

BURNS 1980



The near-legendary status of Jim Burns in the tradition of British musical instrument makers has been summed up by calling him the English Leo Fender. Burns guitars have never owed much to Fender, any more than Fenders to Burns, but there is an inevitable comparison between these two giants of guitar construction who, though operating on opposite sides of the Atlantic, both came from the same generation, both had their musical roots in the technically demanding country and Hawaiian sounds, and both have pioneered whole eras of electric guitars. Nevertheless, Jim Burns still calls himself 'basically a joiner' with magnificent modesty, and normally forebears to comment on the quality of his own product. 'People that have seen them seem to like them' is a characteristic understatement.



THE JIM BURNS STORY

Jim was born and brought up in County Durham, and as a boy spent much of his times making model aeroplanes and cars. His musical career began when, as a teenager, he became a singer with a local dance band, aiming to become not the English Leo Fender (who was of course then unknown) but the English Bing Crosby.



The 'VIBRA ARTIST'

The move from vocals to guitar was in those days not so predictable as it might be today – indeed it implied a certain eccentricity in a part of England with no tradition for guitarists and little opportunity for tuition or instruction. Nonetheless, he stuck to his choice, and through the final period of his schooling and the beginning of his apprenticeship as a joiner, he was perfecting his technique.

At the age of 18 he joined the RAF and, prevented by airsickness from becoming a pilot, joined the ground crews as a fitter, in which capacity he gained valuable experience in working with metals. His first exercises in guitar construction show an inventive genius combined with a good-humoured willingness to improvise. Finding himself guitarless in darkest Africa, he equipped himself to play in the Squadron dance band using Burns ingenuity combined with RAF materials. The formula was a success and demands for further models came from the two other guitarists in the dance band. Jim did his best – even to the extent of making a pick-up from a bar magnet out of an aero engine, using a coil with thirteen dry joints wrapped with toilet paper. The pick-up worked – and Jim was as surprised as anyone for he had never even seen such a thing, much less contemplated constructing it.

He continued to think of himself as a musician rather than a guitar maker after he left the RAF in 1946 and resumed his work as a joiner, while playing slide guitar in the evenings with A. P. Sharpe's Honolulu Hawaiians. He shared A. P. Sharpe's prominence in the popular music scene of the time, and by 1952 was appearing as Hawaiian guitarist with Felix Mendelson's Hawaiian Serenaders. During this period he worked in various jobs, notably at a cabinet making factory, but the idea of setting up as a guitar builder was becoming more and more attractive to him.

The first guitars for general sale were produced in London whilst their author supported himself as a waiter and as a paintsprayer. Jim knew that he had something special to offer and was not thinking of the mass market, but top guitarists were reluctant to take on products by this newcomer to the craft. Ivor Mairantz, who was offered and who refused the first Burns guitar, admitted that he lived to regret his decision.

With Ike Isaacs, however, Jim met with a more positive response. Then, as in fact now, Jim aimed to produce a range of matching products and it was the Mullard circuit valve amp built to back up the guitar which initially caught Ike's attention. Ike had an amp made for his own use, and gave Jim support by agreeing to test the instruments that were produced. At last, a guitar was sold to Marty Wilde, but the Burns sound was still in the making, and while Henry Weill pickups were being used, it could not be developed to the full. Spurred on by the demands from flourishing rock 'n' roll bands for a pick-up that would give a clear sound with plenty of 'top', Jim designed his own unit.

