

# Guild Pilot:

The **WORKINGMAN'S**

# BASS

Written by  
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The Guild Pilot bass is one of the unacclaimed successes of the music industry. During its twelve years of production, over 6,000 instruments were produced. The model peaked in 1987, with approximate sales of 1,300 units. But, throughout its lifetime, the Pilot saw periods of recognition as the top-selling bass in the industry.

In many respects, the Pilot is a Jazz bass taken to its extremes. Its smaller, more elongated body is lighter. Its P/J pickup configuration is more versatile. The use of high quality electronics and hardware gave it great sound and reliability. And, the fact that it was produced by Guild meant quality at an affordable price. Lightweight, high quality and affordability make the Pilot a superior 'workingman's bass'.

This article is an attempt to document the various Pilot bass models offered between its inception, in 1983, and its discontinuation, in 1995. But, as with all Guild instruments, the best that can be done is describe what typified the Pilot bass. As the old-timers at the Westerly, RI, factory have reminded me more than once, it was not unusual for them to arrive at work in the morning and be told, "today, we're going to do it this way"... and, with that, a change was instituted.

## MODELS AND SERIAL NUMBERS

### Models and Serial Numbers

For the purposes of this article, each element of the Pilot will be described with reference to its many model numbers. The distinctions between them are as follows:

**SB-600:** Along with the SB-601, SB-602, SB-603 and SB-604, the SB-600 was one of the original Pilot bass models, first offered in 1983. Based on serial number data provided by Guild, it may have remained in production through 1986. The SB-600 appears in a Guild catalog copyrighted in 1987. But, that is the sole evidence of its existence beyond 1986. It was distinguished from its counterparts by the two DiMarzio pickups installed in the typical P/J configuration.

The SB-600 serial numbers are preceded by 'BE', as are those of the 601, 602 and 603.

**SB-601:** Although I have never seen an example, most sources acknowledge the existence of this model. According to Ted Beesley's research, the SB-601 is a Pilot with a single active EMG P-type pickup. But, based on information provided by Willi Fritscher, who has managed the Guild factory for many years, it seems more likely that the 601 was a single 'P-pickup' version that featured the DiMarzio pickup. It was introduced in 1983 and discontinued at some point prior to 1987. In all likelihood, there were no SB-601's made after 1984.



Serial numbers begin with 'BE'.

**SB-602:** The SB-602s are probably the most common incarnations of the Pilot bass. They featured active EMGs in a P/J arrangement. While the 602 was produced in limited quantities with a full pick-

guard, typically it had none. It is differentiated from the SB-604 by its peghead shapes (details below).

The Pilot longest in production, the 602 was introduced in 1983 and discontinued in 1993. Serial numbers reflect the 'BE' prefix.

**SB-603:** This is the most vague of all Pilot models. It appears in some Guild records, but not in any catalogs that I have found. The Blue Book of Electric Guitars identifies the 603 as having three pickups, but offers no further explanation as to type or manufacture. At my request, Mr. Fritscher (manager of the Guild factory) dug into his archives and discovered that the 603 was a single "P-pickup" version (like the 601), using the EMG active pickup. He said that it was not a popular model, so only about 50 were ever made.



It seems that this model was first produced in 1983. And, it was discontinued prior to 1987. SB-603 serial numbers, I expect, would be preceded by the letters 'BE'

**SB-604:** The SB-604 is the second most popular model. With its active EMGs in the P/J configuration, in most respects, it is identical to the SB-602. But, unlike the 602, it sported a Charvel-like headstock (see below).

For some reason, Guild thought it appropriate to give the 604 the unique serial number prefix 'BH'. According to available information, this model was produced in 1983 and '84; discontinued for two years; then reintroduced and manufactured in '87 and '88.

**SB-605:** A 5-string version of the basic Pilot bass was introduced in 1986. According to serial numbers, 783 SB-605s were produced between that year and the end of 1993. A prefix of 'BK' was used in their numbering.

