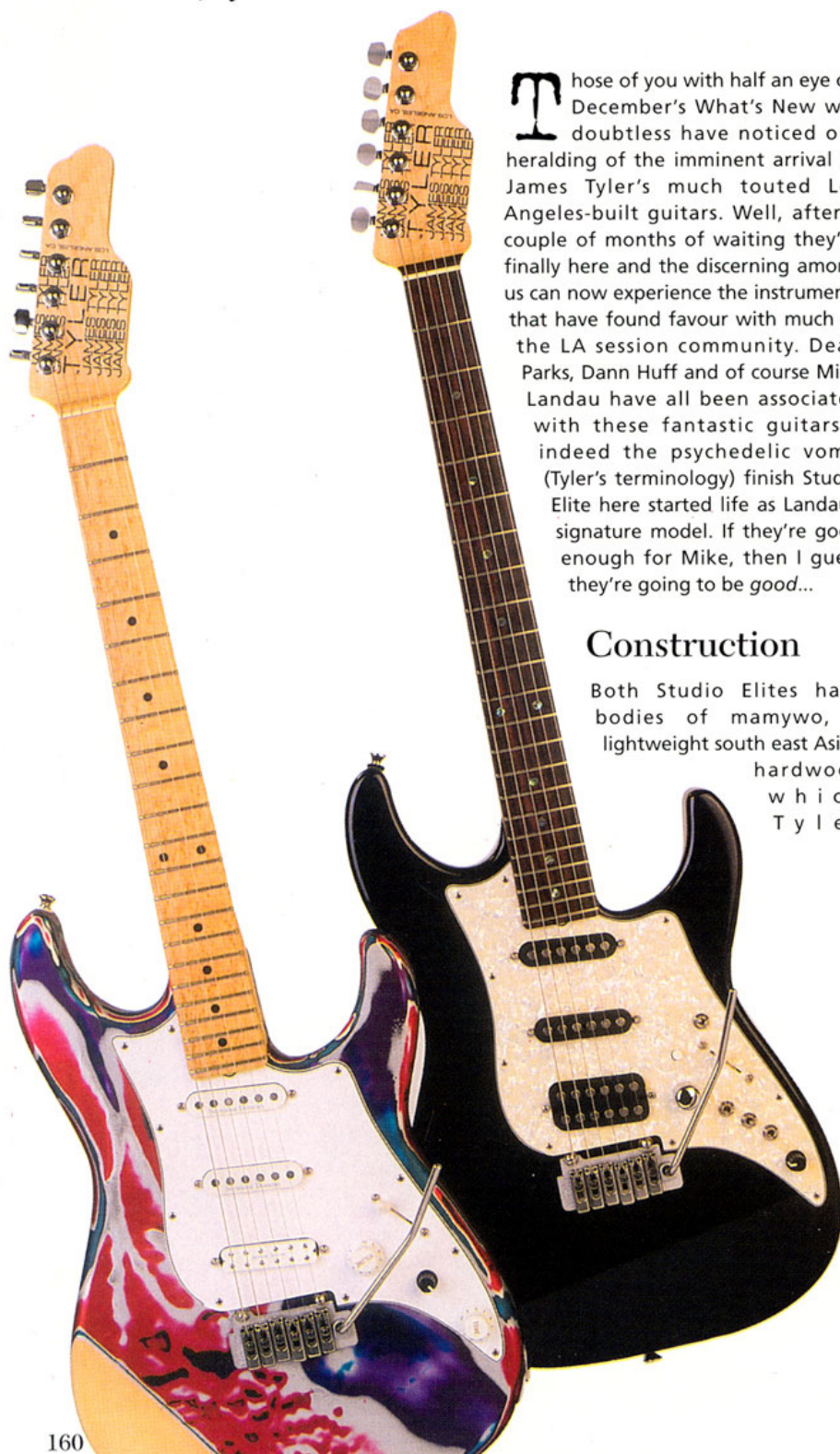


This cool California luthier has picked up some serious endorsees, including the amazing Mike Landau. But do his weird and wonderful guitars live up to their fabulous reputation?