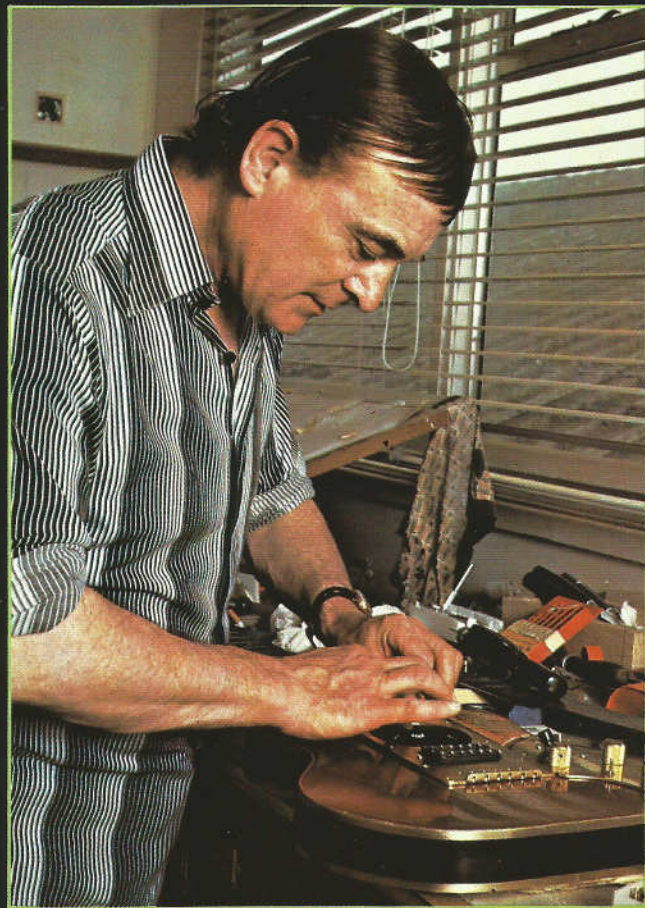
A reputation began to be established. In 1959 Jim, with Ike Isaacs as his musical director, went into production. The firm of Ormston-Burns was incorporated in 1960 with its premises in the basement of a Buckhurst Hill house provided by Mrs Farrell, Jim's landlady. When her son came out of the Marines he became part of the firm, learning from Jim, but still demand for the new guitars outstripped supply.

The next step was an organised production run; the basis of the famous 'mass-produced one-offs' of the Burns range, which was well-known for the individual character of its models. Premises for a factory were found eventually when a friend who had been supplying them with timber offered workshop space on Cradley Heath together with an interest-free loan, and the first production guitar was launched—the Artist Vibra.

From then on, it was expansion all the way. Another removal to larger premises brought the company to Romford, and the Black Bison and Marvin models came into production. In the heyday of Burns guitars, over 150 a week were being made, for a market that could not get enough. Production continued long enough to equip a great many leading artists, both British and American, and models were to be found in the possession of artist as various as Hank Marvin himself and any number of guitarists following in his footsteps, to the likes of David Essex or Slade, and, to cap it all, Elvis Presley. By 1965, however, a variety of factors came into play. The Farrells wanted to go abroad and encouraged Jim to sell the company, and he describes himself as being somewhat surfeited of guitars — if a designer of Jim's stature is to preserve his originality and flair he must have room to expand his interests, and perhaps this was lacking. There were also ideas which were too much ahead of their time to be brought to fruition by the technology available, and a look at a modern Burns guitar is the best guide to what those were. So Jim made his decision and the company was sold at a period of great prosperity — with the condition

that Jim must make no more guitars under his own name for three years.

Three years turned out to be long enough for him to turn his talent to other applications, and



with Jim Burns off the scene, the company that used his name went into decline. The guitars were seldom seen in music shops and while a few were cherished many were exchanged second hand for sums which would make today's dealers bite their lips. Then, a couple of years ago, nostalgia began to grow and with it the re-discovery of a product whose appeal could rely on more than sentimentality, because Burns were simply — the finest English guitars. After appreciating the smoothness and value for money of Japanese models, artists were becoming homesick for the individuality of other lines, and American products, with a lion's share of top sales, could certainly admit a slot for a different style and approach. To cut a long story short, Jim's friends in the business were beginning to talk to him about making a come-back, and the time seemed right for him to re-emerge as saviour of a British guitar industry. He was introduced to Tony Gipp, who played such a part in MM's recent rise to fame, and in the fullness of time the new Jim Burns company was formed.