This 5-string model featured active EMG's in a J/J layout.



**SB-902:** The 900-series 'Advanced Pilots' first saw production in 1988 and continued through 1990. These basses had flamed maple bodies and bound ebony fingerboards, instead of the poplar and unbound rosewood that typified the 600-series. Pickups, on the SB-902 were active Bartolinis in a P/J arrangement.



The SB-902 prefix is 'JE'. Based on serial numbers, 195 of these instruments were made.



**SB-905:** Like its 4-string sibling, the 905 featured a flamed



## "Pilot bass – redesigned through and through"



maple body and ebony fingerboard. It also used Bartolini active pickups. But, like the other 5-string Pilots, it was only offered in a J/J configuration.



Odd as it may seem, the prefix 'JJ' was used in 1988 and 'JF' in '89. It appears that, over their two-year life-span, only nine instruments were made.



**Pro4:** Introduced in 1994 as the Pilot bass, "redesigned through and through", the Pro-series was another flamed maple version – this time with "scalloped cut-aways for easy access to the upper frets" and a 16" radius on the rosewood fingerboard. The headstock shape was modified (see below). But, the pickups were the tried and true EMG P/Js.



Produced in 1994 and '95,

the serial number prefix is 'AL'.

**Pro5:** The 5-string version of the Pro was identical to the 4-string, in most respects. Pickups were active EMGs in the J/J arrangement.

The Pro5 shared the 'AL' prefix with the Pro4.

### CONSTRUCTION AND FINISHES

**Body and Neck Materials:** The vast majority of Pilot basses have poplar bodies. The decision to use poplar may have been prompted by cost and availability of material. But, it resulted in several positive characteristics reflected in the instruments. Because of this design choice, the basses, as a whole, are extremely light-weight – sometimes to the point of being a bit 'neck-heavy'. And, because of the density and grain structure of poplar, Pilot basses have

good acoustical qualities – resulting in a great-sounding instrument when amplified.

The only other wood species used for Pilots was maple. The maple versions are not just maple tops and backs laminated to a poplar core. They are solid maple. As a result, the maple instruments have a distinctive (tighter, less warm) sound.

Both the SB-602 and 605 were offered in maple, as an option. This was reflected in the model designation by the addition of a trailing 'M' (i.e. SB-602M and SB-605M). I have seen examples of these that are both 'flamed' and straight grained.

The 900 series (SB-902 and SB-905) and the Pro series (Pro4 and Pro5) were only offered in flamed (or, occasionally, birdseye) maple.

Necks were always maple 'bolt-ons'. With a few variants mixed in, Pilot necks appear to be cut from a good quality rock maple species.



**Finish:** Early examples of the Pilot bass have been found with a lacquer finish. But, these certainly do not extend beyond 1984. The typical Pilot is sprayed with a two-part polyurethane, making it a real challenge for minor repairs. The only practical option (short of stripping and completely refinishing) is to first color the repair area, then use cyanoacrylate (crazy glue) for the top coats.

The poplar body models were available in sunburst, white, black, candy apple red, black sparkle, metallic blue, electric blue and purple. The maple body models were offered in amberburst, cherryburst, blueburst and transparent charcoal.

Necks are generally finished with a clear coat. Although, I have seen examples of SB-604s (Charvel-type peghead) on which the neck was finished to match the body of the guitar (black, blue, etc.).

**Fingerboards and markers:** All Pilots have a standard 34" scale. Most Pilots are found with a 14" radius rosewood fingerboard. The standard was jumbo frets and round dot inlay markers.

Fretless versions were available on all models. And, I suspect that when, in 1985, the "Jaco and Guild. Revolutionary and Evolutionary." ad campaign hit, the demand for fretless Pilots increased.

There was, apparently, also an optional maple fingerboard. I have seen examples of this in SB-602s. These were glued on fingerboards, rather than the Fender-style integrated fingerboard/neck in which the truss rod is inserted through a slot routed in the back of the neck.

