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## Melancon Custom Artist Signature electric guitar

Reviews : Guitar: Electric

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Signature guitars can often be seen as little more than an attempt to lure gullible guitarists into believing that the purchase of a particular model will somehow imbue their playing with the magical tone and musicality of their idol. Steve Hughes's signature Custom Artist from Melancon, however, clearly has something special to offer.

by Bob Thomas

I've lost count of the number of signature guitars that have been launched and quietly disappeared over the years. I've also lost count of the approximately equal number of guitarists who have been 'honoured' with a signature guitar from some manufacturer or another, and I can even think of a few who have had signature guitars made by several companies during their careers.

Having said that, there are a few guitarists — Eric Clapton and Martin Carthy among them — who, having received a signature guitar, play it to the exclusion of all else. Buying a Clapton Fender Stratocaster and a Carthy Martin 000-18 won't miraculously turn you into a killer Eric and Martin hybrid, but it would get you a couple of very fine guitars that may or may not suit your style of playing.

Signature guitars like the Clapton Strat and the Carthy Martin are rarely radically new designs, but are much more likely to be relatively minor modifications to existing models, and are usually made either by the player or their guitar tech. Arguably (and this may be a question for the Pub Bore), the first and only true signature model electric guitar was Les Paul's Les Paul, and perhaps every signature model thereafter could be regarded as merely a modified production guitar.

However, since the whole point of a signature guitar is to give the player the guitar that fits his or her hands, style, technique, tonal needs and so on, there is a relatively easy (although admittedly more expensive) way to get all that, without waiting until we become guitar gods and the guitar companies start to shower instruments upon us.

### Melancon Guitars

One of the joys of recent years has been the number of smaller guitar companies and independent luthiers that have sprung up in response to the needs of somewhat wealthier generations of guitarists, who are not content simply to buy whatever the music industry puts in front of them, but who are willing to spend money and time to get the guitar that they want. Some of these companies were pretty much true originals — PRS and Taylor spring to mind — whereas others went down the road of continuing the evolution of the electric guitar revolution begun by Leo Fender some 60 years ago.

One such company is Melancon Guitars of Thibodaux, Louisiana. Owned and operated by one-time professional guitarist Gerard Melancon, this one-man company produces guitars that, although the DNA of their body outlines and bolt-on necks may come from Leo, have a very different construction, tone and overall feel.



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Construction  
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Melancon Custom Artist £2499 (base model), £3499 (as specified)

The Melancon Steve Hughes Signature Custom Artist is a very high-quality, Fender Stratocaster-derived guitar that has been specified by a very fine guitarist to give him an enormous amount of flexibility in the studio, as well as a great guitar for live gigs. As an instrument, it is impossible to fault and is an extremely impressive showcase of Gerard Melancon's talents as a luthier, and his overall approach to this art.

information

Explorer Sales & Marketing  
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[www.melanconguitars.com](http://www.melanconguitars.com)

Tech Spec

#### Steve Hughes Custom Artist

Matteo Blue finish.  
Quilted maple/mahogany body.  
Brazilian rosewood/mahogany neck.  
Satin finish.  
Standard carve.  
6150 stainless-steel frets.  
1.6875-inch nut.  
10-inch fingerboard radius.  
Two Duncan Stacked P-90 pickups, one Melancon PAFB humbucker.  
RMC Piezo bridge saddles, RMC Poly-Drive 1 MIDI system with volume control for 'acoustic' output.  
Gotoh locking tuners.  
Master volume, master tone with humbucker coil-tap, five-way pickup selector, three-way mini-toggle for P-90s, mini-toggle Blower switch for humbucker.  
Custom 12th fret cobra inlay.

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Reading on their web site how Melancon guitars came into being gives you some sense of the man behind it all, and the very fact that there are pages devoted to describing the tonal qualities and results from the various permutations of body woods and neck woods gives you a huge degree of confidence in both the man and the guitars that he builds. Incidentally, he doesn't build that many (the UK only manages to get around 30 guitars a year), so if you went for one of Gerard's guitars, you'd be joining a pretty exclusive club.

Their UK distributors, Explorer Sales and Marketing Ltd, are run by the very same Steve Hughes that pens a column for this magazine. Steve is also a much in-demand, highly respected, triple-scale session guitarist, and the Melancon Custom Artist reviewed here is his very own signature model, designed to give him exactly what he wants and needs in a guitar that has to be capable of covering a wide variety of styles and sounds in the studio.