Prices: £1,865 – £1,995

Review by Jordan McLachlan



Those of you with half an eye on December's What's New will doubtless have noticed our heralding of the imminent arrival of James Tyler's much touted Los Angeles-built guitars. Well, after a couple of months of waiting they're finally here and the discerning among us can now experience the instruments that have found favour with much of the LA session community. Dean Parks, Dann Huff and of course Mike Landau have all been associated with these fantastic guitars – indeed the psychedelic vomit (Tyler's terminology) finish Studio Elite here started life as Landau's signature model. If they're good enough for Mike, then I guess they're going to be good...

Construction

Both Studio Elites have bodies of mamywo, a lightweight south east Asian hardwood which Tyler

Spec Check

Tyler Studio Elite Psychedelic Vomit

Price:	£1,865 (options extra)
Country of manufacture:	USA
Body:	mamywo
Neck:	birdseye maple
Fingerboard:	maple
Frets:	22
Scale length:	648mm
Neck width at nut:	43mm
Body width:	320mm
Weight:	3.5kgs
Pickups:	Seymour Duncan Jeff Beck Junior, 2 x Seymour Duncan Classic Stacks
Switching:	5-way selector, mid boost preamp (optional)
Finish:	psychedelic vomit
Case:	£75 extra

apparently uses for its extraordinarily even tone. Mamywo may be a lightweight material but the black Studio Elite is in no danger of floating away in a stiff breeze, thanks to the amount of electronics inside (more of which in a moment). The psychedelic vomit model sports less internal trickery and is consequently a little lighter, but both weigh in at under four kilos, not exactly cripplingly heavy. Both are exceptionally comfortable thanks to the dressing away both of the ribcage area and the smooth contouring of the rear of each cutaway – the black one is so beautifully done it looks like it could have been cast this way.

Both SEs have birdseye maple necks – the black one's is nicely peppered all the way up, whereas our psychedelic friend is rather more subtly figured, with just a grouping of eyes behind the fifth fret area. Both are equally stupendous to play, however. The one immediate aspect of the necks that several of us commented on was the worn-in feel that the SEs share with the Music Man Van Halen model. For those who have played one of those wondrous guitars, no further explanation is needed; for those who haven't, let me elucidate.



Psychedelic Vomit features JB Jr at bridge, plus mid boost control

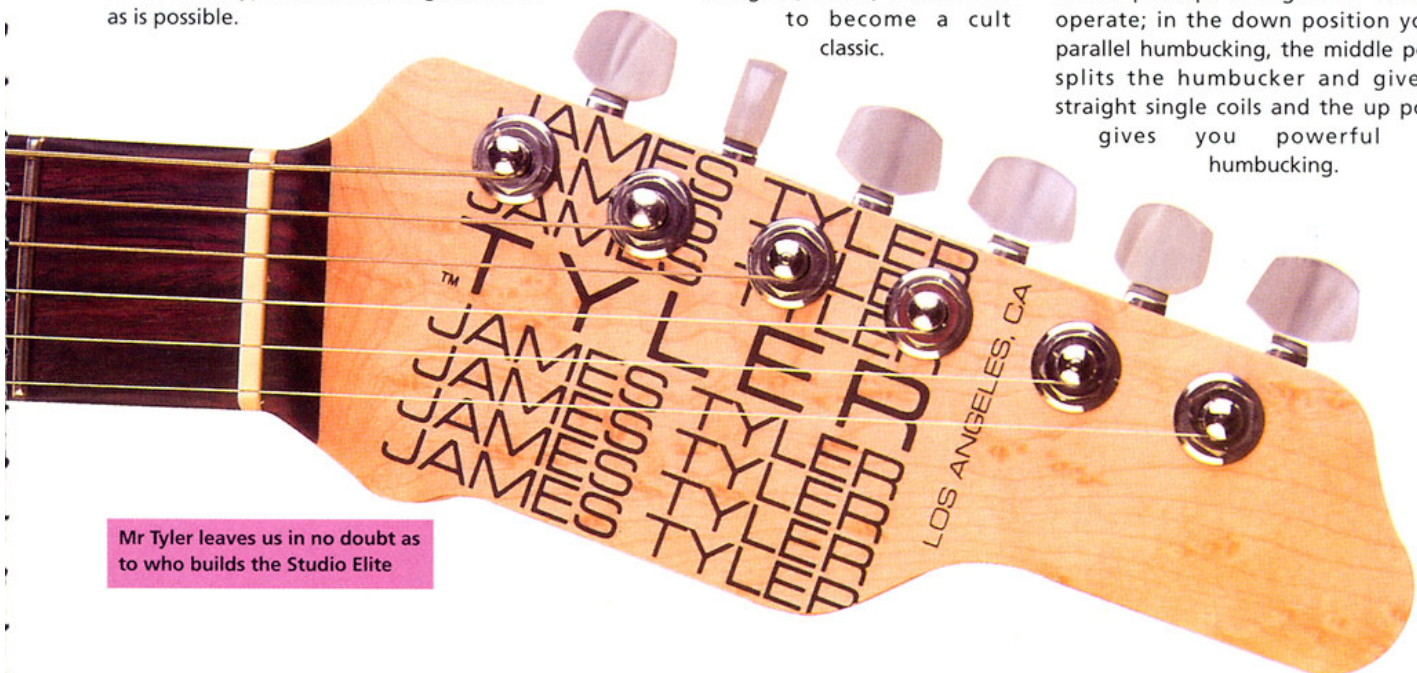
There's no room for debate where the quality of the SEs' hardware is concerned; both tremos are Wilkinson non-locking systems, which I would actually choose over the locking version – these are easier to set up and they're nice and smooth in action. Tuning stability is helped by locking machineheads and a seemingly very slippery nut – both Elites coped admirably with any amount of tremolo usage that I could muster.

