

# The Acoustic Guitar Test

Tony Bacon & Gary Cooper

Most electric guitarists start their playing careers on acoustic guitars – for the most part, cheap and nasty ones. Later on, they usually find that they need a good one, either because their skills have improved and they just want an acoustic to enjoy, or because their recording commitments call for one. In fact, if you listen carefully to many top bands, you'll hear an acoustic in the mix – often low and subtle, but playing a vital role.

But how do you choose a good acoustic guitar, if all your experience is based on electric criteria? You may not be an aspiring Bert Jansch or Stefan Grossman, but you may still want a nice acoustic.

We assembled a panel comprising both primarily acoustic players, and those for whom it is a second line of attack. They were asked to assess a very wide range of instruments of differing prices, with value for money being of prime importance.

In the presentation of this multi-review (previous ones were: the Copy Guitar Test *SI* Nov and Dec '78; the Combo Test *SI* June and July '79; the Oriental Original Guitar Test *SI* Jan '80; and the Electr(on)ic Piano Test *SI* Jun '80), we are breaking with tradition in an attempt to give you the information in the most accessible form we can. Criticism of the previous multi-reviews has centred on the density and unreadability of the information, and we have decided that a general summation of the panel's comments, plus direct quotations where relevant, will make it easier for you to see exactly where each instrument stands, without having to wade through endless quotes of 'Okay,' 'Awful,' 'Yes,' 'No,' and, 'Maybe.' Also, it avoids the use of endless strings of initials. This time, we name the guilty men! Speaking of whom, the panel comprised Duncan Browne, Isaac Guillory, Steve Howe, Gret Knowles, and Robin Millar. See opposite page for more details.

Our criterion for selecting each instrument was pretty random. We wanted to avoid cheap, laminated-topped beginners' guitars, which automatically eliminated the vast majority of acoustics available in the UK. These instruments are short-term purchases; you will buy one and resell it as you grow more discerning. Solid-topped guitars will, generally speaking, provide a better, more professional and more rewarding sound, and will, with luck, improve with age. This, by the way, is not a mere re-run of the, 'My '54 Les Paul is better than your '55 model,' argument. Quality acoustics improve as the wood matures and settles. Further, it is arguable that the wood used in acoustics has more influence on the overall sound than it does in electric solids. Obviously, we could not anticipate this maturing effect, but if an instrument starts its life with a good sound, one would hope that it will only improve – not always the case, alas!

These, then, are professional acoustic guitars, ranging from probably the least you can pay for a suitable instrument, to well up the price range. However, we have not been totally comprehensive – there are too many guitars on the market to allow for that degree of completeness. Obviously missing are Gibson and Fylde. Norlin, UK distributors of Gibson and Epiphone, were unable to supply us in time for our test with a Gibson, largely due to their distribution centre being located in Rotterdam. They were able to lend us an Epiphone. The absence of a Fylde, however, was our fault (actually, mine – GC!). The name occurred to us (me!) late in the day, and we (he! – TB) just didn't get it together (sorry!).

You may also note the absence of Aria, a name you may well have expected to see (so did we!). The story here is a little more complex. Regular readers of *SI* may remember our Oriental Guitar Test in the January '80 issue, in which the Aria RS850 solid electric received less than fulsome praise from our panel. As a result of this review, and indeed the multi-review format itself, Gigsville, Aria's UK distributors, declined to supply us with an acoustic for this test. This is a pity, as we feel sure that their guitars would have acquitted themselves honourably. Still, that's their decision.

What we *have* got are guitars from Epiphone, Guild, Martin, Moridaira, Mugen, Ovation, Washburn and Yamaha. The Moridaira is an oddball inasmuch as it has what the manufacturers call a 'semi-solid top'. This was surprising at the price, and we are forced to question their terminology. Surely the top is *either* a solid *or* a laminate? Own up please, Moridaira's UK distributors, Hohner! The rest of the instruments are the sort that you will see hanging on most music shop walls – and about which, in our experience, the retailer will know nothing, apart from the fact that you don't have to plug it in!

We hope that this review will help you choose an acoustic guitar, and please do drop us a line and let us know of your experiences and problems in this field.