The 900 series basses were constructed with an ebony fingerboard as standard. Because these were marketed as an upscale, 'advanced' version, rather than simple dot markers, they featured an inlaid rectangular marker with an included inverted triangle design.

With the introduction of the Pro series in 1994, the Pilots returned to rosewood with dots. The fingerboard radius, however, on the Pro was flattened to a 16-inch radius.

## PEGHEADS AND LOGOS

### Pegheads and Logos

All Pilot pegheads are of the flat Fender-style, relying on a variety of string hold-down devices to create angle and string tension. All Pilots also placed the truss rod adjustment nut at the peghead end, requiring a trussrod cover (see below). Most Pilots feature a black painted peghead face – the exceptions generally being maple body versions, which occasionally had pegheads painted to match the body (amberburst, etc.).

#### SB-600, 601, 602, 603, 605, 902, and 905:

These models all had one of two peghead shapes:

"The Foot" shape (as it was commonly referred to at the factory) has a concave curve on the treble side and ends in a rounded tip. 1983-1987.

The "Foot" peghead may have any of three logo versions: a) standard Guild (all upper case) peaked logo in gold (observed on an early '84 version); b) logo in script with an enlarged lower case 'g', the tail of which underlines the 'uild', in gold (seen on a late '84 example); and, c) same as 'b', but with the logo in white and the model 'Pilot' (all upper case) added (several '86 and '87 instruments).

"The Cake-knife" shape (factory term) has a generally straight treble side, curving just at the tip to reach a point at the extremity. 1987-1993.

All examples I have seen of the 'cake-knife' peghead have a common logo, in which 'Guild' is in script with an upper case 'G' and lower case 'uild'. The scripted connecting line for the 'uild' begins beneath the 'G'. This logo is in white and is accompanied by 'Pilot' (all caps), below. I have observed these features on versions ranging from '87 to '93.

#### SB-604:

The SB-604s have one of two very similar peghead shapes:

"The Hockey-stick" is a Charvel-type peghead on which the bass side has a scalloped transition from the nut to a straight side. And, the treble side goes directly from the nut to a severe angled straight side toward the tip. 1983-1987.

# "The "Meuller bridge" is, in the opinion of the guys who setup and repaired these basses for a living, the superior bridge."

This peghead may have either the 'peaked GUILD' or the script logo with the lower case 'g' (see above).

"The Hockey-stick variant" is a very similar shape. But, in an effort to reduce the severity of the string angle from the nut and yet afford sufficient head width at the tip for the G-string machine, an additional scalloped transition was added from the nut to the angle of the treble side. 1987-1988.

The 'hockey-stick variant' peghead had the script logo with the lower case 'g'. But, in at least one observed example, the upper case 'Pilot' text was eliminated from the logo.

**Pro4 and ProS:** These 'redesigned' models had a unique, somewhat smaller peghead: "The Pro peghead" features three concave

edges on the treble side: a short scallop from the nut to the full peghead width; a long scallop, extending the span of the tuning machines; and, another short scallop extending to the tip. 1994-1995.

It appears that all Pros were given the script logo with the upper case 'G' (see above).

## HARDWARE

**Nuts:** The nut on a Pilot is of the type that 'caps' the end of the fingerboard, rather than the Fender-style, which fits into a routed slot in the fingerboard, itself. To the best recollection of the factory repair people, this has always been of a micarta material. Yet, I have several examples from a range of years that appear, when filed, to be bone.

**Bridges:** Over the years, a variety of bridges have been used on the Pilot.

The first was the Schaller roller bridge (1983 – '84). Some of the earliest Schallers have no identifying markings on them. Later, a Guild script logo was added to the anchoring bar. These have appeared in both chrome and black. And, interestingly, the bridge finish is not always in agreement with that of the tuning machines. I have two full-pickguard SB-602s that have chrome Schaller bridges and black tuners.

