

The Guyatone LG50 Project



As the Guyatone was “won” in an on-line auction for a charity, I knew nothing of its provenance. My bid was purely based on the following: it was old, Japanese and had a very cool tailpiece!

Since then, I’ve been trying to find out more about it; as the guitar has no serial number and there does not seem to be any definitive production records, the history is somewhat sketchy. But, the guitar is labelled as LG50 on the headstock, which confirms the model. The tailpiece has a “Guyatone” badge on it which is particularly important as Guyatone made guitars for other companies. You will see similar, if not identical, looking instruments with Antoria, Vox or other logos on. Obviously, the guitar is old and an entry in the book, “1001 Guitars to Dream of Playing Before You Die” and an email to an American Guyatone expert, allows me to confidently say it was built circa 1957.

So, what I have is a 1957 Guyatone LG50!

As my research unfolded, it became clear that the LG50 played an important role in the history of British pop music. So many rock and pop luminaries from Hank Marvin to Steve Howe had one of these as their first guitar. *(At that time, the import of American manufactured goods, including guitars, was restricted by the British Board of Trade.)* Realising its importance, the restoration became a real passion project and I felt that I had a responsibility to do right by it.



“A History of Japanese Electric Guitars” by Frank Meyers proved to be a great book for background reading. The early years of guitar production in Japan seem very confusing with many companies sub-contracting work out to others i.e., Guyatone painting Teisco bodies!

The LG50 seems infamous for its very high action. This was evident on my example, and I have been contacted by LG50 players who confirm that theirs were difficult to play too. Yet having the opportunity to examine its construction in great depth, led me to conclude that the guitar was very well made. So, a bit of a paradox? However, it appears that the early Guyatones had their necks and bodies made by Mr. Tosaka, who had a one-man operation called Tosaka Woodworking. As Japanese woodworkers are renowned as highly skilled artisans, I would say that the actual construction is very good and the high action is a product of something else.....

To criticise and compare the Guyatone to what we expect from a modern guitar is wrong. You must remember that it was designed and built when electric guitars were still in their embryonic stage, in a city that had been devastated by WWII and in a culture where pop music was yet to be accepted. The real boom years for Japanese guitar manufacture were yet to come, later in the 1960s.

When the guitar came to me it was in a very sorry state, completely unplayable with parts missing; the best life it could have hoped for would have been hanging on a man-cave wall as a rock ‘n’ roll relic.

It was clear that a complete rebuild was necessary and yet its originality and road-worn patina had to be preserved wherever possible. As the fretboard was coming away from the neck, it made sense to remove it completely. This step revealed a beautifully crafted dovetail neck joint which I then disassembled and reset, thus rectifying the high action. *(It wasn't until later in the 1960s that Guyatone moved to a new factory and changed from set necks to bolt-on.)*

Whilst the neck was removed, the corroded steel neck reinforcements were replaced with carbon-fibre. Once this remedial work was complete, the fretboard was glued back in place, its playing surface restored and new pearloid inlays and frets installed. Note that although there is a truss-rod cover, there is no truss-rod!



Sadly, the original pick-ups were missing, but the pickguard, that they would have been fixed to, was with the guitar. This leads me to assume that they were deliberately removed. Whilst researching, I discovered that Ry Cooder favours vintage Guyatone pick-ups on some of his guitars and there is quite a trend amongst players to build their own “Cooder-caster” using these original pick-ups, making them both rare and prohibitively expensive. Maybe that was the fate that befell my Guyatone’s pick-ups?

Suitable period correct, single coil pick-ups had to be found and I took a gamble and bid on a pair of unknown provenance. The gamble paid off as the pick-ups turned out to perform extremely well and looked in keeping with the rest of the guitar. The Guyatone had its voice back!

These were the major jobs that had to be carried out, but there were also 101 minor tasks too, plugging and re-drilling holes, shielding the electrics, repairing binding, the list goes on. The great irony of all this work is that the more time and care that you spend restoring an instrument, the less it looks like you've done any work!

So, after many hours of love and care, the 65-year-old Guyatone LG50 is now playing better than it ever has, sounding great and yet still wearing its battle scars with a patina that tells the story of a hard life.



However, the restoration of the LG50 is only half the story. As the Guyatone is really a charming instrument, I thought, “what if a made a replica for the player who wished for a vintage experience, but needed something more refined for their modern sensibilities?”

So, with my version the overall design, appearance and feel is basically the same as the original but with subtle modifications to enhance its performance. I would hope that Mr Matsuki would approve!

The neck is carved to a deep vee profile, based on templates taken from the original, so that as soon as it's picked up, it feels like a vintage instrument. However, there are minor tweaks, such as the position of the tuners so that the strings run at a better angle over the nut and a slightly wider fretboard (41m @ nut).

The original Guyatone pick-ups had fully enclosed covers: these were gold coloured which is strange as these were the only gold components used! It was important to get close to this original look, so I chose a pair of gold mini-humbuckers which are similar in appearance and their ceramic magnets were chosen for the vintage tone that they give. A benefit of these pick-ups is the ability to switch from a humbucker to single-coil mode giving a choice of authentic tones. Slider switches are used for this function; they are in keeping, as many vintage Japanese guitars have a multitude of switches on them!

The Guyatone has a very distinctive tailpiece and bridge. Both components are obviously factory-made, and I felt that I had to make my tailpiece and bridge look as close to the originals as possible. A challenge with hand tools in a wood biased workshop!



The resulting instrument could not be considered an *exact* replica of the original LG50 but more of a *sensible* replica. Maybe if Guyatone made a mark 2 version this would have been it!



The resulting guitar has a vintage look and feel to it, but should suit the demands of a modern player. And hopefully, would meet the approval of Mr Matsuki.

Gary Nava

Dec 2022