And now, as the guitars with their back-up range of amps, cabinets and so on are actually launched, all the signs point to a resounding success. For Jim himself, the new venture was first a challenge, and then an inspiration. He's bursting with new ideas, and having gathered many of his old team about him as well as first-class production management, he has the means to implement them. His summary of what the new set-up means to him: 'I really feel that I'm just starting to make guitars.'

THE BLACK SCORPION

The Black Scorpion, with its menacing appearance, heads the new Burns range and should take a sizeable bite out of the market for lead instruments with a hardhitting, modern, dynamic styling. But this Scorpion matches its striking appearance with a sound, scope, balance, and playing ease which sets it immediately among the stars. Burns guitars have set the standards before, and this one will do so now.

For example— in unparalleled sustain: if you've ever struggled to stop long notes dying on you, the Black Scorpion offers success on a plate — literally. The bridge and the two pickups are mounted on a single eighth of an inch brass plate — a system which combines the innate harmonic properties of brass with the novel idea of linking the vital sound transmitting parts. The degree of sustain achieved is remarkable.

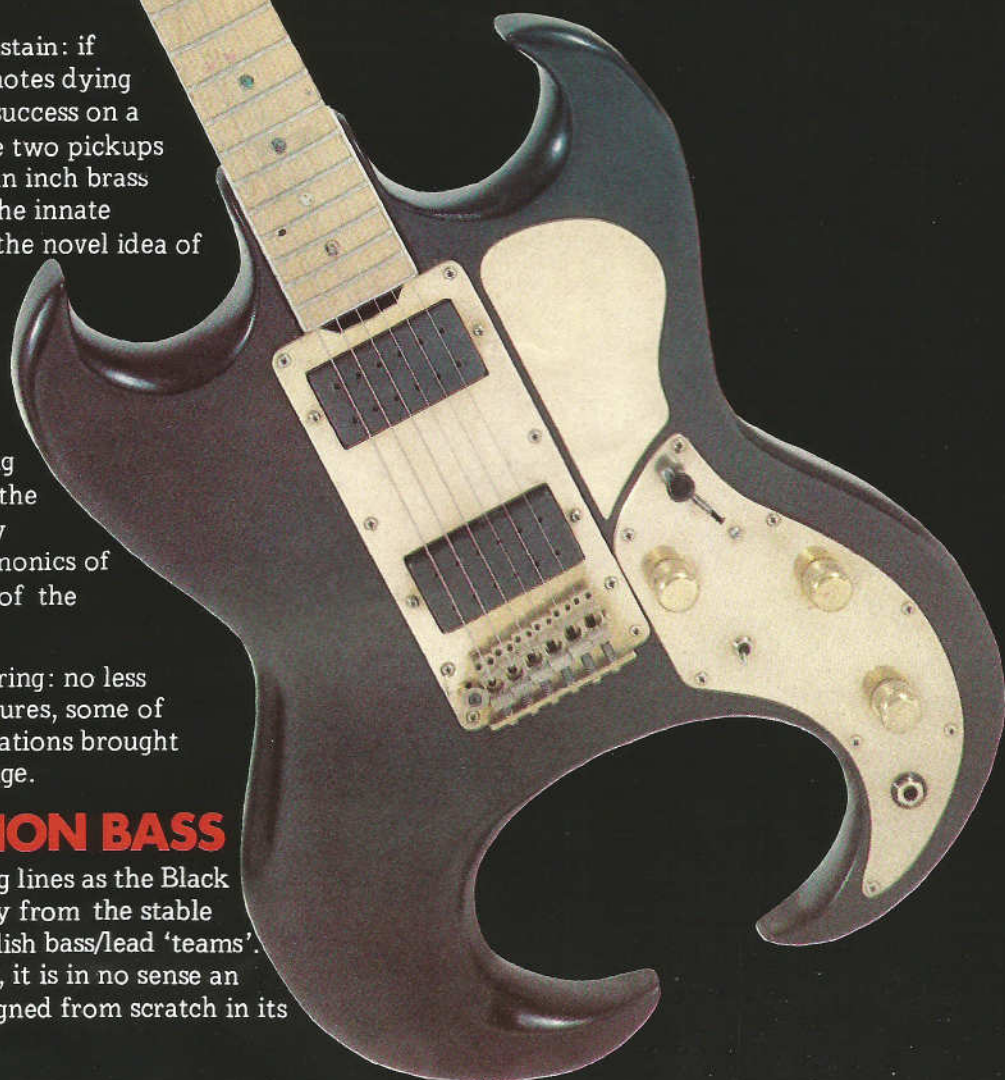
For example— in unique tone facilities: using a recently developed system, the coil switching for the pick-ups is incorporated in the tone controls, giving a continuously variable range from the 'clean' harmonics of the single coil to the throaty voice of the humbucker.

