders and Gibsons of the 1950s and '60s. Perhaps I would've continued down that trail, but for a strange twist of fate.

One spring day in 1990, as I was browsing through a just-average guitar store in Berkeley, two college students came in and asked the owner the whereabouts of a place called Subway Guitars. The store owner was clearly annoyed; reluctantly, he gave them the information. I don't know if the students made it to Subway, but I was there within minutes.

I've always thought that I missed out on the golden age of department-store guitars. There was something special in hearing older friends' stories about finding that Sears, Ward or J.C. Penney guitar and amp under the tree on December 25. When I walked through the door at Subway, it was all there — every '60s department-store mutant imaginable, and then some.

Subway Guitars was the brainchild of one Sam "Fatdog" Cohen. Founded in the '70s, the original store was located near a proposed station site of

LEFT: Not too much is known about the Stradolin company. From the 1930s to the 1950s, the Stradolin label was put on inexpensive instruments made by an assortment of different builders — to widely varying degrees of quality. It seems the addition of a pickup has brought new life to this sunburst Stradolin Jr.
JOSH MINTZ

RIGHT: At some point, this jumbo flattop might be returned to playing condition. It appears to be an artifact from the "golden age of department-store guitars" — basically, a Kay K-22 that the company made for Sears under the Silvertone name.
JOSH MINTZ

then-fledgling Bay Area Rapid Transit (hence the name). The store has become a legend among the legendary. The alumni/customer list is a diverse who's who in music: Charlie Hunter, Joe Louis Walker, Tom Petty, Bob Dylan, Green Day and, of course, Cooder and Lindley, gurus of the obscure.

Fatdog was a classic '60s Berkeley hippie; he started Subway to "provide guitars to the proletariat." It was a crazy place. If Mega Guitar Super Mart was your idea of instrument shopping, you were in the wrong place for sure. When I first walked in, guitars were everywhere — walls and ceiling all covered with the most beautiful mutants I'd never seen. In the middle of the floor was a pile of weird amps — some working, some not — including Kay, Kalamazoo, Airline and Silvertone, but nary a Fender or Marshall. Everything was fair game; there was no "don't touch" policy at Subway. Pretty soon, I became acquainted with nearly every piece in there, and a couple even followed me home.

To be a part of the Subway team required no working knowledge of guitars. The people who worked there were all there by osmosis. Maybe they hung around just a little too long, played some wicked blues guitar or had a compatible leftist agenda — if Fatdog took a liking to them, next thing you knew he was showing them the ropes. As a matter of fact, the first time I went to Subway, there was an unknown Michael Franti working behind the counter.

It wasn't long before I was spending my days off in Subway. I was an electronics technician in the Coast Guard, and it was around then that I began to really learn the mechanics of the guitar. I also figured out that the cheapest castaway might be turned into a rock

machine by simply replacing cheap, faulty parts with parts that actually worked.

I sunk my teeth into many old Harmonys, Kays and Danelectros. I also had the chance to rebuild many '20s and '30s Stellas and Regals — the kind of guitars I heard on the Depression-era blues records I was so fond of. I became obsessed with these guitars and could be found scouring local flea markets looking for that next off-the-rack guitar.

Pay dirt came one day in '94, in the form of a 1930s spruce-top, single-0-sized Stella six-string. After strolling through a parking-lot flea market in Oakland, I had managed to walk away with this guitar for $62. After a neck reset and new bridge, bone saddle and nut, it was ready to go. Here it was, the sound I couldn't get off the rack; the sound of 1930. Since being rescued from that flea market, this special instrument has accompanied me on a few award-winning records and many trips around the world.

By the mid-1990s, I was going on the road as a fulltime touring musician. Now, I had the entire U.S.A. and Canada as my pawnshop playground. When finances allowed, and sometimes even if they didn't, we'd systematically raid pawnshop districts, flea markets, thrift stores — anywhere castoff guitars and amps might be hiding. (Road musicians tend to develop a good amount of vices. I suppose the trick is, if you're gonna have a vice, try to find one that will keep you outta jail and maybe alive a little longer.)

One of our best strategies was to not give ourselves away as music makers. We'd walk into a pawnshop and feign interest in tools, firearms, fishing rods — everything but musical instruments. Once, in Birmingham, Alabama, we were outed by our drummer. I knew there'd be no killer deals that day, and from then on, we made sure the drummer had something to do when the rest of us went pawnshoppin'.

One morning in '02, we were pulling out of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, and I just couldn't pass up the pawnshop on the way out of town. After looking over a few deep-sea fishing rods, I spied this mid-'60s Kay solid-body on the wall. It had been repainted black, with some gold engraving on the headstock, but the cool thing was the big scimitar carved into the body. It reminded me of the skulls, crossbones and swords inlaid on some of Keith Richards' custom guitars in the '70s.

I paid my $80 and walked my new purchase out to the van; the band guys were so amused. In keeping with the current events of the day, one of the band members dubbed it the Saddam. Well, the name stuck, and, after a pickup change and installation of some recycled, still-functioning hardware, the Saddam is still in action (and one of my favorite pieces for open-G tuning).

With the popularity of eBay, pawnshopping has changed a bit; shop owners keep their eyes glued to the Internet to see what they can get. But even in these dark economic times, I'm still out there beatin' the bushes — and having success. One thing I always remember when I find pieces to buy: They are someone else's misery. With that in mind, I feel somewhat obligated to take these instruments and make them do what they were intended to do. I don't pawnshop for gear to turn a profit; I play the stuff I buy.

Though more-lucrative career opportunities have been thrown my way, I can't think of any of them that would have been more fulfilling than being the gear rat that I am. Even within the musical field, I guess I could have been more of a conformist. My friend Scotty Smith of ProAnalog often jokes that I would have more success as a musician if I would just play a Strat, a Tube Screamer and a Super Reverb. That may be true, although I'm pretty sure I'd be making some mighty generic-sounding music.

While I *did* ascend to Super Axe Heaven — many times over, in fact — I cannot even begin to imagine what my musical life would be like without the "working-class guitars" that make up the bulk of my personal arsenal — the freaky, funky castaways found in flea markets, pawnshops and assorted back rooms. I never would've thought that they would provide me with so much inspiration, information and entertainment — much more than I ever could've purchased off the rack at Guitar Conglomerate.

Sometimes, when I show up at gigs with stuff that looks like it won't work, I get a bunch of flak from the cork sniffers in the audience about my homemade pedals and pawnshop amps. But, like a true garage guerrilla, I just smile and let it do what it do . . .

— ALVIN YOUNGBLOOD HART

The menacing-looking guitar in the foreground is a mid-'60s solid-body Kay that Hart rescued from a pawnshop on the outskirts of Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, in 2002. It very quickly became known as the Saddam. JOSH MINTZ