People l-r: Steve Howe, Robin Millar, Duncan Browne, Greg Knowles, Isaac Guillory

## —The People—



**Duncan Browne** Classically-oriented guitarist with two solo albums on Logo to his credit, *The Wild Places* and *Streets Of Fire*. Duncan is busy writing new material presently for a forthcoming recording project.



**Isaac Guillory** Busy session player both on the road and in the studio, and at present on tour with the Barbara Dickson Band. An exceptional acoustic guitarist, although many think of him as primarily an electric player.



**Steve Howe** Founder member of Yes, has often included acoustic guitar pieces on Yes albums and in live Yes performances. Steve is currently working on a book which will document his vast guitar collection.



**Greg Knowles** Guitarist with the Movies, whose most recent album is *India*. Considers himself first and foremost an electric player, and therefore represents the electric-player-looking-for-first-acoustic opinion.



**Robin Millar** Currently playing and recording with French band Extraballe, whose second album will be released soon. Keen to use acoustic guitar live and in the studio whenever the opportunity presents itself.

were well received by all except Robin Millar who felt that the neck was a bit wide and that the fingerboard was 'very sticky'.

Robin again dissented on string height: 'mucho fret buzz', but everyone else was happy about this department. Intonation on our sample was generally acceptable.

Robin and Isaac identified the fretting as being troublesome, Robin finding 'the frets too high, rectangular and stubborn'. Isaac said, 'A bit proud, especially at the edge.' Again, everyone else was happy. Bridge and saddle were OK except for Robin (again!) who didn't like the angle of the strings on the bridge being so sharp due to the shape of the pins.

Tonally the guitar was liked by all except Duncan Browne who found it dull, and Robin who liked the treble but agreed about the dullness of the bass. 'Noisy rather than loud,' was Robin's comment on the volume of the Epiphone and the rest of the panel were not 100% convinced by its overall loudness.

Projection was felt to be good by everyone except Isaac who stressed that for him it was, 'The only way to tell it's not expensive.' The guitar scored consistently highly for resonance and sustain.

'Characterless' was the sum feeling of the panel about the Epiphone although they felt it was generally good value for money. Robin, however, obviously did not feel at home with this guitar and summed it up thus, 'If you're making an absolutely standard folk guitar you should make a good job of it, and this is not even right for a beginner.' Isaac, on the other hand, said, 'A very playable, well-balanced guitar, for a bargain price.' However, this one was generally liked by the panel.



### Epiphone PR 735 £195 inc VAT

Manufacturer's spec: Solid spruce top, rosewood back and sides, rosewood fingerboard, mahogany neck.

Made to Epiphone/Gibson US design in Japan.

UK distributor: Norlin (UK), 114 Charing Cross Road, London WC1, Tel: (01) 379 6400.

General opinion was that this guitar looked OK – if a little ordinary. It was, the panel felt, rather light, but it was appreciated by Isaac Guillory who said, 'It's light, therefore efficient.' Balance and feel were fine. The neck and fingerboard

