

# Music Trades

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## THE GLOBAL ISSUE



# HRS Unlimited

Flagship brand John Page Classic brings custom design to a midrange price point

**A**s co-founder of the Fender Custom Shop, John Page was the master luthier behind hundreds of dazzling one-offs crafted between 1987 and 1998. Afterward, he embarked on projects of his own: first building a range of art furniture from his home in southern Oregon and then launching a custom guitar line in 2006. Whatever Page decided to do next, you had to figure it would be on his own terms—which is why a team led by music industry entrepreneur Howard Swimmer wasn't at all sure he'd take them up on their new venture in production guitars. "We all thought John would be the perfect guy for this," says Swimmer, "but we didn't get our hopes up that a guy of his caliber would take an interest. As it turned out—he called me 24 hours later and said, 'I'm in.'" What Swimmer and Page created under the new John Page Classic brand was an original take on mid-priced production guitars, pairing boutique-style appointments with a price tag around \$1,500. The line's first model, called the Ashburn, captures a vibe Page defines as "uniquely familiar": classic design themes edged with elements of artistry and innovation.

"John is an expert on Strat/Tele style guitars," says Swimmer. "And I'm sure that over his years of building them, he's had thoughts about what could make them better—but couldn't act on that because it wouldn't have been consistent with the Fender brand. Now that it's his own name on the guitar, he's able to express those thoughts in his design."

On the Strat-style Ashburn, Page incorporates a double-cutaway alder body and classically styled headstock, along with some unique twists that are pure John Page. The neck joint, for instance, has four oversized metal bolts that thread into metal inserts in the neck, creating what Page calls "a better energy transference and more complex overtones." Staggered Gotoh tuners,



*HRS Unlimited founder Howard Swimmer with the John Page Classic Ashburn guitar. Photo/Todd Chalfant*

the same ones found on Page's custom guitars, are used to achieve an even cut-off at the nut and, in most cases, eliminate the need for string trees. The bridge pickup has a reverse slant inspired by Jimi Hendrix, a lefty who habitually played restrung right-handed guitars. Designed by Page from top to bottom, the model is manufactured in Japan and comes in at a price point of \$1,499. Within six months of launch, the Ashburn was named to the *Guitar Player* magazine 2015 Hall of Fame—one of only four guitars selected and the only new brand of the lot. "This is a very important proof of concept for us, and an exciting confirmation that people are responding very positively to the guitar," says Swimmer.

In John Page Classic, though, Swimmer says he's only laid the key-stone in a family of brands being

developed under the banner of his parent company, HRS Unlimited. A drummer himself, Swimmer has worked for decades in artist management, events promotion, and, most recently, guitar production—as organizer of a boutique manufacturers' collective called Premier Builders Guild. It was there, he's said, that he first recognized the demand for a boutique-style guitar at a mainstream price point. Now, under HRS Unlimited, he's planning a network of accessible brands with strong ties to high-level craftsmen. After John Page Classic, the next piece to be introduced has been Bloodline by John Page Pickups, a set of pickups spec'd out by the luthier for his guitars. Included on every Ashburn guitar, they're also being offered as a product in their own right—and the foundation for future "Bloodline by..." collaborations with other craftsmen.

As the products multiply, Swimmer envisions a chain of new brands with ready appeal to musicians already playing one of his other products—which are numerous, thanks to his long associations in the industry. Singer/songwriter Mark Knopfler and longtime session guitarist Richard Bennett are just a couple of the artists to play and offer feedback on the products unveiled so far. "We put our guitars in these guys' hands, and fortunately they like them," says Swimmer. "And then if I bring in another component—strings, perhaps—I can offer them to a built-in network of people who are already playing the guitars." As for the effect of binding these brands together under the HRS umbrella, Swimmer reasons that there's strength in numbers, as well as opportunities to diversify. "It makes us a serious contender to be a brand that's associated with other brands," he says. "It represents stability and gives us a chance to add to our depth chart without being pigeonholed. As time goes on and opportunities present themselves, I'm always looking and listening to see what fits into our portfolio."

Back on the John Page side, HRS has been building on the original single-coil Ashburn with two additional models: a humbucker version scheduled to ship in December, and a third iteration, not yet announced, that's slated for

introduction at the 2016 Winter NAMM show. By the time the NAMM Show opens, Swimmer also expects to be offering three varieties of Bloodline by John Page pickups. “One of the

great things about working with John is, he does something I can’t do, and I think I do something that he can’t do—so it works perfectly,” says Swimmer. “He’s just a great guy and a brilliant

designer. He’s the story we’re telling every single day in these guitars.”  
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