





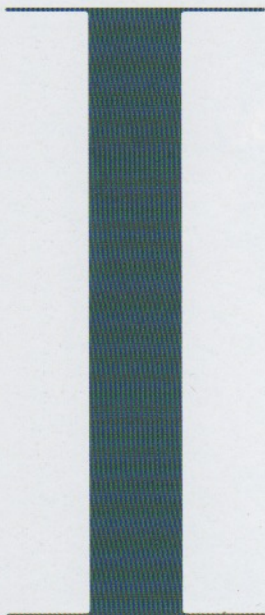
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ERNIE BOCH JR. MAY PRESIDE OVER A MULTIBILLION-DOLLAR AUTO-DEALER EMPIRE IN BOSTON, BUT HIS TRUE PASSION IS HIS IMPRESSIVE GUITAR COLLECTION.

story MAC RANDALL

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IF YOU LIVE IN EASTERN NEW ENGLAND AND HAVE EVER WATCHED TELEVISION OR LISTENED TO THE RADIO, YOU KNOW WHO ERNIE BOCH JR. IS. HE'S THE GUY WHO WANTS TO SELL YOU A CAR. JUST A FEW MILES SOUTHWEST OF BOSTON, IN NORWOOD, MASSACHUSETTS, BOCH PRESIDES OVER A MINI EMPIRE CALLED THE AUTOMILE, WHICH COMPRISES SEVEN DEALERSHIPS RANGING FROM TOYOTA TO MASERATI. TOGETHER, THEY HAVE RACKED UP ANNUAL SALES IN THE BILLIONS, MAKING BOCH ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL CAR SALESMEN IN AMERICA.

The 55-year-old businessman has poured a significant chunk of that Automile money into a six-acre estate, located down the road from his car lots. The brick mansion at the center of the property was built in the late Twenties for a member of one of the Bay State's leading families, the Endicotts, and had been vacant for a decade when Boch bought it in 1997. Over the next 14 years, he embarked on a \$30 million renovation campaign that expanded the house from 8,000 to 16,000 square feet.

Today, the Boch residence has five bedrooms, six bathrooms, an indoor pool that's heated by a geothermal pump, a wine cellar, and a five-million-dollar touchscreen-controlled electronics system that regulates everything from lights to heat to the music that emanates from 300 speakers throughout the house. It also holds his impressive collection of more than 80 notable guitars. Boch's fortune may have come from selling automobiles, of which he owns several choice examples, including a Bentley Mul-sanne, a Ferrari 612 Scaglietti, a silver 1983 DeLorean,

and a striking purple 2010 Allard; but it turns out that his favorite possessions have six strings, not six cylinders.

"Every guitar is its own story," Boch says with barely disguised wonder, in an accent straight out of *Good Will Hunting* or *The Departed*. With his wavy shoulder-length hair, goatee, and black-rimmed glasses, he certainly doesn't look like a stereotypical car dealer—more like a brunet version of Sammy Hagar. "You could give one person a guitar and he'll say it's the greatest in the world. Then you could give someone else that same guitar and he'll hate it. It's such a personal thing."