### Guild D40NT £419.75 inc VAT and case

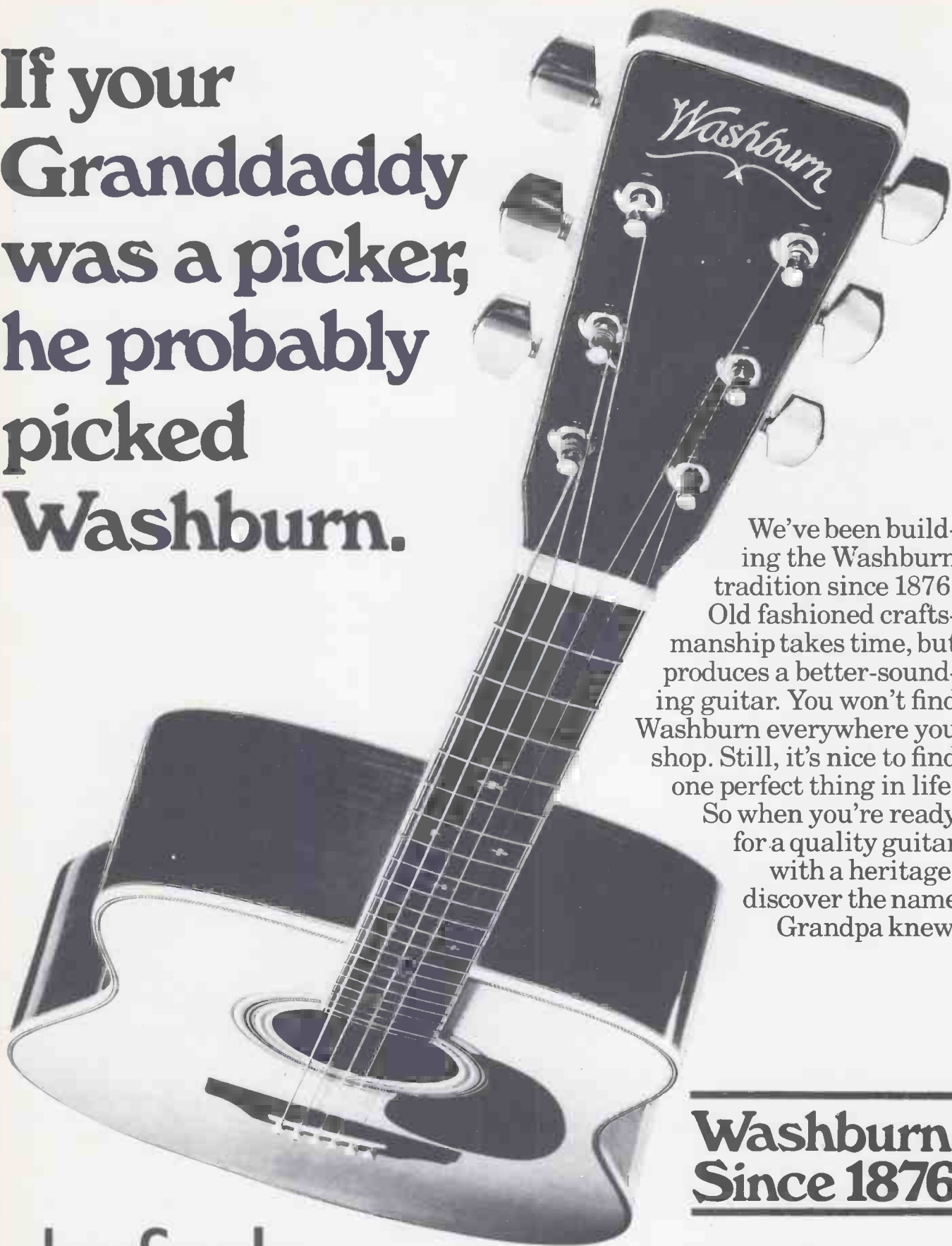
Manufacturer's spec: Spruce top (solid), mahogany back and sides, mahogany neck, rosewood fingerboard and bridge.

Made by Guild Guitars, 225 West Grand Street, Elizabeth, New Jersey 07202, USA, Tel: (212) 227-5390.

UK distributor: Guild (UK), Saltmeadows Road, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear NE8 3AJ, Tel: 0632 770431.



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### Moridaira W617 £197.50 inc VAT

Manufacturer's spec: 'Semi-solid spruce top', maple neck and sides, rosewood fingerboard, maple neck.

Made by Moridaira, Japan.

UK distributor: M Hohner & Co, 39-45 Coldharbour Lane, London, SE5 9NR, Tel: (01) 733 4411.



By common consent this was a beautifully finished guitar, but Greg Knowles felt that it was a bit shiny, 'Which accentuates the lack of grain on the top,' (fussy, eh?). The Guild carried on scoring 100% throughout the weight, feel and body dimension questions, and the only dissenting voice for a long while was Greg who didn't like the sharpness of the pegs, feeling that they could have caused lacerations.

The neck and fingerboard were also A1, but Robin Millar found it 'a little thick' (the neck feels the same way about him).