For example—in all-round pioneering: no less than seventeen separate design features, some of them patented, are technical innovations brought together only in the new Burns range.

THE BLACK SCORPION BASS

Designed on the same compelling lines as the Black Scorpion lead, this is very obviously from the stable which has produced the finest English bass/lead 'teams'. Like all the best Burns bass guitars, it is in no sense an adaptation, but an instrument designed from scratch in its own right.

Featuring the same maple neck and mahogany body as the lead, the bass has the prime quality fittings that characterise the range — every material used is quite simple — the best for the particular job it has to do. The Black Scorpion is a long (34") scale bass designed to give the widest possible scope in terms of tone. Using a 3-way selector switch and a phase switch coupled with two different types of pick-up, it offers a range from the aggressive 'rock' feel to the traditional 'plummy' sound.



THE STEER

Named with the 'Black Bison' heritage in mind, the Steer is a highly original concept in guitar design whose appeal may go wider than the market for which its Western association makes it the obvious first choice. Falling between the semi-acoustic and the solid in its construction with a little of the jumbo in its appearance, the Steer is a real character.

The technical and mechanical details are very similar to those of the Black Scorpion, with the same high quality brass fittings and exacting standards of construction. And that makes this guitar a very fine musical instrument indeed.

The body design reduces feedback and the pickups are chosen to give the pure tone Burns enthusiasts have set so much store by in previous models. A 20-fret fingerboard is fitted instead of the 22-fret one on the Black Scorpion and light-gauge strings are standard. The pick guard is made in English hide, instead of brass as in the Scorpion.

SPECIFICATIONS:

*Body type: the Black Scorpions are mahogany solids balanced for optimum weight distribution with deep cutaways giving access to all frets. The Steer is of laminated semi-solid construction to reduce feedback, finished in clear lacquer and faced with finely figured saple veneer.

*Necks: modern slim design in hand selected piano grade Canadian rock maple. The wood has a guaranteed moisture content of less than 10% and is allowed to settle both before shaping and before assembly, to ensure accuracy and stability. Glued and screwed to body for maximum reliability, necks feature a curved truss rod of large section spring steel allowing positive and negative adjustment. The sustain plate is cut away to allow adjustment without removing the strings.

*Fingerboards: individual necks may be fitted with ebony, ash, maple, or rosewood fingerboards. Frets, in best quality nickel silver, are individually honed and polished and there is a shallow camber. The finish is hard lacquered semi-matt for comfort and speed, with white purflings on the edges. Fret markets are inlaid abalone except in the Steer where they are brass.

*Pickups and controls: The Black Scorpion is fitted with two split coil humbuckers, while the Steer has one split coil humbucker and one single pole pickup. The two pickups have separate tone controls. Selection is by a three-way selector switch and a phase reversal switch allows out-of-phase operation when both pickups are selected. The tone controls are also used to fade out one coil of the humbuckers at the extreme treble setting, allowing single coil operation without the added complication of separate coil tap switches. The volume controls are fitted close to the bridge for easy adjustment - particularly useful for 'violin'ing with the little finger.