The second, and most commonly found, bridge is referred to as the 'Meuller bridge' (1984 – 1994). This bridge was manufactured in 4 and 5-string versions by ABM – Muller & Sohn, KG in Germany. The bridge typically had a Guild logo (in both the all lower case and, later, the upper and lower case script ver-



sions). Mr. Muller recently advised us that, while they ceased production of this bridge in 1994, an apparently identical article is now being made by a Korean company.

The "Meuller bridge" is, in the opinion of the guys who setup and repaired these basses for a living, the superior bridge. And, having worked on a few, myself, I have to acknowledge that this is an outstanding piece of hardware.

It should be noted that an interim bridge, a Gotoh, was used from time to time. These are not common. But, those examples I have seen are in black.

Finally, there was a period in the mid-80s, during which the SB-602 and, perhaps, the SB-604 were offered with the Kahler 'bass tremolo'. Forged Classics in California manufactured this bridge. Scott Miller, of Forged Classics has advised me that, while they continue to make a guitar trem, they have not made the bass model since approximately 1994. This option was only offered on the 4-string Pilot.

While the people at the Guild factory can only recall the Kahler unit being installed in black, they have recently come across a chrome trem arm – which has caused them to consider that other finishes may have been shipped, at some point. Since our discussion, I have seen black Kahler trem bridges with chrome arms – which may explain the puzzling discovery.

The Pro series was offered with gold hardware. While most of the specimens I have seen have been black and/or chrome, the 900 series – and even the 600 series – from time to time, were also offered in gold.

**Tuning Machines:** Again, the 'standard' varied from time to time. Most pilots, down through the years, came with Grover mini-tuners. However, the Guild veterans have assured me that there was a period in which they were installing Gotoh 'minis'. I have two examples from 1984 to confirm the fact. It may be that the line began with Gotohs, in 1983, then the switch was made to Grover in 1984 or later.

Once again, the reader should be aware that

the color of the hardware was not always consistent from one end of the instrument to the other (chrome bridges were used with black tuners, etc.).

On the SB-605, when ordered for EADGC tuning, the option of an installed Hipshot "D-tuner" was offered for several years.

**String Retainers:** All Pilots came with string retainers. The early versions used the round button-type fixed retainers on the first two strings of the 4-string and the second and third strings of the 5-strings. These may be found in black, chrome or gunmetal gray.

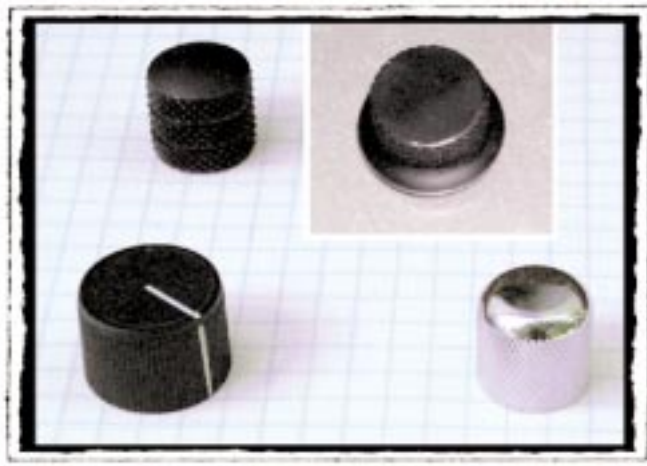
Later, Guild switched to the center post, dou-

**"the reader should be aware that the color of the hardware was not always consistent from one end of the instrument to the other"**

ble roller retainer. This was especially helpful on the 'hockeystick head' of the SB-604 to facilitate the severe redirection of the 1st string as it exited the nut groove.

**Strap Buttons:** It is unusual, in an article of this sort, to descend to level of detail that would include these items. But, the passion with which Guild repair people spoke on the topic makes it worth mentioning.

