



Season 6, Episode 11: Josh White Guitar

Elyse Luray: In the years following World War II, in New York City's Greenwich Village, African American guitarist Josh White takes the stage, and plays to some of the first racially mixed audiences. It's a watershed moment. The Southern-born blues and folk singer becomes one of the earliest ambassadors of African American music to white audiences. And in the years to come – despite political controversy -- his songs will add a resonating accompaniment to the Civil Rights Movement. More than half a century later, Jeb McIntyre of Rochester Hills, Michigan, believes he has a guitar that may have once played the protest songs of this musical legend.

Jeb McIntyre: I am a huge Josh White fan and I think this guitar has an important story to tell.

Elyse: Hi, nice to meet you. Wow, she's a beauty, so what's the history of this guitar?

Jeb: This guitar I believe was at a time owned by Josh White.

Elyse: Jeb jumped at the chance to buy the instrument from a friend. As a child he'd seen Josh White play... and even got to know him.

Jeb: My parents took me and my sister to see him at a coffeehouse and we sat right upfront and I was just enthralled with the performance. He was simply a phenomenal musician.

Elyse: Jeb and his father approached White after the show, and invited him home for Easter dinner.

Jeb: We were both surprised and then he became a friend of the family. I've got a couple of pictures of him teaching me guitar.

Elyse: Jeb believes the guitar he bought is a unique prototype that Josh White had told him about years ago.

Jeb: He told me that the guitar had been built for him and that the intention was that it was going to be brought out as a Josh White signature model guitar.

Elyse: A so-called signature model guitar means that the guitar maker plans to use the celebrity's name to endorse the instrument and increase sales. Do you have any documentation to prove that it was his?

Jeb: No I don't.



Elyse: Ok. Did you do any research of your own?

Jeb: I called the Guild Guitar Company and the person I spoke to told me that it was built in 1959, but they didn't have any other additional information.

Elyse: And what can I tell you; what do you want to know?

Jeb: I want to know if this guitar was intended to be a Josh White signature model guitar and if it was I want to know if that would be the first signature model honoring an African American musician.

Elyse: I'll see what I can find out and get back to you. We do have some wear on it. When I look inside the guitar there is a label, I do see that it says Guild Guitars, Hoboken, New Jersey. There's a serial number on the headstock. But nothing I can see indicates whether it was a signature instrument designed for Josh White, or anyone else. Celebrity endorsements for all objects are very successful, but especially when we talk about music and guitars, people pay big money for Eric Clapton, Les Paul, Stevie Ray Vaughan and John Lennon. If this was the first signature guitar for an African American, it's historically a very important piece of memorabilia. My office has tracked Guild to another guitar maker who bought the brand in the 1990s. Unfortunately, they have no Guild Company records dating back to the 1950's, or know anything about a Josh White signature model. So I'm heading to the Institute of Jazz Studies at Rutgers University, where Dan Morgenstern is director.

Elyse: Hi, nice to meet you. What did you bring?

Dan Morgenstern: I brought some things I thought would be interesting, some photos.

Elyse: Look at these; these are wonderful. Was Josh White always a guitar player?

Dan Morgenstern: He was a brilliant guitarist and you can't really imagine Josh White without the guitar it was really an integral part of his performance.

Elyse: Dan explains that the Southern-born White had started out playing so called "race" songs for the African American market. But after moving to New York in the early 1930's, he increasingly infused his music with a strong political message.

Dan Morgenstern: He was very involved in Labor Movement but it was not something that kept him from being accepted by the highest level of American government. He was frequently at the White House both FDR and Eleanor Roosevelt liked him a lot.



Elyse: White found a national audience, and following World War II, he gave voice to a generation who were challenging the social conventions and political orthodoxy of the day. His protest songs and left-leaning lyrics were also embraced by political groups – including socialists and communists – that championed folk music as the music of the people.

Dan Morgenstern: The left wing political movement became very interested in American folk music and that's why you had people like Pete Seiger and Woody Guthrie, and later on Burl Ives, and they developed an audience especially among people.

Elyse: At the legendary New York club called Café Society, White drew mixed-race crowds with his unique blend of politics and showmanship.

Dan Morgenstern: He had a very charismatic personality but also on the advice of the owner of Café Society he started unbuttoning his shirts and that made him into an early black sex symbol.

Elyse: But White's popular profile, and his political songs, drew the attention of the house committee on un-American activities... In September 1950, White was called before the committee to reveal the names of suspected communists.

Elyse: What happened?

Dan Morgenstern: They really wanted him to name names, which he didn't do but he was very uncomfortable about this. And so he decided to go to England for a few years and wait until things cooled off.

Elyse: Do you think that a guitar company would want to use him as an endorsement to help to sell guitars?

Dan Morgenstern: Well, I think it's not impossible because folk music was becoming quite popular among young people a smaller guitar company might have wanted an endorsement from him.

Elyse: My next stop is Mandolin Brothers, a world-renowned guitar store on Staten Island. I'm meeting the owner, Stan Jay. I'm also meeting Guild guitar expert Jay Pilzer, who's brought some of their early catalogues.

Jay Pilzer: Look at what Elyse brought. Isn't that something! This is a wonderful guitar.

Elyse: Yeah?



Jay: It is absolutely unique. This is basically a classical guitar neck on a flat top steel string guitar, it's very unusual. Also this model was made normally with mahogany; this one is made with Brazilian rosewood. This was clearly made as a special order for someone,

Elyse: Jeb who owns the guitar thought that it dated about 1959 how do we tell?

