



# TAKE YOUR PICK

Can you guess what scent supremo Julian Bedel's other passion is? We thought so. But why does a man need *this* many guitars? GRACE CAIN pays him a visit to find out...





SCENT-DIFFUSING GUITARS! Botanical extractions! The fascinating intricacies of the molecular headspace of a 300-year-old Stradivarius violin! Julian Bedel is taking my brain for a walk. It's like having a conversation with Willy Wonka (if Willy Wonka was faultlessly charming, and obsessed with fragrances rather than chocolate).

As the mastermind behind the niche Patagonian brand Fueguia 1833, Bedel has essentially elevated scent into both a science and an art.

But we're not here to talk about that. Today, we're here to talk about Bedel's collection of vintage guitars – in theory, anyway. “You see, the part of our brain that is involved with scent is the same part involved with playing music,” Bedel declares, wrapping his opposing passions into one sentence. “Although that's not unusual. When you're smelling something, almost all the parts of your brain light up. Scent is a very powerful medium that can completely transform our mood, and the same can be said for good music.”

“Do you like guitars?” he continues enthusiastically, and his spirits are not dampened when I confess I know absolutely nothing about them. “The guitar is the king of instruments,” he ploughs on. “Millions are sold every year, and they are all imitations of the vintage models I collect. From South America to Europe to Africa, from tango to jazz to bossa nova; so many people express themselves and their culture using the same tool.”

The guitar's inherent creative potential is part of the reason Bedel has been beguiled by the instrument since he was a child. “They aren't just useless objects,” he elaborates.

“Many guitar players are collectors themselves, because different designs might inspire them to create certain melodies or play in a particular way. It's like shoes – you can have many styles, but each will have their own reason to exist in the wardrobe.” He chuckles. “Well, this is what I tell my girlfriend when she questions why more guitars keep coming through the door.”

Her concern is perhaps not completely unwarranted. Bedel owns more than 100 vintage guitars, the vast majority of which reside on his living-room wall. “I have to keep them readily available, because they need to be kept in tune,” he shrugs. “Plus, it's a good opportunity to play them all.”

Aside from a selection of Martin acoustic guitars (including a couple that date back to the 1920s), Bedel's focus is very specifically on Gibsons from the 1950s and 1960s. Two models dominate – the ES-335 and the Les Paul. “The Gibson Les Paul is the Stradivarius of guitars,” he says. “The single bridge pickup, the master tone and volume; the basic

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elements you need to create rock, and that's it. It cannot be improved. Even modern guitars are not this efficient, and certainly not as much of a joy to listen to.”

Bedel is not a celebrity-guitar collector, preferring instead to source his pieces from the epicentre of session music: Nashville, Tennessee. “I have a lot of guitars that have



*This page, from top: Julian Bedel with his Gibson Les Paul Gold Top 1952; just a handful of the hundreds of guitar picks Bedel has collected on his travels. Opposite page, from top: Bedel needs his guitars “readily available, because they need to be kept in tune”; the case and paperwork for a Gibson Les Paul custom 1968*



Fabrizio Cicconi

been played by some amazing musicians,” he says. “Instruments that have really worked. Like, you can see the cracked paint, you can tell how someone's hand has worn into a certain part of the wood. They all show – with a lot of grace – their craftsmanship and age.”

He insists he doesn't have favourites. “I try to keep the collection pure,” he explains, which essentially means constantly replacing models he considers “less relevant” with new pieces. Well, not new. “New guitars are like new cars – they have a plastic smell,” he waves a dismissive hand. “Guitars that have been sounded for many hours have an incredible scent because of the way the lacquers have matured.”

Around the world, Fueguia 1833's stores are physical manifestations of Bedel's belief in the symbiotic relationship between scent and music. The New York boutique (or “gallery”, as Bedel refers to all his outposts) is decorated with a portion of the founder's guitar collection. And the Milan iteration features furniture and walls built using spruce from Italy's so-called ‘Musical Wood’ in the Val di Fiemme – that's the same forest where (legend has it) Antonio Stradivari discovered the perfect violin-making materials. “I wanted to create an acoustically isolated space where you can focus only on fragrance,” Bedel explains.

For his latest gallery, in Japan, Bedel has created a series of scent-diffusing guitars – in a very literal sense. His youthful fascination with the instrument led him to train as a luthier – a craftsperson who makes and repairs stringed instruments. “The thought of composing something on a guitar that I built was always a very powerful concept for me,” he reflects. I ask how the scent-diffusing versions work. “Ah, I cannot tell you that!” he wags his finger and grins. “I have already told you too much! The copycats might be reading.”

He can't remember exactly, but Bedel thinks he got his first instrument at around the age of eight. “As I got a bit older and started getting interested in girls, I realised...” (here, he lets out a big self-deprecating laugh) “... for a not-beautiful, not-gifted guy like me, this was an additional tool for my toolkit. The guitar has always helped me to feel more confident.”

Today, surrounded by his collection, Bedel still believes in that power. “I often gift guitars to friends because I believe they can be very healing.” Dare I feel inspired to have a try? “With the digitisation of music lessons, there's nothing to stop you learning a few chords,” Bedel insists. “It's good for you. Playing music is like meditation. It puts your brain into a different state. Nowhere else have I found this feeling...” – he grapples for the words to describe it – “... this sense that my mind is expanding. Whenever I pick up a guitar, I know I am automatically connecting to something positive. They never let me down.” □