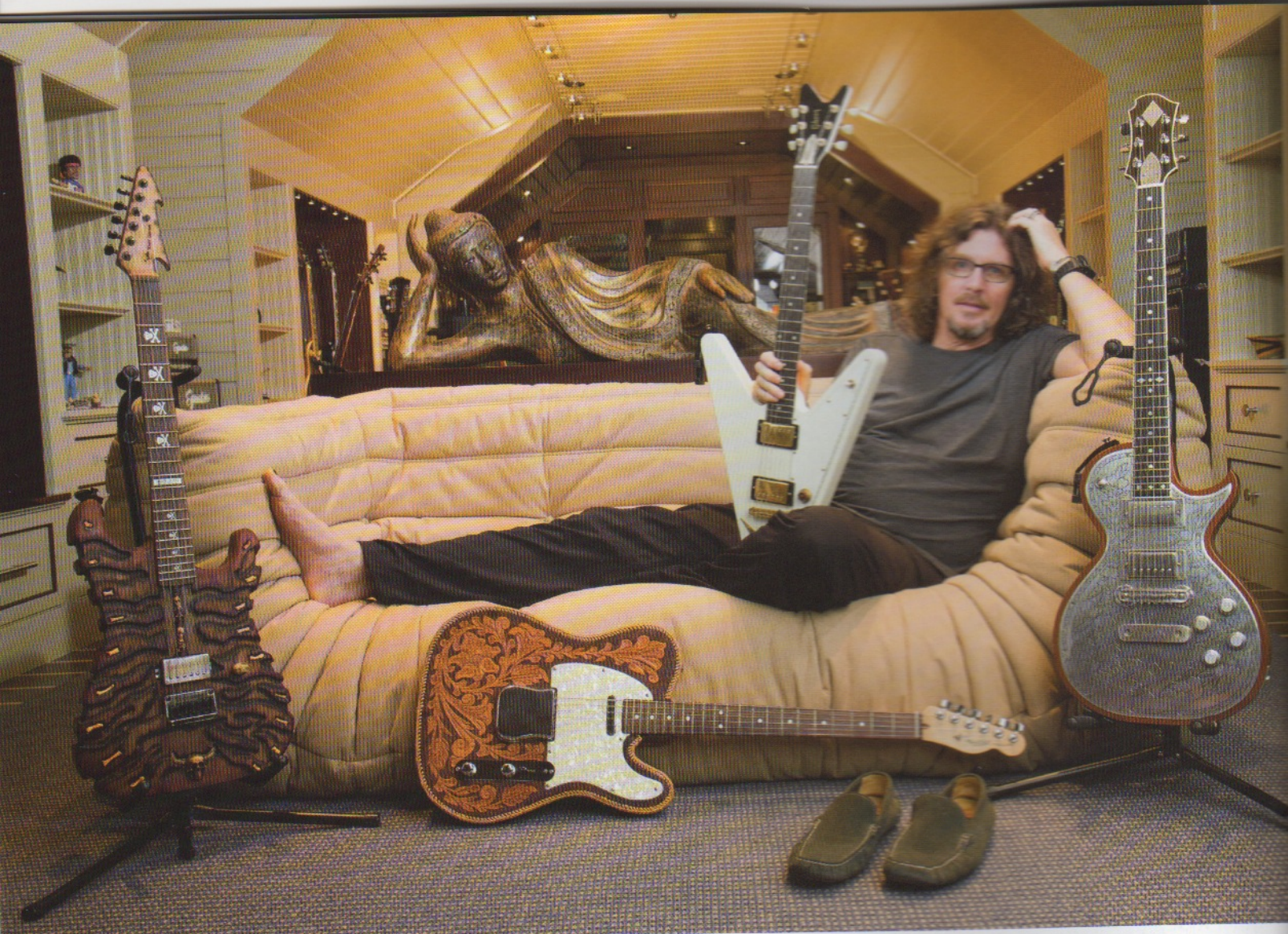
Although guitars are found all over Boch's property, the highest concentration of instruments is on the top floor of what he calls a "carriage house"—in reality a climate-controlled man cave par excellence. Here, a drool-worthy gathering that includes new and vintage Martins, Gibsons, and Fenders is on display in dark wooden cases that line the building's two longest walls, on stands under the eaves, and even in the bathroom behind the wet bar. Not a single guitar is behind glass, and Boch encourages interested visitors to pick up and play whatever they like, no matter how much it's worth.

"They all get played," he says, grabbing a custom Martin J-40 covered with ornate pearl inlays that depict the history of aviation from the Wright brothers to the space shuttle. It retailed for \$150,000, but Boch "made a deal" (details unspecified) with an acquaintance who works at Guitar Center. "I don't buy guitars to put them away," he says. "I keep them fully strung and tuned, always. I don't think of them as investments; they're instruments, and they're meant to be used."



When I buy a guitar, it has to be pretty special, something I'll want to have around for a while."

An avid guitarist from age 12 and an alumnus of Boston's Berklee College of Music, Boch long intended to become a professional musician. "Listening to AM radio in the late Sixties inspired me," he recalls. "And then in the early Seventies I heard Led Zeppelin, Jeff Beck, the Allman Brothers. I loved all that stuff. What I really wanted to do was make music like Neil Young: rock, but with folk and country elements to it."