*Sustain plate: in 1/8" solid brass firmly mounted with 1/4" wood screws, to give overall high sustain and the natural uncoloured string tone characteristic of all Burns guitars.

*Bridge saddles: of solid, burnished brass for best sustain and minimum string friction. Intonation is set by longitudinal adjustment of each saddle and string locating notches permit lateral adjustment and prevent string slipping when notes are 'bent'. Height adjustment screws are recessed to avoid interference with the playing hand when 'damping'.

*Saddle locking cam: once the bridge saddles are set the bridge assembly is locked together between the tapered saddle locking cam and a fixed peg. This arrangement combines the flexibility of separately adjustable saddles with the sustain and lack of unwanted vibration of a one piece fixed bridge.

*Nut: 'jumbo' sized, in solid self lubricating bronze, precision slotted and burnished to maximise sustain and minimize string friction. The nut is detachable and can be adjusted for height by varying the thickness of the spacing shims.

*String retaining plate: in solid brass, this is positioned to lead the strings around the bridge saddles at the optimum angle for positive string location and maximum down force on the bridge.

*Control panel: solid brass and mounted with 1/4" wood screws. Both the control and the pickup cavities are treated with conductive paint for complete screening.

*String guides: the specially designed and patented string guides are ball bearing pulleys which give the lowest possible string friction. The use of the grooved ball races allows a greater string pull-off angle while preserving a straight path through the nut, which permits the use of a wide nut without the risk of strings 'sticking' during tuning or note-bending. The strings can also be led over the nut at a more acute angle than normal to increase the down force on the nut and reduce spurious overtones.

*Strap buttons: solid brass strap buttons are carefully positioned for optimum balance.

THE STEER 50

The Burns Steer 50 is a 50 Watt combo designed for the musician who requires a simple portable combination unit with a wide range of available tone colours.

The unit is deliberately versatile. The controls, input and master volume, bass, middle, treble and presence adjustment, can be manipulated to give the most effective response to every scale of playing from 'clean' to 'overdrive'. Extensive use of field effect transistors give the unit a fullness of tone remarkable in a power amp of this size, recalling warmth and smoothness normally associated with valves.

The Steer 50 features 3 Spring Hammond switchable reverb as standard, along with pre-amp output and slave input. The open backed cabinet is constructed in 3/4" ply for strength, and finished in heavy duty tan leathercloth with leather handle and brass detail fittings.

The new amp is designed specifically for electric guitars, and rock, country, R&B, and jazz musicians will all find it complements their musical ideas. Compact size and light weight combined with an excellent sound projection make it ideal for club and studio use.



*output power:	50W RMS into 4 Ohms	*signal/noise ratio	more than 70dB ref. 30 mV input signal
*frequency range:	80Hz - 6KHz approx.	*sensitivity	3mV (volume, master volume, middle full up)
*distortion:	less than 1% at 35W RMS (1KHz input with middle and master volume on 'full') approximately 7% at 35W RMS (1KHz input with middle and master volume on '5')	*output impedance of power amp	0.5 Ohm 100 Ohms (depending on presence control setting)
		*tone controls	bass, middle and treble to cover entire range of guitar spectrum.

THE SNAKE



Despite compact size and low output power (0.6 watt) this is a professionally designed portable practice amp built to the same high standards as the Steer 50. Powered by 4 dry batteries, it is available with a rechargeable unit as an optional extra.

A full range of bass, treble, and volume controls is fitted and the output allows the Snake to be 'slaved up' to a larger amplifier or directly linked to a P.A. or recording desk. A high efficiency 5" loudspeaker is fitted as standard.