The Guild came well set-up although Isaac described the supplied strings as 'duff' and Greg found that the intonation was 'good until the top end'. Frets were generally OK although Isaac identified a few buzzes on the 5th and 6th strings. The nut didn't fare too well, a few finding it, as Steve Howe put it, 'A little tatty.'

The sound (treble, bass and tonal balance) didn't impress as much as one might have expected. Duncan, for example, found the tone 'a little dull overall, compared with the others', but the actual tonal balance was generally praised with Isaac summing up the feelings of the panel when he described it as being 'really mellow'.

Volume and projection were felt to be OK, but Duncan Browne, strangely, found it to be 'very quiet', and Greg found it muted compared with the Martin. Value-for-money wasn't the Guild's strong point, the panel felt. 'Just a little overpriced,' said Steve Howe, while Duncan put it stronger: 'The guitar isn't a bargain at £419... I would be cautious about this one.'

Generally, the Guild was felt to be very well-made, a workmanlike job, but somehow it didn't seem to inspire anyone to great heights.

### Martin D19 £569 inc VAT and case

Manufacturer's spec: Solid spruce top, mahogany back and sides, mahogany neck, ebony fingerboard and bridge.

Made by C F Martin, Nazareth, Penn 18064, USA.

UK distributor: Philip Yorke.

Ten-out-of-ten for the Martin on appearance, except for Steve Howe who felt that it was 'a little over-contrasting, white edging doesn't complement the rather dark spruce top'. Everyone else seemed adequately seduced by the 'aged' look of this guitar. Weight, feel and body dimensions went down well, although Steve found it a little heavy and fat (mind you, he did warn us that he was biased in favour of the 0018 size, which he prefers). Greg felt that 'you have to work hard to play it' and this was echoed by the others. This was accentuated by the fairly heavy strings and high action that the D19 came with but, it was generally agreed, you couldn't alter these points without seriously degrading the basic nature of the instrument.

On the design side, Martin's refusal to use adjustable truss rods caused Greg to wonder what would happen in five years time. Other points were raised too, such as Steve's criticism of the 12th fret tuning which he felt to be a little worse than he found normal on Martins. Isaac felt that it 'doesn't look like a normal Martin'.

Despite all this, the guitar carried on well through the neck-check session. It also sailed through the setting-up test. And so to sound.

Isaac and Steve found the treble lacking on this guitar, although Greg summed it up well for the rest by describing it as having a 'big bright chord sound'. Steve Howe put it another way, calling it, 'Singer songwriter.' Overall sound quality brought supreme praise – and that really is no exaggeration. Greg said it all with his final comment: 'Rich, subtle – the best guitar of the eight for quality and beauty of sound.'

Price is difficult. At £569 Greg felt that you could look around for an aged, secondhand one. Duncan suggested a custom-made guitar as an option at this sort of money. However, Rolls Royces cost Rolls Royce money, and everyone else accepted with a shrug what seemed to be if not a bargain, then a fair price for such a good guitar. Again Greg said it all: 'It has the feel of a handmade guitar, and in the Martin tradition – definitely a specialist guitar and probably the hardest to play. The sound of this guitar is the real point.' Or, if you prefer, there is Duncan's comment, 'The most subtle and rewarding of the set. From my point of view it rewards a classical approach with subtlety and variation of tone, but would equally satisfy the extrovert strummer.'

'Cheap' was the word consistently used to describe the look of this guitar with its black plastic binding on the head being singled out for particular criticism. The blonde maple finish didn't win any awards either. 'But doubtless some would be charmed,' Duncan felt. A couple of murmurs were heard about the heaviness of this guitar but nothing over-much was said about this aspect. Steve raised the point that it was surprising, if this guitar did have a laminated top, that so much effort had been spent on such nice inlays. Robin added that the colour of the heel ('ugly, brown heel' to be exact) drew attention to the joint. It certainly was strange to look at in this aspect.

Steve and Robin both found the neck 'triangular', although the rest found it OK. Greg said, 'Surprisingly, it plays well.'

Setting up was not a strong point of the Moridaira. Everyone agreed that the intonation wasn't spot on. The frets were a good point but the supplied strings were criticised by everyone except Isaac.