During most of the Pilot production, Guild used the typical round metal button in a variety of finishes. But, apparently, there was an interlude during which a plastic oval-headed "T" button was installed. The intent was that the extended 'ears' would keep straps from coming off inadvertently. The repairmen made it clear that the vast majority of these buttons broke, requiring that they be replaced with regularity.



**Pickguards:** Only the SB-602 was offered with a pickguard. To my knowledge, all pickguards were black and were made of a .093" (3/32"), five-ply black and white laminate. Both installed examples I have examined date from 1984. The full-pickguard option was discontinued shortly thereafter.

It should be noted that, of the six SB-602 pickguards I have seen, there are four different shape variations. These differences occur in the areas of the bridge cutout; the neck pocket cutout; and, the lower right extremity where the jack is installed. So, if the reader is seeking a replacement, he must be certain to obtain the right version.

Because the electronics on the full-pickguard SB-602 were installed through the front of the guitar, a small battery compartment was routed in the back – saving the owner the aggravation of having to remove the entire pickguard when the battery went dead. The closure for this compartment is a black plastic cover secured with four screws.

**Covers:** Truss rod covers are the shape of a tall isosceles triangle with the top cut off. They are attached with two screws. In order for the small screws to pull the cover down into the radius created by the neck/headstock transition, the cover must be fabricated of a very flexible plastic sheet. I have an early specimen (BE100153) on which I found a very handsome two-ply cover. The bottom ply is in white and slightly larger than the top black ply – creating a white outline or a multi-ply effect. But, apparently, this construction became too tedious for production. As, subsequent ver-

sions all appear to be of a .020" single black sheet.

Electronics compartment covers are all of the same irregular amoeba shape. They are made variously of .062" or .093" solid black sheet and are secured with four black flathead pick-guard screws. When replacing these covers, it is advisable to use the thicker material, as the top screw hole has a tendency to breakout through the edge of the cover.

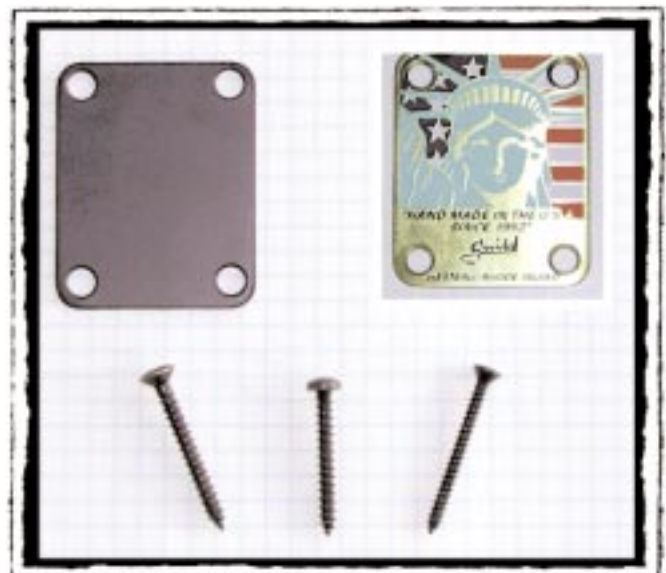
**Knobs:** There are four different knobs that were used over the history of the Pilot.

The first is a black knob, the size and shape of a 'speed knob', with a white indicator line on the top and side. I have seen this knob only on full pickguard models from 1983-84.

The second knob is a 'witch hat' or 'bell knob' that was also in black. I have not seen an example of this knob on a Pilot bass. But, I have been told by the Guild repair people that it was used – probably also in the early years.

The third and fourth knobs were both knurled metal 'dome knobs'. The one used most extensively has relatively fine knurling and is distinguishable by two grooves in the knurling that encircle the knob. These appeared on instruments as early as 1984 and were used through the final days of production.

The other dome knob has coarser knurling; no grooves. These may have been substitutes from an alternate supplier, as they appear at





various times in the manufacturing history, with examples of the grooved dome knob occurring before and after. These knobs were used in black, chrome and gold.