Things get really interesting when we start looking at the electrics; the psychedelic vomit SE sports three Seymour Duncans – two Classic Stacks in the front two positions and a Jeff Beck Jr at the bridge, although you can specify a Hot Rails if you so desire. The slight departure from the norm is the unassuming little black knob between the standard volume and tone controls, but the ace in the Elite's hole is a mid boost preamp (made by Demeter to Tyler's spec) which this pot gives access to.

Where the black Studio Elite is concerned, things get even more exciting – it positively bristles with mini switches and push pots in addition to the expected 5-way and there's still more to this guitar than meets the eye. Underneath the pearly scratchplate lie two dummy pickups, which can be switched in to give access to true humbucking sounds. To start at the beginning, however, the scratchplate-mounted pickups are Tyler's own – two single coils and a humbucker, and these are allied to both the 5-way and the three mini switches behind the volume control. The mini switches don't actually select pickups but govern how they operate; in the down position you get parallel humbucking, the middle position splits the humbucker and gives you straight single coils and the up position gives you powerful series humbucking.

The VH's profile was copied from one of Eddie's old necks – with 20 years of wear built in – and these are similar. The fingerboard edges are gently dressed away and the ends of the 22 medium to large frets are rounded off perfectly and as a result they both feel worn and friendly as soon as you pick them up. It really is astonishing what a difference a little attention to this area of the instrument makes to its playability. The profile of the necks themselves is pretty spot on too; they're smooth and slim, without being weedy, and about as close to the archetypal modern rock guitar neck as is possible.

The headstock, however, is about as far removed as it would surely want to be. Just as the necks elicited nothing but praise, so the headstock prompted almost unanimous derision. I think it's a combination of factors; the sheer amount of wood there, the somehow half-finished look of the thing and the nagging feeling that the logo is just James going mad with Letraset. However, it is so obviously not trying to be pretty, or clever, or anything other than completely different and mental that I must admit to having a soft spot for it. Ignore any clamour for you to change it, James, it's destined to become a cult classic.



Mr Tyler leaves us in no doubt as to who builds the Studio Elite

The headstock is so obviously not trying to be pretty, or clever, or anything other than completely different

James Tyler Studio Elites

► The 5-way still chooses which pickup(s) you're actually using, and this little system means you're spoilt with a *huge* range of sounds. And that's before you bring the mid boost into play; the actual unit is the same as in the psychedelic vomit version, the only difference being that the black SE has a push switch to bring it in, so you can preset a gain boost and access it at the push of a button. *Finally*, the mini switch in isolation next to the 5-way switches

you straight to the rear humbucker in series to give you instant clout for solos. It looks complicated, but after a couple of minutes it all makes perfect sense. Promise.