Soundwise, the guitar was quite successful, though 'not stunning,' as Duncan put it. Not a loud guitar, then, and as Steve Howe says, 'Not exciting.' Price drew mixed feelings. The general opinion was that, cosmetically, the Moridaira was very disappointing, although Steve Howe thought they'd had a good try at making it look good for the money. Robin felt that it was too expensive for a laminate (if, indeed, it is a laminate) and Duncan reminds us that the Mugen is £20 cheaper and, in his opinion, a little more inspiring. The fact that this guitar overcame the general condemnation of its looks is pleasing in that it shows our intrepid reviewers to be capable of being talked round by a guitar's sound. On the other hand, the lack of detailed comment from the panel tells of the guitar's overall lack of character for the price. >>

**Mugen Heritage 78** £179.95 inc VAT and case

Manufacturer's spec: Solid cedar top, 'hand stained', oval back and sides, nato neck, rosewood fingerboard and bridge, brass nut and saddle, gold-plated machine heads.

Made by Mugen, Japan.

UK distributor: Rosetti & Co, 138-140 Old Street, London, EC1, Tel: (01) 253 7294.



This instrument, featuring unusual woods, came out well in the looks department with only Steve Howe dissenting. He felt that it looked 'less than satisfying, and over-plain'. Everyone praised the feel of the guitar and similarly everyone found it a comfortable guitar, although two members of the panel found it a little heavy.

Very unusually for an acoustic, the Mugen features a brass nut and saddle. These features drew praise for their appearance and had some effect, it was felt, on the guitar's sound qualities – particularly, of course, the Mugen's brightness of tone.

Steve and Duncan found the fingerboard 'scratchy' and 'sticky', although Duncan admits that he's used to ebony (the swine!). Otherwise, the neck drew no comments – which we assume to be a good point as the guitar generally fared rather well. The setting-up was also pretty good, but three members of the panel would have liked a more precise intonation.

Soundwise the Mugen was, er, *bright*. This was liked by almost everyone but there was a general assent to the feeling that this brightness was paid for by a lack of bass or, perhaps, a general thinness of tone. Steve said, 'A hollow bass,' and wasn't totally happy with the sound. Isaac reckoned it to be the brightest acoustic that he has ever played. Duncan found it to be 'not particularly subtle, but very bright, clear and forceful'. Both Isaac and Greg commented that the guitar would be good for ensemble playing. It wouldn't be lost along with other guitars and Isaac felt that it would fire the others' playing by virtue of its sound.

Value-for-money was a strong point of the Mugen. Duncan felt it to be the best value of the lot.

Summing up, Steve said, 'It tries to be impressive looking but goes too far.' Robin says, 'It's lovely to play and is cheap – perhaps an uncompromising sound.'

**Ovation Legend** £347.13 inc VAT

Manufacturer's spec: Sitka spruce top (solid), lyrachord body, ebony fingerboard, walnut bridge, gold-plated machines, pearl inlays, mahogany/maple neck.

Made by Ovation Instruments, Blue Hills Avenue, Bloomfield, Conn 06002.

UK distributor: Rose-Morris & Co, 32-34 Gordon House Road, London, NW5 1NE, Tel: (01) 267 5151.



An Ovation is an Ovation and, as two members of the panel pointed out, you either like the appearance or you don't. Steve Howe didn't, and described it as looking 'Pretty 'orrid.' Robin did, and said, 'Pleasing and attractive.' It's one of those guitars folks!

This particularly comes across all the way through this instrument's comments. The Ovation was either loved or hated. In overall feel, Duncan says, 'Perfect, all Ovation guitars I find to be perfectly balanced,' while Robin says, 'Tends to tip backwards,' and Steve says, 'Is unbalanced... hindered by silly back.'

Duncan wondered whether the acoustic-only version (*ie* without transducer pickup) justified the use of the design and materials that he feels are best utilised in the electric/acoustic version. Robin wondered what the same shape would sound like if the instrument was made of wood. Nice thought?

The neck and fingerboard were felt to be a little classically flat and wide, although this was generally praised and Isaac described it as having a fast neck. Greg found it 'a cinch to play'.