**Neck Backing Plates:** The backing plates for the bolt-on necks were typically black, symmetrical four-hole plates. At various times, a plastic insulating piece of the same shape was used in conjunction with the backing plate. But, at one time, a commemorative neck plate was used. This plate featured an image of the Statue of Liberty. The inscription read, "Hand made in the USA since 1952. Guild. Westerly, Rhode Island".

The neck screws are items worth noting. While working on Pilots, I have occasionally come across necks secured with 'panhead' screws. Thinking an earlier repairman had replaced the screws with leftovers, I removed the panheads and put 'ovalhead' screws in their places. But, I have recently learned from people in the Guild repair department that the panheads were sometimes used on new instruments at the factory. I was relieved to hear that they also used panheads just as often.

The neck screws are of a larger diameter than those used on Fender and other basses. So, if you do replace them, make sure you use a screw of the same size rather than risk the possibility of a smaller screw pulling out of the hole.

## ELECTRONICS

**Pickups:** There have been three manufacturers' pickups used on Pilot basses over the years. The earliest models, the SB-600 and SB-601, introduced in 1983, used pickups made by DiMarzio. They were installed in P/J and P configurations, respectively. Willi Fritscher, of Guild, told me that after 1984 only EMG pickups were purchased. So, while there may have been some residual inventory of DiMarzio pickups, it is unlikely that large quantities of 600's or 601's were produced, thereafter.

The vast majority of Pilots have featured EMG active pickups. The EMG's played a major role in creating the popularity of these basses and certainly made a big contribution to the Pilot's characteristic sound. The SB-603 sported a

single EMG split P-type pickup and saw very limited production. The SB-602 and SB-604, and subsequently the Pro4 (1994), used an EMG P-type pickup in the neck position and an EMG 'J' in the bridge position. The SB-605 and the Pro5 (five-strings) employed two active EMG J-type pickups.

One of the most intriguing stories in the history of the Pilot involves the installation of the EMG P-pickups. According to Charlie Lavallee, who started with Guild in 1979, one day in 1984 Al Dronge came out into the shop and told them that he had been thinking about what the bass would sound like if the two pickup halves were reversed (with the bass coil being closer to the bridge and the treble closer to the neck). Dronge liked the sound of the prototype they made and directed the workers to put the change into production. Apparently the novelty was too much of a shift for the buying public, because examples produced at the end of '84 reflect the typical P-pickup arrangement.

In 1988 through 1990, Guild offered a special version of the Pilot, designated as the SB-902. The 902 featured Bartolini active pickups in the familiar P/J arrangement. During the same period, a 5-string model was produced, the SB-905. The 905, likewise used Bartolinis but in a J/J configuration. These pickups can be used very effectively in a 'passive' mode by switching or bypassing the pre-amp.

**Controls:** The controls for the Pilot have remained very simple and consistent through the years. The single pickup models had one volume and one tone. Most of the two-pickup models (SB-600; 602; 604; 605; 902 and 905) used two volume and one tone knob.

The Pro4 and Pro5, in 1994 and 1995 added a level of sophistication by converting to a single 'circuit board' preamp with four control knobs (two volume and two tone) integrated into it.

## CASES

Pilot basses have always been shipped in a hardshell case. Most of these are the easily identified brown rectangular cases with white



piping and the Guild logo. A company called Bass Case supplied these cases. At some point in the mid-90's, Bass Case was acquired by TKL. And, Guild continued to use them as a vendor through their new parent company.

As with anything Guild-related, there are exceptions. During the years of production, some molded plastic cases were shipped. I have one in stock, for example, that was manufactured by SKB. It has the early 'peaked Guild' logo on it.

## COMMENTS

**Favorites:** Having examined and played a wide variety of Pilots, in preparation for this article, I must say that I love the appearance of the full-pickguard SB-602. And, a black full-pickguard, with a maple fingerboard, is stunning. The somewhat classic Jazz Bass shape with a smaller body size is, aesthetically, a beautiful instrument.