At home with (from left) his Mr. Scary Headhunter, a Fender Telecaster with a custom-tooled leather cover, a 2007 Gibson Reverse Flying V, and a Seventies-era Zemaitis formerly owned by Nuno Bettencourt; (previous pages) with his Martin 19th century conversion model

One especially cherished item in Boch's collection—a 1971 cherry-finish Gibson ES-335—is a regular reminder of those early ambitions. It's the first electric guitar he ever bought, which would be reason enough for his attachment to it. However, his feelings for the instrument are bolstered further by the fact that it's had an exciting history without him. First, good buddy Joey Kramer of Aerosmith borrowed it to write some songs in the late Eighties. Then there was a fire at Kramer's house, which led to many of his possessions being dispersed. "After a few years, I stopped asking Joey about the guitar," Boch says, "because he never could say where it had gone. Then one day he called me and said, 'I found your guitar!' I said, 'Where was it?' He said, 'It ended up with Joe.'" That would be Joe Perry.

Boch picks up the 335 and points to something inside its left-hand f-hole: it's a numbered sticker, he explains, the sort that Aerosmith's crew customarily uses to identify band gear. "Somewhere along the way it became part of Joe's inventory," he continues. "I'd actually seen him playing it at shows, and I'd even thought, That looks a lot like mine. But no, it *can't* be. When Joe gave it back to me, I asked him about it. He

said, 'You know, I always wondered where that guitar came from. It plays nice!'"

Sadly, Boch's young dreams of rock stardom didn't pan out as planned. "I was in bands in the Seventies and Eighties," he says, "but I never hooked up with the right people, and I couldn't make any money. After a while, I just didn't like it any more." And so he joined the family automotive business run by his father, Ernie Boch Sr., who made a name for himself in the Sixties and Seventies with his frantic TV ads urging potential customers to "Come on down!" (years before Bob Barker made those words his tag line on *The Price Is Right*). The elder Boch was something of a pioneer in creative advertising. At one time or another, his spots involved llamas, sledgehammers smashing through windshields, and a "magical" donkey named Kramer.

Like his dad, who died in 2003, Boch Jr. has maintained a strong interest in media promotion, and he's become a minor New England celebrity, appearing as a regular guest on radio talk shows, creating a series of animated short films featuring his family (one son, one daughter, one now-divorced wife), and introducing monster movies on local TV in full Halloween makeup. With all this, plus



In his 2010 Allard
with his 1938
Gibson L-Century

a multibillion-dollar company to oversee, he finds it hard to make time for music. "I literally stopped playing," he acknowledges. "Years would go by between the times I'd pick up a guitar."

But the year 2006 brought major changes for Boch the musician. "It all started when I got a call from the Boston Pops," he says. "They were asking well-known people from around the city to play with the orchestra for a benefit concert. I hadn't played guitar for five years at that point. *Five years*. But I said to myself, What the fuck, I'll give it a shot." With a little help from an old friend, vaunted guitarist and Berklee professor Jon Finn, Boch ended up taking the stage at Boston's Symphony Hall and delivering a rendition of a Mike Stern tune that was, he says, "actually pretty good."

That brief taste of performance after so many years away clearly set something in motion. Within a couple of months, thanks to mutual connections and a little good luck, Boch was playing in a blues-rock band alongside two original members of the group Boston—guitarist Barry Goudreau and drummer Sib Hashian—and saxophonist Michael Antunes, formerly of John Cafferty and the

Beaver Brown Band. Dubbed Ernie and the Automatics, the band made its live debut warming up for Los Lobos on Cape Cod. For their second gig, Ernie and the Automatics opened for B.B. King. They subsequently cut two CDs—the first, *Low Expectations*, made the Top 10 in *Billboard's* Blues Albums chart—and toured regularly for the next five years.

"Playing gigs gave me an unbelievable shot of adrenaline, the kind of thrill you'd otherwise have to jump out of a plane or wrestle an alligator to get," Boch says with a grin. "I just wanted to keep on doing it. One year, we played over 200 gigs."

And that's how the guitar collecting started. "When you're on the road," Boch explains, "one of two things can happen during the day: you get in trouble or you don't. I started using all that down time to hit music stores. Every town we'd be in, I'd go into a store and be like, Whoa! This stuff is great! I really caught the bug."