The setting up of our sample was universally praised and most found that the low action suited them. Two players criticised the intonation, but the string spacing, while close, posed no real problems, except for its straightness which Steve disliked.

Soundwise, the Ovation drew the predictable mixed feelings. Duncan liked the 'bright treble, good bass and fine tonal balance. Not a guitar for loud strumming but perfect for my classically-oriented style'. On the other hand, Steve Howe described it as being 'naïf and plastic-sounding with a rattly bass and a thin, whispering treble.' And so it goes...

Value-for-money comments reflected the basic love/hate attitudes that this guitar drew. If you love it, it's worth it. Some people obviously wouldn't take one free with a packet of *Corn*

*Flakes*. It all depends on you, we would suggest.

Overall, the construction and materials drew further comment, but to avoid repeating ourselves could we pose one final question: Without the pickup system, what is the advantage of this instrument over a conventional acoustic guitar?

**Washburn Prairie Song Custom (!)** £271 inc VAT

Manufacturer's spec: Solid spruce top, rosewood back and sides, mahogany neck, ebony fingerboard, bone nut and saddle, abalone and maple inlays, scallop braced.

Designed in USA by Fretted Industries, 1415 Waukegan Road, Northbrook, ILL 60062, USA.

Made by Washburn, Japan.

UK distributor: Brødr Jørgensen, Unit 6, Great West Trading Estate, Great West Road, Brentford, Middx TW8 9DN, Tel: (01) 568 4578.



Appearance of the Washburn was rave reviews time, except for the still, small voice in the wilderness of Isaac who disliked 'the terrible looking pickguard'. Weight, feel and body dimensions were OK – a couple of people found it a little heavy but not objectionably so. Generally all right: 'One of the best,' said Duncan.

The neck and fingerboard went down well, in fact very well. Greg (the electric guitarist of the bunch) said, 'Feels like an electric guitar neck – fast, due to the fingerboard with flat frets.'

Setting up was also pretty fine although Duncan and Robin were very slightly critical of the intonation. Steve found it 'below average'. On the other hand, action, frets, *etc* were well praised.

The E-string on our sample was thought to be dull by all reviewers but the guitar was bright and clear in the treble registers. Generally, the sound of this instrument was liked, and volume and projection ratings were from average to good. Isaac felt these aspects to be 'excellent'.



whereas Steve said, 'Three feet,' for projection.

General reaction was that the Washburn is reasonably priced, although Duncan and Isaac were more positive in this area, while Steve felt that it would only be a good buy at £200. Robin says, 'Must be a guitar to look at if you want just one good all-rounder at a medium price.'

Overall likes and dislikes drew some good comments from the panel. Greg said, 'I think a genuine acoustic player might not find it forceful enough but it gives every impression of being a carefully designed guitar.' Duncan said, 'Seems on cursory inspection to be as good in many ways as guitars £200 or £300 more expensive - classic six-string acoustic, very good buy.' Robin was impressed by all aspects of the instrument's performance. Isaac says under 'likes': 'Producing a guitar that lives up to the old name,' and, under 'dislikes': 'Using the old name.' Can't win, can you?

### Yamaha FG375S £189 inc VAT

Manufacturer's spec: Solid spruce top, rosewood back and sides, mahogany neck, rosewood fingerboard and bridge, gold-plated machines.

Made by Yamaha, Nippon Gakki Co Ltd, Hamamatsu, Japan.

UK distributor: Kemble Yamaha, Mount Avenue, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, Bucks MK1 1JE, Tel: 0908 71771.



Overall, the appearance of the Yamaha seemed to be a little too 'slick' for most of the panel's tastes. Steve liked it, though: he said that it was 'neat, smart and well-balanced'.

The area of feel drew contradictory reactions: Isaac and Robin disliked the Yamaha, Duncan and Steve liked it, although Duncan did add the proviso 'considering the price'.

The neck and fingerboard were odd. Duncan liked the feel of the neck and the fingerboard which he likened to ebony, although he felt it was rosewood. Greg, however, felt that there was something wrong with the neck. This came out in repeated criticisms of the intonation and, although some of the panel put this down to the nut being oddly set, there was a definite feel that something somewhere was horribly wrong with the intonation.