## Construction

I hadn't ever seen a Melancon guitar before it arrived on my doorstep, and when I opened the box to reveal a very classy case covered in rough blonde tolex, I must confess to being favourably impressed. Once I'd opened the case, I began to think that all my Christmases had arrived at once.

Steve Hughes has specified a very beautiful guitar indeed. Basically, what we've got here is a Strat-shaped guitar with a solid mahogany neck and two-piece mahogany body, both of which are of exceptional quality wood. The headstock and body are faced with quilted maple in Melancon's transparent Matteo Blue finish. The headstock facing is a thin veneer. However, the body carries a gorgeous, perfectly bookmatched cap, which is around a quarter-inch or so thick. Both body and headstock are unbound, although the body has the very edge of the maple left uncoloured to give the impression of binding.

The 22-fret, 10-inch-radius fingerboard is a beautiful piece of Brazilian rosewood, with pearl dot markers in the usual places. The 12th fret is marked by a beautifully executed pearl, abalone and turquoise inlay of a cobra, which was designed by Steve's daughter. The Melancon logo on the headstock is inlaid also in pearl, and the back of the headstock is signed by Gerard Melancon. The machineheads are of the locking Gotoh variety, and their efficacy was proven to me by the fact that the guitar arrived perfectly in tune and has since stayed there pretty much unaided. Frets are 6150 stainless steel, and are finished superbly.

All hardware on the guitar is gold, including the four bolts sitting in recessed washers that hold the neck firmly in place, but with the exception of the two mini-toggle switches, which we'll come to later. Although the satin-finished mahogany neck is somewhat unusual on a Strat-style guitar, it is one of the nicest necks that I've ever played on. This is due not only to the very comfortable Melancon standard profile, but also to the fact that the rosewood fingerboard is one of the thickest I've ever seen on an electric guitar, and the combination just works so well.

On the body, the heel area around the neck pocket has heavily rounded edges that make wailing away at the top of the fingerboard a more comfortable experience than on many other similarly styled guitars. The body also has a fairly deep cutaway contour on the top rear edge, and a forearm relief on the top, all of which add up to a supremely comfortable guitar to play and to hold.

The tremolo bridge carries the Melancon logo and is a modern, twin-pivot design with a push-in arm. Steve has the bridge set for a semitone-up bend, with dive-bombing down bends being eminently satisfying. In either case, it always returns to perfect tune. Pickups are a rather unusual combination of two Seymour Duncan Stacked P-90s in neck and middle positions, with a Melancon PAFB Blues humbucker at the bridge. Controls are master volume and a master tone (which also carries a push-pull coil-tap for the bridge humbucker), a five-way pickup selector and two mini-toggle switches. One of these is a coil-tap/series/parallel switch that affects both P-90s together, and the other is Steve Hughes's signature Blower switch, which brings in the bridge humbucker on its own, bypassing the pickup selector.

In keeping with Steve's studio needs, the bridge is fitted with six individual RMC piezo saddles, which feed an onboard RMC Poly-Drive 1 MIDI system, as well as routing out through a separate volume control to the ring contact of the stereo output jack — this also carries the output of the magnetic pickups on its tip. This arrangement gives Steve the ability to run the magnetic and piezo outputs simultaneously, and drive a Roland guitar synth too.



Steve's daughter designed the pearl, abalone and turquoise cobra inlay at the 12th fret.



The neck and body of the Melancon are of exceptionally high-quality mahogany.

## Performance

Acoustically, the Melancon Steve Hughes Custom Artist is pretty loud for a solid-body guitar. This amount of volume is a sure sign of high-quality woods, very close tolerance fitting of parts and exemplary craftsmanship by the builder, and the guitar does nothing to contradict that. This Custom Artist, with its generous amount of solid mahogany, is a good deal heavier than a standard alder Strat, and if I were buying one, I'd probably take up the chambered body option. However, that option, although giving a bit more harmonic richness to the guitar, apparently upsets the RMC Poly-Drive system, which is why Steve specified the solid body.

The RMC piezo saddles and their preamp work very well (as they always do, in my experience), and while you can't pretend that you've got a Martin D28 hanging off your guitar strap, you can get a very acceptable sound indeed through an acoustic guitar amp like my Jam 400. On the other hand, the two P-90s are just astounding on this guitar.