Besides purchasing various examples of the expected classics—Telecasters, Stratocasters, Les Pauls, SGs, a mint-condition 1968 Rickenbacker 360—Boch began to indulge a taste for the bizarre. "I enjoy finding designs that

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*I don't buy guitars to put them away.
I keep them fully strung and tuned, always."*

were utter flops," he says. For starters, there's his 2007 Gibson Reverse Flying V, with the body wings pointing up instead of down. "This is a totally impractical guitar," he says. "How can you even play it comfortably? But I love it."

A few feet away from the Reverse V is a limited-edition Gibson Holy Explorer from 2009, which, as its name suggests, has seven large holes cut out of its mahogany body. Then there's the custom Mr. Scary Headhunter, designed for Boch by George Lynch, its Strat-style alder body decked out with skulls made of real bone and a murky finish that allegedly contains snake blood. A Tennessee electric quadruple-neck comprising a mandolin, banjo, bass, and guitar takes up a substantial amount of real estate in one corner. Across the hall are two more rarities: a pair of Seventies Zemaitis solidbody electrics with intricately engraved metal tops, both formerly owned by Extreme's Nuno Bettencourt, with signatures on the back of their headstocks to prove it. "I asked Nuno to do that," Boch explains. "I said, 'If I buy 'em, you gotta sign 'em.' He's a good friend."

Following a month-long U.S. theater tour with Deep Purple in 2011, Boch shut down Ernie and the Automatics. "It was a lot of fun, but it was just too much to keep things going at that level," he says. His collecting fixation has continued, however. These days, he's focused almost exclusively on acoustics, which he can mess around on at home without having to plug in. This has coincided with Boch's renewed interest in folk and acoustic blues. The day *Guitar Aficionado* comes to visit, he's selected a soundtrack on the in-house Meridian Sooloos system that's dominated by Delta legend Furry Lewis (a recent discovery—"I don't know how I missed him until now!") and early Bob Dylan.

"I've come full circle," Boch says. "I always liked acoustic music, and I played it for years. Then in high school, everyone wanted to plug in and play rock, so I did too. But in the last couple of years I've gone right back to where I started."

Among Boch's latest acoustic acquisitions are a gorgeous trio of Martin parlor guitars: one from 1929, one from 1919, and a recent conversion model, one of about a dozen that contain recycled parts from 19th century Martins. A weathered 1938 Gibson L-Century stands next to its 2008 clone, the Elvis Costello Century of Progress signature model. "I bought those two in the same store at the same time," Boch says. "I was originally just going to get the old one, but then seeing the two together, I couldn't resist."

This is just one example of Boch's deep interest in artist replica and signature models. That fascination takes its most extreme form in his set of all four Eric Clapton Crossroads Collection guitars issued in 2013 by Martin, Fender, and Gibson, including the "Brownie" Strat, the "Lucy" Les Paul, the 000-28EC, and the 000-45EC. Boch also owns a Fender Clapton Blackie replica Strat (which he used frequently onstage with the Automatics), a Stevie Ray Vaughan Lenny tribute Strat (sans the SRV pickguard, which he swapped out for a more modest design), a Rory Gallagher replica Strat ("His sweat was so acidic that it burned the finish off the guitar," Boch marvels), an Andy Summers replica Tele, a Slash signature sunburst Les Paul, and a George Harrison signature Gretsch Duo Jet, among many others.

When the house Boch lives in was originally built, it stood on a 500-acre plot of land. Over time, that acreage dwindled away, but Boch is trying to restore the estate to something approaching its original form by gradually buying up surrounding houses, then knocking them down. He is now tantalizingly close to owning the whole square block, and once this happens, a master plan already drawn up by an architect will go into effect. That plan includes the construction of the mausoleum, where Boch will be buried, in a glass coffin, by a reflecting pool. Upon his death, he intends for the estate to be set aside for public use.

And what about the guitars? Does he wish to keep his collection together in perpetuity? "No, I'm doing triage over time," he says, "swapping out more typical models for less typical ones. I've given a bunch away to charity, and I'll keep doing that. But I haven't sold many, and I'm not interested in selling many. When I do buy a guitar, it has to be pretty special, something I'll want to have around for a while. It takes a lot for me to buy one now, but I'm always looking." 