'Bright and thin,' was the overall comment on the Yamaha's sound. Duncan felt that some people would consider it too thin. Robin said that it was 'just a set of strings making a very percussive sound'. The panel by-and-large did not respond well to this aspect of the instrument, although Steve was a little more tolerant of the sound, and Greg said, 'A clear all-round sound. Not subtle - ordinary.'

On value-for-money terms, Steve and Duncan felt that the instrument was good value, Duncan commenting, 'Ideal for a beginner seeking a playable acoustic,' while Isaac is a little more guarded when he says, 'Reasonable if you like the cosmetics and play quietly.'

Overall, Isaac said, 'It seems they are trying to make an expensive-looking guitar and have sacrificed sound to this aim.' Greg said, 'Make sure it's a good one before you buy it, I suspect they vary.' Robin absolutely hated this guitar, saying, in a nutshell, 'It's not a musical instrument, it's a machine. I think they should stick to motorbikes.' Ouch!

## CONCLUSIONS

Surprise, surprise! After years of seeing famous name guitars slugged into the ground for not living up to their reputations, the **Martin** passes with flying colours. It wasn't an immediately astounding instrument, but each player seemed to warm to it, finally accepting that it was a true great. Not easy to play, perhaps, and certainly not cheap, but it really *does* seem like a case of getting what you pay for.

Surprise number two was the **Mugen**. Virtually unheard of, not coming from a big-name manufacturer, it impressed us all with its bright, alive sound and its unusual looks. Excellent value-for-money with this one, although you'd need to make sure that you could use this brightness - if you could, you'd be on to a winner. Well worth tracking down, but not too easy to find in the average shop.

Star number three was the **Washburn**. The most expensive Japanese guitar under review it was, nonetheless, a good one. It would particularly suit an electric player who needed a good acoustic and who wouldn't feel at home on the hard-to-play types. Easy to find in most shops, and a good buy.

Now it gets hard. The **Epiphone** was generally liked but seemed to lack character. Does this matter? Yes, according to our panel. It is a good price and a well-made instrument: but what a pity that the once illustrious American name of Epiphone is now applied to Japanese mass-production techniques.

The **Guild** may well have inherited some of Epiphone's former glory (Guild certainly absorbed some of the old Epiphone craftsmen when the company was sold to Gibson). This Guild, however, failed to inspire our guitarists. It was a great instrument for playing while sitting on the fence, although it was well-made. For this money one might have expected a challenger for the Martin. It wasn't.

The **Ovation** is capable of testing anyone's prejudices to the full. Our panel was no exception. Try one, you might like it: people certainly do buy and use these guitars. We weren't sure, however, that there was much justification in buying an Ovation unless you bought an electric/acoustic model. Very much a matter of personal taste.

**Yamaha** certainly have a lot to live up to. The panel all remembered those beloved early models which established new standards for cheap, Japanese, folk guitars. However, Yamaha have lost ground in this area in recent years, especially true if this sample is anything to go by. Overall, this guitar just *didn't*.

The **Moridaira** baffled us all. Universally it was agreed that it looked decidedly tacky. It didn't actually sound too bad though, and played reasonably well. This business about laminated tops, however, is worrying. A guitar that retails at £197 has no business having a laminated top. So is it, or isn't it? The point is that a damn-nearly £200 guitar should age and mature, but a laminate won't allow this to happen. We are dubious. Tread carefully!

Tony Bacon/Gerry Cooper



Thanks for help in this test go to firstly the panel, who were all very helpful and amazing players. Roka's, who lent us the Martin, and Phil Yorke of C F Martin for arranging the loan (can we keep it, please??). Robin Millar, for letting us wreck his penthouse suite and patio. Jim at Rose-Morris, Trevor at Rosetti, Jerry at Norlin, Gary at Hohner, Denis at Yamaha, Dave at Brodr-Jorgensen and Kevin at Guild (Alan will be contacting you all later!). Erratic and expensive communications by dis-courtesy of British Telecoms (GPO to you, squire!). Alcoholic sponsorship by the Frascati Brothers.