I'm a big fan of P-90s in general, and the Duncan Stacked humbucking versions take the original P-90 design, quieten any interference considerably, and add a bit more weight and darkness to the overall sound. Through my favourite 1964 Deluxe, the neck P-90 gave a wondrous, slightly compressed and harmonically rich sound that had me playing happily for hours. And if that had been all that this Steve Hughes Custom Artist could do, I'd have been more than happy. Hitting the toggle switch and getting into the coil-tap and parallel coil configurations just added to the fun, but the basic parallel setting remained my favourite.

The middle P-90 was another revelation. I'm no great user of a Strat middle pickup on its own — on my main Strat, I've had it moved down next to the bridge pickup à la the Band's Robbie Robertson — but the Duncan P-90 in the middle makes for a really useable pickup with some great sounds. Combining the two P-90s and experimenting with the various possible coil settings extended the sound palette even further, and I spent a lot of time playing around with these without ever finding a sound that I couldn't or wouldn't use.

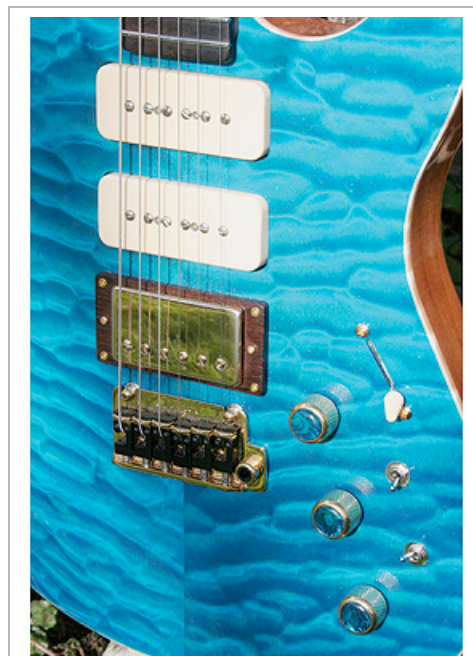
The Melancon PAFB humbucker is pretty much what you'd expect a good humbucking pickup to be like. Although the coil tap in the tone control adds to the PAFB's versatility, its distinctive voice is somewhat overshadowed by the two P-90s. Having said that, if you were to base your sound around the richness of the two P-90s, the PAFB would give you a contrasting tonality to bring in should you want to get into the heavy metal, scooped-mid arena. Given Steve Hughes's need for this kind of versatility, I can totally appreciate why he's gone for this particular pickup option, and in these terms it succeeds immaculately.

Combining the coil-tapped humbucker with the middle P-90 puts you into instant Mark Knopfler, out-of-phase Strat territory, except that the Melancon has a weight and depth in that sound that I don't get in any of my Strats. Adding in the acoustic sound of the piezo pickups opens up a whole new area of experimentation, and, especially in a studio environment, gives so much more flexibility and individuality to your sound. Although driving guitar synths isn't high on my list of favourite things to do with a guitar, the RMC Poly-Drive fitted to this guitar is one of the best systems around for this purpose and I couldn't fault its performance with a Roland GR-20.

## Conclusion

Playing this guitar is an absolute delight. The mahogany neck is comfortable, easy to play and, especially in its satin finish, blazingly fast to get around. The sound of the guitar — no matter which pickup combination you get into — is always harmonically rich, crystal clear and very inspiring. The fit, finish and overall standard of workmanship put Gerard Melancon up there with the very best electric guitar luthiers working today. This Steve Hughes Signature Custom Artist is one of the finest electric guitars that I've ever had the pleasure of playing, and the memory of the sound of its neck P-90 will doubtless haunt my dreams for years to come.

Although quality at this level doesn't come cheaply, you can't put a price on the inspiration and pleasure that a guitar such as this Custom Artist can give you. If you've ever wanted a signature model of your own,



There are two Seymour Duncan Stacked P-90 pickups and a Melancon PAFB Blues humbucker. Controls are master volume, master tone, a five-way pickup selector and two mini-toggle switches — one controls both P-90s and the other the bridge humbucker.



The Custom Artist features Gotoh locking machineheads, and the back of the headstock has been signed by Gerard Melancon.

I'd recommend trying out a Melancon or two to find out what basic model suits you, and then sitting down in a quiet corner with the extensive option list and building up the exact specification that you want.

Other than the cost, I can't think of a single reason that would stop me buying this particular Melancon Custom Artist, so it's just as well that it belongs to Steve Hughes. Mind you, I know that it would only take a maximum of 12 weeks to get a Custom Artist built to my specifications, so maybe, just maybe, I will...

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