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Jay Jay French: A Twisted Interview...And Les Paul



In 1987, the rock&roll world was knocked on their a**es by a new New York based Glam Band performing under the name of [Twisted Sister](#). With theatrics rivaling KISS and a shock factor that Alice Cooper would be proud of, the band released Stay Hungry which yielded the hugely successful singles and videos "I Wanna Rock" and "We're Not Gonna Take It". The extensive touring that followed kept them near the top of the charts for many months to come and made the band out of Long Island a household name in America. Epiphone's Don Mitchell recently had the chance to talk to founding member and lead guitarist Jay Jay French.

EPI: Tell me about your first introduction to guitar playing, how old were you?

JAY JAY: I got a Folk Guitar when I was ten and my brother taught me Travis Picking. Not something you'd ever hear on a Twisted Sister record but that's what I learned first.

EPI: How did you go from Travis Picking to Rock & Roll?

JAY JAY: When I was about fifteen I started going to the Fillmore East all the time and seeing all these amazing bands. About that time I also got a copy of

the Paul Butterfield Blues Band's first album and I think Mike Bloomfield's guitar playing and his blues-based style was the first time it ever hit me about playing lead...the first time it ever got to me. I had like \$135.00 so I went down to 48th Street and bought the guitar that was on the back of that album, a Telecaster.

EPI: So that started your blues/rock adventure?

JAY JAY: Yeah, I started messing around with that guitar and a few weeks later a guy in my building showed me a riff from a Rolling Stones Album, which was really a Chuck Berry riff. The song was called "Down The Road A Piece" and I got kind of enamored by that riff. Another big turning point came shortly after that when I got sick with mononucleosis. I was in bed for six weeks and I'd ask my father to get me some records. He brought me "Born Under A Bad Sign" by Albert King, and when I heard Albert King I went nuts. Then I heard Clapton on "Steppin' Out" and I went even more crazy! I just kept asking myself, how do you do that, how do you do that?

EPI: Was it the tone or the notes that grabbed you?



Jay Jay with his Epiphone Elitist LP.

JAY JAY: Well, both but when I saw the pictures of Clapton playing a Les Paul I asked my neighbor what the guitar was. He said, "I think it's called a Les Paul". I wasn't sure but the tone blew me away. When I compared it to the way the Fender sounded the Fender suddenly became very thin and I loved the fullness of that Les Paul. By the time I got out of bed I could play a bunch of those songs but I couldn't afford a Les Paul so I went out and got an SG Special and put some humbucking pickups in it. I just became obsessed with...I gotta have humbuckers! Then "Super Session" came out and guess what.....there's a picture of Mike Bloomfield

playing a Sunburst Les Paul and I was like Oh Man! That's it! That's the holy grail! I knew that in '68! I knew it back then! Between Bloomfield's playing after he got the Les Paul and Clapton's playing on the Bluesbreakers album...that really started my Les Paul mania.

EPI: When did you get your first Les Paul?

JAY JAY: I got it about a year later. It was a 1968 Black Custom that I bought for 300 bucks from somebody. Then from 1969 to 1972, which is when Twisted Sister started, I had about 18 Les Pauls in and out of my collection and I've owned probably 50 of them over the years. I was just a Les Paul guy...that was it!

EPI: Probably the most famous one you had was the Pink Burst model. What's the story behind it?

JAY JAY: Yes, the one Les Paul I used the most in Twisted's history is that one. It was a 1978 Tobacco Sunburst which I re-did in the Pink Burst. The problem with it was that it weighed eleven pounds! If I wasn't playing it I could easily have used it as a door stop...or a weapon! As our tours got crazier the guitars weight really bothered me so I ended up switching over and was endorsed by other companies with different body styles since Gibson wasn't really interested in endorsements at the time. But all the recordings I've done have been with that Pink Les Paul.

EPI: So the Les Paul apparently was defining your sound?

JAY JAY: Yes, the Les Paul through a Marshall! I got my first 100 watt stack in the Summer of 1969. I brought it home, opened up the windows in my apartment and played my Les Paul for like an hour and it was just awesome! I was thinking, man this is just it...I have made it! Then I hear somebody smashing on my door and I open up to see this woman covered in sweat! June in NYC! And she goes, "Do you have any idea how loud that is?" I said, "What apartment do you live in" and she screams, "What apartment...I live 4 blocks away!" I kind of freaked out and just slammed the door in her face. When the cops showed up a few minutes later I knew that the Les Paul through the Marshall was my dream combination.

EPI: How did you hook up with Epiphone?

JAY JAY: A couple of years ago I went to a NAMM show and met Jim Rosenberg. I was managing Sevendust at the time. I had just produced their record and we were checking into endorsement for them. I sat there playing this Epi Les Paul and said, "Wow, these are great guitars...they're good! They feel great!" I told Jim that Twisted was going back out so he gave me a couple of Epi Les Pauls to check out and then later sent me one of the Elitist Les Pauls. I was like whoa...these are amazing guitars. I know Les Pauls! I've been playing them literally for 30 years. I know how these guitars should feel and these Elitists are the best bargains in the world. They're as good as any Gibson for half the price and the regular Epiphones are great too...you know the ones that sell for five or six hundred bucks. I've been using Epiphones on the road since and every guitar player that plays my guitars goes Holy Christ...they're amazing.



EPI: And I hear there may be another Pink Burst in your near future!