Attractively finished in suede paint and suede type leathercloth, the Snake is an amp you can take anywhere. The real leather strap can be replaced by a longer one to sling round the guitarist's neck, and when not in use the amp is small enough to be slipped into his lead-bag. For the professional to use in tuning up - especially if his dressing room is without a suitable power source, the Snake is invaluable, or it can simply be packed next to the sandwiches when you go on a picnic! The output level is compatible with acoustic guitars and the unamplified voice, and making this outstanding midget still more attractive will be the surprisingly low price at which Burns have been able to produce it.

*output power	0.6 watts.	*controls	bass and treble cover full range of the guitar. The volume control acts as a master volume and incorporates on/off switch.
*size approx	7 1/2" x 7" x 2 1/2"		
*battery life	5 hours approx.		
*output socket	allows direct access to pre-amp output.		

Burns guitars have only just begun to attract the collector's passion with which the vintage classics of the American guitar industry have been regarded for some time. Nevertheless, they have their champions. Here's what Paul Day, a leading collector of and researcher into Burns guitars, has to say about the Burns tradition in his just-published book on the range.

'Among such pioneers' He begins, speaking of the leading British competition with American makes, 'the name of Burns figured most prominently on the home market throughout the 'boom' era of the sixties. The company made its name as a manufacturer of good quality, reliable, and innovative guitars, which sadly do not receive the acclaim now afforded to products of similar vintage from other, more illustrious American sources – even though in terms of quality and construction they sometimes surpass their American counterparts.'

The heritage currently on the second-hand market is a paradise for the enthusiast, a nightmare for anyone trying to classify or value. 'The Burns Book' explains how Jim, bringing design to the shop floor, influenced every stage of construction.

Often he would improve design even during production runs, producing guitars that were continually evolving. Working with individual craftsmen, Jim constantly strove to seek new and better ways of solving old problems. The guitars from this period can best be dated from the number of innovations included in the basic design.

It is impossible to say which is the "best" Burns period as often the guitars would go through cyclic improvements which would deal with one area of the instrument design at a time. The end result was always slightly better in one respect.

Summing up the tradition of Burns guitars from the early Artist Vibra to the superb Scorpion, Paul Day has the following observations to make:

Jim Burns produced examples of virtually every possible guitar variation – at least one of each.'

'Although the tradename on the guitars varied over the years, sometimes giving no indication that Jim Burns was even involved, his innate design flair was usually apparent, providing a constant common factor. A man 'ahead of his time' on many occasions, his career parallels that of Leo Fender in a number of ways although sadly he does not enjoy the same acclaim. At one time, Jim was even invited by Don Randall to join the Fender organisation, an indication that at least someone appreciated his talents!

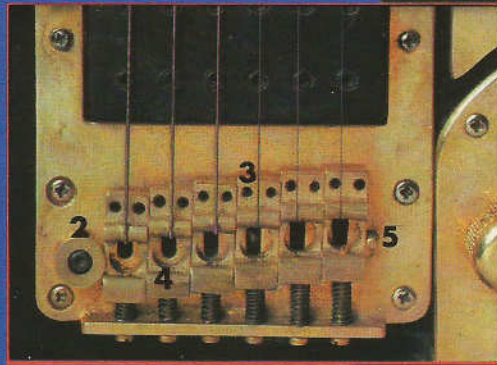
'All Burns instruments are 'interesting', to say the least, they all possess a characteristic air of slight eccentricity among many other attributes, very different from the average products that have appeared in the last twenty years. This alone makes them well worth investigating, either as a player, as a collector, or both.



