



STETSBAR VIBRATO FROM £237

ACCESSORIES  GUITARIST INTERACTIVE

Stetsbar vibrato from £237

It's been a long time coming, but an easy retrofit vibrato for Gibson-style guitars is here. Is it a bridge too far? by Neville Marten

Gibson guitars have never been noted for their vibrato systems. When a wobble or a wobble was required on your Les Paul, SG or ES Series, the ubiquitous Bigsby or Maestro Vibrola (as found on SG Customs, for instance) were the only options. Neither offered much in the way of string travel and therefore pitch variance, and both were notoriously poor at returning to pitch. So Gibsons – and any other guitars using a stud tailpiece and tune-o-matic bridge – remained largely vibrato free.

Enter Eric Stets and his Stetsbar. A mechanical engineer by trade, Stets is also a self-professed guitar nut who was frustrated at the paucity of vibrato units available for Gibsons and so set about designing his own. It's taken 14 years of experimentation but now the results of Eric's toils can be seen in a simple-to-fit module that requires no hole-drilling, will cause no damage to your precious guitar and therefore will not detrimentally affect its value.



Stets' challenge was to create a system that looked in keeping with Gibson's unbeatable designs, operated accurately, and felt stable and familiar in use. His solution is a horseshoe-shaped baseplate that bolts into the guitar's tailpiece stud holes; with

upward or downward movement of the centre-mounted arm, a second plate on to which a quality tune-o-matic bridge has been mounted, rolls back and forth on micro-bearings, altering the instrument's pitch as it goes. As the bridge moves with the plate, friction is

STETSBAR VIBRATO

PRICE: £237-£285, depending on finish

TYPE: Retrofit vibrato for stud tailpiece and tune-o-matic bridge guitars

ORIGIN: USA

CONSTRUCTION: All-metal. Horseshoe-shaped baseplate mounts into tailpiece stud holes; tune-o-matic bridge attaches to baseplate and, using a system of springs and bearings, moves back and forth with up or downward movement of the adjustable arm

OPTIONS: Available in gold, nickel, black and chrome colours (prices start at £237 for chrome, rising to £285 for gold). A mix and match service is available – chrome on black baseplate, for instance – plus, a baseplate in Gibson-style cream can be chosen

RANGE OPTIONS: A unit is available for Fender guitars, but is not yet available in the UK (watch this space)

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STETSBAR VIBRATO FROM £237

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The rivals

Bigsby vibrato £POA

For decades, the only sensible choice for stud tailpiece style instruments has been the redoubtable Bigsby. And unless you fancy using the vibrato option on a Line 6 Variax, it's still pretty much all there is on offer. Using a simple spring and roller bar setup, the Bigsby does require making screw holes in the top of your guitar, but fortunately this has never affected vintage values to any great extent. Bigsbys are available in short (for SG and Les Paul style guitars) or long (for Gretsch or Gibson ES335-style instruments). String travel is minimal though, and tuning has never been the Bigsby's forte

STETSBAR	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Operation	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Elegant solution to what is an age-old problem

■ **WE DISLIKED** Won't be enough for some players; gap between unit and guitar body

→ all but eliminated and tuning therefore optimised – string life too. The arm can be adjusted for both position and feel.

Stetsbar's UK distributor, Madison And Fifth, assures us that half an hour or so is all it takes to fully install the system. Once the unit has been attached to the tailpiece studs, simply restrung the guitar (the two E strings are fed in from behind and pass under the two small but powerful springs, while the middle four are hooked directly into the retainer bar) and spend a few minutes adjusting to taste. It's vital that the Stetsbar's rolling plate moves accurately, so two tracking screws at the rear of the unit keep things perfectly in line.

Our Stetsbar came loaded on to a Gibson Les Paul DC Standard Lite and there was a noticeable gap between the bottom of the baseplate and the Les Paul's arched top. Madison And Fifth is currently in discussion with Eric Stets about fitting some form of compression material beneath the system, in order to close this unsightly gap and create a more 'finished' look.

IN USE: Although it looks like a fairly hefty piece of engineering, the Stetsbar's easy fitting is mirrored in its operation. True, this is not a whammy bar in the style of Floyd Rose and will not dive to extremes with the strings flapping off the neck. What it does do – and do very well – is quietly waggle chords or single strings. The arm's action is smooth and there's noticeably less resistance than you'd find on, say, a Bigsby. It almost feels like there's some sort of power assistance, so effortless is the Stetsbar's action.

The Stetsbar in use: the plate on to which the tune-o-matic has been mounted rolls back and forth to alter pitch



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With a well-installed unit, tuning is as good as, or better than, many other vibrato systems on the market – given that travel is not as drastic as on even Leo's vintage Stratocaster design. But it's lovely for smooth chord wobbles, gentle Marvin dives or Holdsworth-style dips. What's most remarkable is that, when you've been playing a Stets-equipped guitar for half an hour or so, it seems to feel as though the system is a factory fitting.

Verdict

Perhaps £237 seems a lot to fork out, but when you consider the additional playability a Stetsbar will bring to your otherwise static Gibson-style electric, it's worth the money. When you then consider you can remove it should you sell the guitar and no trace will be left of its existence, then it really is cheap.

What's most impressive about Eric Stets' piece of engineering is its



The Stetsbar can be put 'out of the way' to allow for some more standard Gibson fun

simplicity to fit and its stability in operation once in place. What we weren't able to test was the effect of the installation of a Stetsbar on the sound of an instrument. Our Les Paul seemed as toneful and sustaining as any we've played, so on balance we'd say the effect was minimal, if indeed there's any difference in tone at all.

A fine piece of problem solving, the Stetsbar looks like the perfect way to turn your staid old Gibson into a more expressive instrument. A bridge too far? No, just far enough thank you! **G**

Stetsbar vibrato

Guitarist RATING

