



*By Larry Dobrow - GJD Contributor*

My favorite guitar sucks.

Or at least that's what I'd been led to believe for the last 22 years or so. You see, I was among the adventurous souls who purchased one of the first wave of Japanese-made Stratocasters back in 1985.

I had valid reasons for my decision. The guitar was shiny. It was red. It vaguely resembled the model Pete Townshend, Mark Knopfler and the dude from Rush were playing at the time. It said "Fender" on it.

Sure, the price was right (\$300, maybe?). Also, the second I plugged it in - to one of those Peavey amps through which you could achieve goes-to-11 overdrive by turning the "pre" knob way up and keeping the "post" one low - I realized that it sounded kinda neat. But let's be honest: the purchase was motivated by my desire to tell everybody at school that I was the owner of a red Stratocaster. This was about status.

Or so I thought. A few days after I bought it, when I trotted my beloved Strat out at its first band practice, I was met with a derisive sneer from the other guitarist. He was older and had meaty fingers that could no more easily race up and down a fretboard than perform complex data entry. He zoomed right in on the headstock, looked up at me, and said, simply, "Japan."

I couldn't piss this guy off. It was his band, his downstairs rec room, his, uh, "refreshments." So I responded, in a voice as innocent as the sun is blue, "What's wrong with Japan?"

He glared. "Fender's an American company. Their Japanese guitars suck." To his credit, his comments seemed motivated as much by ignorance as by xenophobia. The Japanese Strat purchase ruined me in his eyes; I lasted one more rehearsal.

His comments were easily dismissed. The almost rapturously negative ones that followed in just about every guitar magazine, however, weren't. They assailed the guitar's weight, which was supposedly three or four pounds heavier than most American-made Strat models. They ripped into the single-coil pickups, noting their inferiority but failing to say what precisely made them inferior. They shredded the Fender-branded Kahler tremolo, which earned demerits for stiffness and an ineffective string lock atop the neck. (They were right about that last one,

actually. My guitar may have spent two days in tune during its first four years on the planet.)

I was crushed, to the extent that I immediately started pestering mom and dad about trading it in for something, anything else. They might have been agreeable to this if I were been amenable to going the acoustic route, which would have saved them 20, even 30 bucks in earplugs alone.

So I learned to live with my Japanese Strat and, slowly, my initial infatuation returned. Even a clumsy player could fly up and down its super-fast neck. It could spit out any number of tones - hard, bright, thick, crunchy. It became the first guitar I played on stage, if by "stage" you mean "the deck overlooking Jessica Gerstle's pool." It kept me company at summer camp, through college, during my tenure in any number of justifiably short-lived bands.

And then I bought a Custom Classic Telecaster - an American one! U-S-A! U-S-A! - and put the red Strat down for a while. It just seemed the thing to do at the time, especially as my musical sophisticacation advanced from early-era Van Halen to early-era Van Halen played more quietly. I settled in as a boring living-room half-virtuoso.

So imagine my surprise when, upon retrieving the red Strat from my folks' house a few months back, I realized that it plays, sounds and looks considerably better than the Tele. No, it's not in prime shape - it needs the guitar equivalent of a bath and some Restylane - but the Strat remains every bit the instrument that it was, at least to me, in 1985.

Even more surprisingly, somehow a sizable percentage of the guitar-dork universe has come around to my adolescent way of thinking. Do a Google search for "Fender Stratocaster made in Japan" - there are dozens of information sites and just as many enthusiast ones. On eBay, my guitar (or at least non-scuffed versions thereof with a functional tremolo) is regularly listed for four figures. People want these things, whether they were made in Japan by eager Fender minions or in China by lead-paint-inhaling 11-year-olds, not because of their novelty value. No, they want them because they kick ass, dude.

In conclusion, my adolescent self was a lot wiser than my adult one. That is all