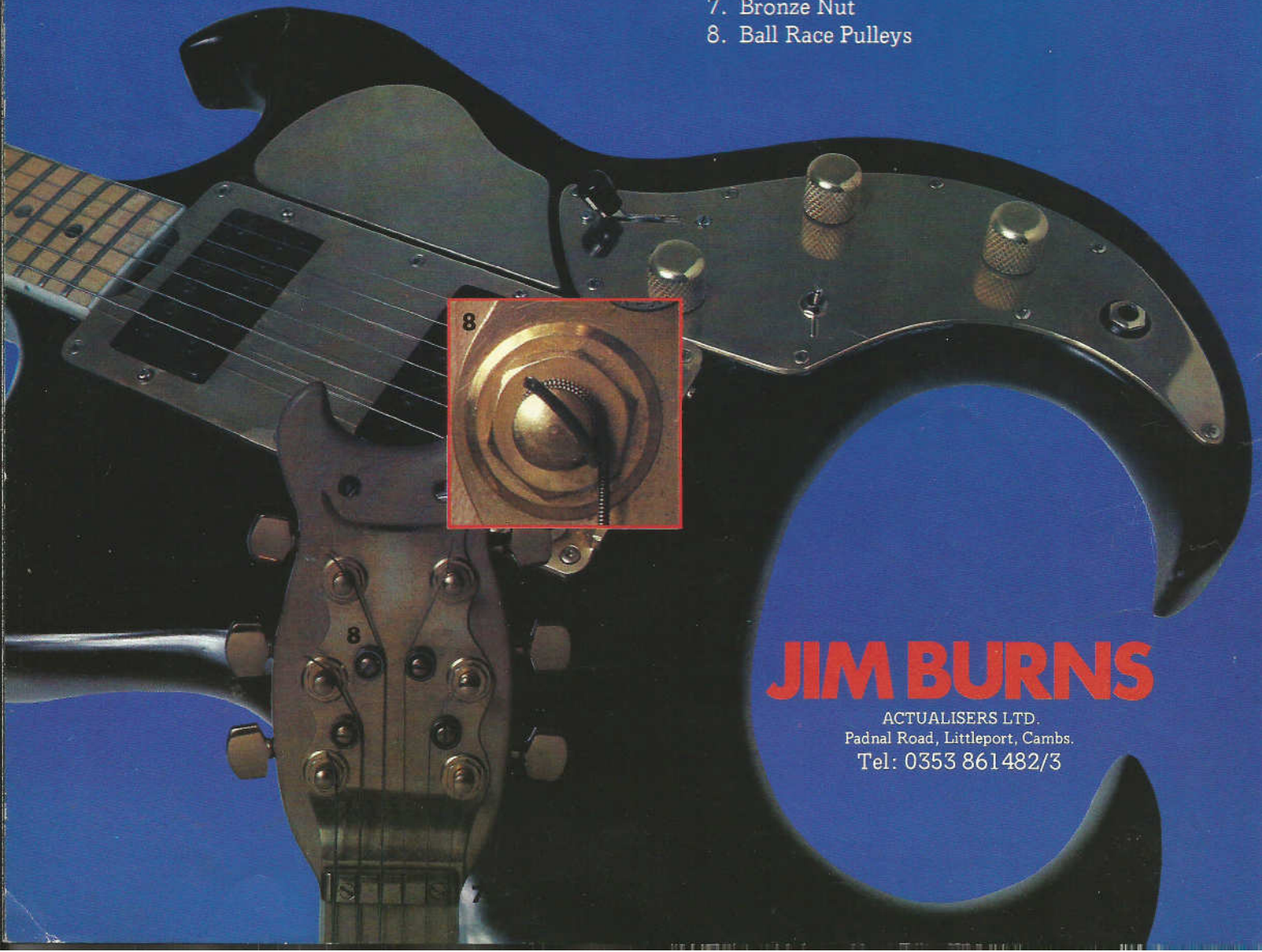
THE BURNS TRADITION



BURNS IN DETAIL



1. Truss Rod Adjustment
2. Saddle Locking Cam
3. Recessed Height Adjusting Screws
4. String Locating Notches
5. Locating Peg
6. Height Adjustment Shims
7. Bronze Nut
8. Ball Race Pulleys



JIM BURNS

ACTUALISERS LTD.
Padnal Road, Littleport, Cambs.
Tel: 0353 861482/3