JAY JAY: Yeah man! Jim has honored me with my own Les Paul Signature Model. When we first started talking about it I said, "Why don't you make my Pink Burst with a couple little variations like making it lighter than eleven pounds and maybe a contoured back for comfort level. He agreed and I am happy as hell! (Ed Note: The Jay Jay French signature model will be available Summer '05. Prices and specifications are unavailable at this time.) The guitar is perfect! I just gotta say to all those guitar players that might be reading this...You really have to play these Epiphones. I mean, some people think that a sister company can't be as good or that when guitars are made overseas it means something different. I don't care where they're made, they're either up to standard or their not. I've seen crap made in America and I've seen good stuff made in America. I've seen crap made overseas and I've seen good stuff made overseas but I'm telling you, every one of these Epiphones has been great.

EPI: Did you ever think there would be a day when Twisted Sister would be experiencing such huge success again?

JAY JAY: In Europe we're headlining 30, 40 and 50 thousand seat festivals... and we're headlining them! Next year we'll be headlining some of the biggest biker festivals in America! Here's what's astonishing. At the biggest level, Twisted Sister ever was, when we were selling tons of records, we played festivals all over the place and were never higher than fourth on the bill! So, if you were to say to me three years ago that Twisted was getting back together and going to headline some of the biggest festivals in the world I would have looked at you and said, "You should go have another cold one." I mean, why would that be? All of a sudden we come back and people can't get enough. The offers are big and the exposure is huge and we're happy as a clam. We're just thrilled!

EPI: So this kind of took you by surprise?

JAY JAY: It was pretty strange. When the first offer came in to headline Sweden Rock which is a festival that drew 45,00 people, I said why would we be asked to headline? I mean Yes opened up for us...are you kidding me... you've got to be kidding me...you couldn't draw a stranger scenario than that! Then three weeks later we headlined Bang Your Head which is this big Metal



Festival in Germany. Then a month after that we were headlining the Wacken Open Air Festival which is THE metal festival in Germany...that's 50,000 people!

EPI: What do you think it is that sparked the renewed interest in Twisted Sister?

JAY JAY: I really think it has a lot to do with our reputation to put on a legendary live show. That reputation just kind of fed on itself. And if your reputation precedes you as putting on a great live show, you better be great live! If you're not, you just shot the one shot you had. If you suck, you're dead. Dee, Eddie and I have stood together on stage for about 8000 performances. If you're not that good after 8000 times you better just pack it in and become a meat packer or something. So I think what happened was the reputation was huge and also there's a nostalgia for 1980's music now and we just rode a wave of circumstances that nobody could have predicted.

EPI: It's pretty amazing to see you guys out drawing some of the top-acts of the day!

JAY JAY: I think it's just that people want solid entertainment. The 80's were fun and entertaining. In the 90's when Grunge and then the whole Ozzfest thing happened, the scene became very depressing. Some of them are good players and nice people and all that but I think that the scene became very depressing with the whole "my life sucks", "the world sucks" attitude. You know, if it sucks why do you have to sing about it and depress the s*** out of the rest of us? Why don't you go back to school and go into Business Management or something. Why do you have to make records just to depress the crap out of everybody? Why do you have to b**** and moan? You're being paid millions of bucks, you're in a limousine...what the f*** is your problem? People are sick of being depressed...maybe that's the answer. When I'd go to Ozzfest with Sevendust I'd see some of these bands and they make you want to slit your wrists! Why even get up in the morning? Just go to group therapy and become a junkie!

EPI: It can be a bit of a downer.

JAY JAY: Yeah and I think Twisted Sister represents having a good time and I think people relate to that. We put on a really entertaining show and people


have fun. Ironically, one of the most fascinating parts of our rebirth is that we are asked to headline death metal festivals! Twisted Sister is a bunch of guys from New York who play soccer with our kids on the weekends, not a bunch of people who sacrifice animals and burn churches. But we ask them why they like us and they're like...because you play Burn In Hell, Fire Still Burns which we really kind of did tongue in cheek. Pretty funny actually. We are loved by the extreme metal heads and we have a great time playing for them.

EPI: Given your sometime torrid history, what was it like getting back together with the guys?

JAY JAY: Well, when VH1 did Behind the Music with Twisted Sister it kind of exposed how much we hate each others guts. It was broadcast in August of 2001 and any idea of reforming was subsequently destroyed by it. But then September 11th happened and a local DJ in New York called me and asked if Twisted Sister would consider a reunion to help raise money for the widows and orphans of the New York City Police and Fire Departments. I called the other guys and said look, something happened here which makes our problems look like nothing and everybody agreed. They just said, when, where and how. We scheduled rehearsal dates for three hours, one day a week for three weeks. At the end of the rehearsals we went home and didn't talk much. We did the show in just t-shirts and jeans and brought the house down. The word kind of spread and the next thing you know promoters were making inquiries. By the way, we ended up raising \$100,000.00 that day and that's something we're very proud of.



EPI: How is everybody getting along now after a couple years back together?



JAY JAY: Actually it's great because we don't really see each other that much. The band can't work a ton because I manage artists, Dee has his radio show and Mark Mendoza is very busy as well, so we generally play on weekends. When we get together we have a hell of a lot of laughs. We meet at the airport, tell jokes, fly to the venues, play the show and fly home. It's like Budapest and home, Italy and home, Spain and home, Holland and home. That's what we do so it works out great

EPI: Thanks Jay Jay for taking the time to chat and thanks for using Epiphone!

JAY JAY: It's easy man. I currently have 5 Epiphones and I can say this about all of them. The necks are set perfectly, the frets have been dressed perfectly from the factory, the pickups are dead center, the necks are dead straight, and even with the crazy traveling we do with constant climate changes these guitars have performed flawlessly. I love them!

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