Jay: Well let's look at the serial number, if you'll read it out to me it's on the back of the headstock there, we can look it up.

Elyse: It says 40150.

Jay: 40150; that's going to make this a 1965 guitar.

Elyse: Ok, so that's much later than he thinks it is.

Elyse: Jay says the first signature guitar was made by the Gibson Company for a white jazz guitarist named Nick Lucas, way back in 1928.

Jay: Nick Lucas's picture is on the label and that is the first time that any guitar had the picture and the name of an artist on the label.

Elyse: So what's the first one that we know of that was associated with an African American?

Jay: The first one appears to be the Josh White guitar that came out by Ovation in 1967.

Elyse: Ovation?

Jay: Ovation, Yes.

Elyse: So Josh White was the first African American to have a signature guitar. But it wasn't Jeb's guitar, and it wasn't built by Guild.

Jay: The Ovation company was quite young at the time it was founded in the mid 1960's and so the Josh White project was one of their initial marketing ventures and I would have to say that it worked out very well for them. It's the name of the game; it's who you associate your product with that gives the product credibility.

Elyse: Although Jeb's instrument isn't the first signature guitar for an African American, Stan and Jay can't account for its very distinct characteristics. There is no Guild literature that talks about Josh White playing it,



there is no mention of this in any of the Guild catalogues from the era, any of the guide books to vintage guitars this guitar is not mentioned.

Elyse: How would I be able to figure out in your opinion if this was Josh's guitar at all?

Jay: His son, Josh White Jnr is a very active player.

Elyse: I've made some calls, and I've arranged to meet Josh White Junior at the site of the old Café Society Club in Greenwich Village.

Josh White Jr.: Hello there.

Elyse: Very nice.

Josh White Jr.: Thank you very much. Just kinda doodling.

Elyse: Now you've been on this stage before, right? Josh Jr. explains how he got his start here at the age of four, singing alongside his father. Café Society was an unprecedented experiment, which he observed through the eyes of a child.

Josh White Jr: At four years old didn't know there was any other way that black and white people sitting next to each other, black and white performers sharing the stage and it was just a very natural thing. My old man use to say...if you are going to sing a song you got to believe it because if you don't believe that song you are singing those you are singing to won't believe you.

Elyse: And what do you think your dad's primary message was at that time?

Josh White Jr: He would do his blues, he would do his ballads, but he also did songs of social consciousness that made you think about as good as this country is we can make it better. He took it upon himself to sing for those who felt at times they didn't have a voice. My old man thought if not me who, if not now, when?

Elyse: Well there's something I want to show you. You recognize this baby?

Josh White Jr: My goodness, ah yes, the Guild. The Guild people made this guitar for my old man. When they made this guitar they made sure that it was a wider neck than normal; my dad's fingers were rather large. Some of the signature sounds of my dad are due to a twelve fret neck. One of the sounds of my dad is [music];



so he made sure that when they made the guitar for my dad it was a twelve fret neck to maintain the sound that he wanted.

Elyse: The person that owns this guitar believes that Guild was going to make signature guitars with your father's name on it. Josh doesn't know what the Guild Company's relationship with his father was, but it does seem to him that what his father told Jeb makes sense.

Josh White Jr: I know they made this guitar for him; why would they make just one guitar for him if they weren't going to do more with it?

Elyse: I have a lead – my office has managed to locate Mark Dronge. His father, Al, was one of the founders of Guild Guitars. Mark operates "D. R. Strings", a guitar string factory in Emerson, New Jersey. Mark this is the Guild guitar that a person who wants it believes it was made for Josh White. Have you seen it?

Mark: This is so great. I haven't seen this guitar for over forty years. This is a one of kind guitar and I know we did this one for Josh White, absolutely. This is amazing.

Elyse: Mark explains how his father had seen the musical appeal of Josh White and the commercial advantage to signing him.

Mark: Josh White at the time was so big and so important to musicians to people who like blues and folk music. It's amazing nobody knows who he is now, then everybody wanted to play like him or play what he played, it's that whole celebrity thing.

Elyse: Have you met Josh White before?

Mark: Yes, I'm the one who brought him to the factory in 1965 and that's when we started to entertain the idea of making an endorsement guitar; signature guitar for him and this is definitely the guitar we made for him.

Elyse: So what happened? How did another guitar company beat Guild to the punch?

Mark: There was so much going on that...

Elyse: Mark's answer solves our mystery.



Elyse: Jeb first I want to say thank you because I don't know if I told you this or not in the beginning, but I really didn't know a lot about Josh White and for me it was a wonderful journey. First of all the date, you thought it was 1959, it was actually made in 1965.

Jeb: Really? Okay.

Elyse: And there is no doubt your guitar is a one of a kind, and it was made specifically for Josh White. The Guild Company was planning on making a signature guitar for Josh White, but it was never mass produced and here's why.

Mark Dronge: The scene was starting to change. The Beatles were so influential and all these bands came out and the electric music was getting bigger and the plans for Josh White model just kind of fell by the wayside, unfortunately.

Elyse: What Josh told Jeb all those years ago was true – Guild had planned on introducing the Josh White guitar as a product line. However, in 1967, the Ovation Guitar Company did make a signature guitar for Josh White and that was the first made for an African American.

Jeb: Interesting.

Elyse: Two years later, in 1969, the folk and blues legend died of heart disease. So you definitely have a great piece of memorabilia and you really own a piece of his history. I'm just glad for people to know about him. He was an extraordinary man. Thank you.