Having got this far without mentioning the finishes of the Studio Elites, now is probably the time to do it. The psychedelic vomit is completely mad and random and the resulting emerald green, crimson and silver swirls are quite gorgeous – or deeply repulsive, depending on your own aesthetic tastes. Me, I love it. One aspect of the finish that makes it so appealing is that it's satin, instead of the mirror gloss or oiled finishes that we've become so used to, and the silky smoothness of this SE is both novel and attractive. The other Studio Elite I've referred to as being black thus far, but it is in fact finished in what Tyler call 'midnight', due to the glitter that remains hidden until the guitar catches the light. It's subtle but very pretty and the standard of the overall finishing is absolutely flawless – the smoothness of the contouring coupled with the glass-like black gloss makes the rear of the instrument look almost liquid.

In Use

With the construction quality of these Studio Elites being so high, one expects great things of them when you plug them in. The acoustic response of each certainly bodes well – they're loud and round and sustain is quite considerable. If we start with the rather more straightforward psychedelic vomit model it quickly becomes apparent that, electrified, the guitar actually gets better. The Seymour Duncans go a long way to making it sound great of course; the Classic Stacks are warm and smooth, without any hint of muddiness and dialling in the midrange boost provides a healthy extra fatness. With the neck pickup plus preamp boost I got about as close to a proper jazz guitar sound as you can with a solid body and there was still no unpleasant nasal middliness. The Jeff Beck Jr is a truly excellent little pickup – there's a nice clarity to it and an awful lot of oomph available from the preamp boost, the use of which doesn't rob it of any top end. The mammywo body, it would seem, goes a long way towards providing an impressively even response across the whole neck – adventures up at the dusty end pop out as clearly as riffs on the lower strings, which would make this a fantastic recording guitar.

If you need access to bucketfuls of excellent sounds in the studio, the midnight Studio Elite is the one to go for. From the sheer crunch of the rear pickup in series to the neck pickup with the dummy pickup switched in – which sounds just like Carlos, incidentally – this baby does it all. With the addition of the split coil facility and the ability to switch the humbuckers to operate in parallel, all manner of snappy country sounds and Hendrixy fluidity present themselves. As mentioned earlier, the switches make perfect sense once you've played around with them for a bit, although I don't see this as the ideal stage guitar, unless you're terribly deft of finger.

Playability on both is excellent, as you'd expect; neither guitar came with an action lying on the frets, and as a result they put up enough fight to make them feel real, but not too much to get in the way of high speed pursuits. ►



The full glory of James' psychedelic vomit finish (note 9v battery compartment)

James Tyler Studio Elites

► Conclusion

These guitars both sound fabulous. They play extremely well, they're wonderfully built and as a result they went down a storm in the office – obvious comments regarding headstock design and the psychedelic vomit finish aside. The main reason for my deep affection for these two, and particularly the psychedelic model, is their blatant individualism. While a lot of high class American rock

guitars are very pretty, sound great and play marvellously, they can be a little bland, but these two just ooze attitude.

They're not cheap, but I can't imagine anyone needing anything more from a traditionally styled guitar and if you want something a little more modern you can avail yourself of the myriad options that Tyler offer. If you're looking to spend this kind of money on a guitar of this ilk, Tyler should be right at the very top of your very short shortlist. ■

Spec Check

Tyler Studio Elite Midnight

Price: £1,995 (options extra)
Country of manufacture: USA
Body: manywo
Neck: birdseye maple
Fingerboard: rosewood
Frets: 22
Scale length: 648mm
Neck width at nut: 43mm
Body width: 320mm
Weight: 4kg
Pickups: Tyler humbucker, Tyler single coils x 2, plus two dummy pickups under scratchplate at neck and middle
Switching: 5-way selector, parallel/split/series 3-way mini switches for each pickup, mid boost rotary plus optional mid boost switch, 'straight to bridge humbucker in series' switch (optional)
Finish: midnight (black with glitter); figured exotic tops, 'Jimburst' and sunburst options
Case: £75 extra

Contact: The Home Of Tone, PO Box 404, Newcastle Upon Tyne NE5 1YZ. Tel: 0191 267 3175.



The 'pilot section' of the midnight Studio Elite

A large, colorful advertisement for Jim Harley. The background is a collage of various images, including a hand holding a pen, a guitar, and abstract patterns. The word 'IMAGINE' is written in large, red, block letters across the center. Below the word, there is a white banner with the text: '+ + stop dreaming <stop> jim harley available now + +'. The overall aesthetic is psychedelic and artistic.

send SAE for further info to Barnes & Mullins Ltd 155 Grays Inn Road London WC1X 8UF Tel 0171 278 4631 Fax 0171 837 2784