But, my preference for sound is the mundane poplar body with the rosewood fingerboard.

**Playability:** : All of the Pilot basses were extremely playable instruments. Their lightweight construction makes them a pleasure to play, set after set. Whether a poplar body or the optional solid maple was used, all of the instruments 'weighed in' between eight and nine pounds.

The maple neck contour is extremely comfortable. Its width is moderate – somewhere between the beefy P-bass and the 'too-slight' Starfire necks. And, Guild has a reputation for shipping well-setup instruments.

If there is a flaw to the Pilot design, it is balance. With lightweight poplar body, the instruments have a tendency to 'head-dive'. And, a number of weighting and strap button relocation solutions have been employed, over the years, to counter. The solid maple bodies, of course, reduce this tendency substantially.

**Sound:** When considering the sound of the Pilot, I think first of the prevalent poplar-body/rosewood fingerboard instruments with EMG P/J pickups. Despite the pedestrian perception of poplar, its acoustical qualities

result in a resonant, great-sounding bass. In combination with the rosewood 'board', the bass is a warm-voiced instrument. Add the active EMG's, and you have a wide range of tonal versatility, with plenty of punch to cut through.

Replacing the rosewood with a maple fingerboard reduces the warmth, producing a tighter, throatier, sound. Changing the body to solid maple, with its fine grain structure, tightens the sound further. While it is not my personal preference in a bass, it is a great tonal quality for jazz and fusion applications.

## USER ENDORSEMENTS

Within the published Guild catalogs and literature, there are a couple of recognizable Pilot players: Greg Rzab and Kevin O'Neil (bassman for Tracy Chapman). Of his 605, O'Neil is quoted as saying, Comfortable neck, smooth action, hot sound. Great contour, streamlined design, feels comfortable. With the low B string, I am able to get to the bottom of the music – places where only keyboard players dare to tread. If finding a direction in music and expressing it to others is your goal, the Guild Pilot five-string is my compass and steering wheel.

Beyond this formal list, the Guild folks recalled a number of noteworthy Pilot players: Gary Talent, of Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band; the bassman from Bon Jovi; and, John Mellencamp's bass player. They added, with some certainty, that Mark Mendoza of Twisted Sister still uses his Pilot bass regularly.

But, certainly the most intriguing endorsement is that of Jaco Pastorius. In Guitar Player's September 1985 issue, Guild ran an ad featuring Jaco. The headline read, Jaco & Guild. Evolutionary & Revolutionary. The subtext said, See the revolutionary aluminum Guild/Hartke speakers wherever Jaco performs with his evolutionary Guild Pilot Bass. It also offers a "bass clinic video with Jaco". The photo is of Jaco playing a fretless SB-602. He is standing in front of a Guild/Hartke 4x10 or 4x12 cabinet.

Of course, we all associate Jaco with a Fender Jazz bass – with the frets removed. But, this

ad ran during his tumultuous years. Jaco died only two years later. One can only speculate as to the circumstances surrounding this endorsement. I have tried to locate the photographer with no success.

## **CREDITS** **Credits**

The detail and accuracy of this article was made possible only by the help offered and patience demonstrated by the folks at Guild. Bob LaValley has worked in many facets of the Guild operation, from production to final inspection and now in repair. His tenure with the company stretches from 1977 to '90, then from 1997 to the present. Charlie Lavallee also possesses great breadth of experience at Guild, working from 1979 to '89 and from 1997 to today. Paul Dutra, a relative short-timer, came to Guild in 1992. But, his presence during the period of the Pro4 and 5 production proved invaluable. And, Willi Fritscher, long-time manager of the facility in Westerly, RI, was most gracious in digging into his recollections and written records to resolve plaguing questions.

Special thanks to Julie Lim, VP and General Counsel at Fender, for clearing paths and facilitating my research.

Thanks also to Ted Beesley and George Gruhn for their earlier, intentionally less specific, works. These publications provided a helpful background against which I could assemble and compare information.

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