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Guitar & Bass

MAY 2017 Vol 28 No 08 E4.99

GIANT KILLER?

Why Eastman's artfully aged, vintage style single-cut might just scare the big boys...



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Eastman Antique Varnish SB59/V

One of the stars of Winter NAMM 2017 lands in the UK.
CHRIS VINNICOMBE checks out a new way of making things old...

Anyone who has ever attended the Winter NAMM Show in Anaheim, California will agree that for all the excitement that it generates around new gear, it's one of the most challenging environments on earth in which to attempt to make a value judgement about what something sounds like. And yet every year there are one or two rare moments in which somebody hands you a guitar and the free-jazz hurricane of the show melts into the periphery of your senses.

Suddenly you're lost as the pure experience of playing an instrument - or perhaps a well-chosen combination of guitar and amplifier - breaks down the physical barriers between the player and the music they find themselves creating. And if that sounds pretentious, blame the combination of jetlag and a hangover.

We had two such moments this year, the first of which was brought about by a Walsh Guitars Neshier (a boutique offset with a crazily good roasted maple neck and gorgeous-sounding McNelly pickups) into a new, 6V6-loaded Bad Cat. The second was on the Eastman Guitars stand.

For the uninitiated, here's a history lesson: the Eastman Strings company was founded in 1992 by Qian Ni, a Chinese national who had travelled to the USA to study music. Ni established master violin and bow-making facilities in his home country, seeking to emulate the traditions of the late 19th Century European workshops. Following the principles of hand-crafting and

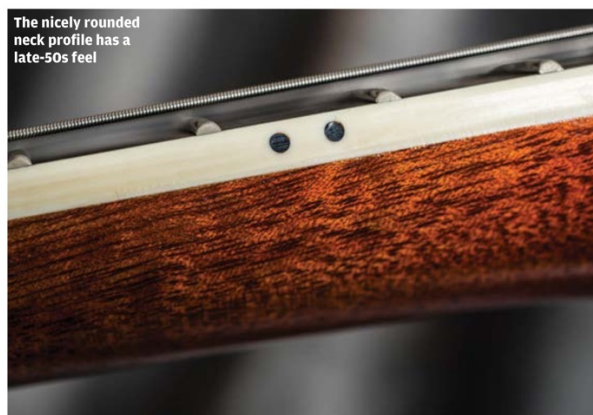
affordability, Eastman moved into archtop guitars, mandolins, flat-top acoustics and electrics.

Back at NAMM 2017, we had our first encounter with Eastman's new Antique Varnish series of electric guitars, including several vintage-inspired thinline and hollowbody models and the SB59/V - the company's first solidbody. Plugging into a 3rd Power Amps Wooly Coats combo (think boutique Princeton), we were left fairly smitten by the ES-330 style T64/V, the 6120-influenced T58/V and this curvaceous rewrite of

a rather influential late-50s singlecut from Michigan.

The first thing you notice when you pick up any of these guitars is the aged Antique Varnish finish, which is unlike the faux distressed paint jobs you'll find elsewhere in the market (find out more about the process on p61). As it's not nitrocellulose lacquer, there's no checking, but you do get an attractive patina that gives the instrument a kind of old guitar look and feel straight out of the case. The French-polished top coat contains shellac and is softer >

The first thing you notice about this Eastman is the aged Antique Varnish finish, which is unlike the faux distressed paint jobs you'll find elsewhere in the market



KEY FEATURES

- **PRICE** £1,769
- **DESCRIPTION** Single-cutaway solidbody electric guitar. Made in China
- **BUILD** Solid one-piece mahogany back with solid, figured bookmatched maple top. One-piece mahogany neck with 12-inch radius bound ebony fingerboard and ebony headstock fascia. Bone nut. 22 Jescar FW47104-P nickel silver frets. Pearl inlays
- **HARDWARE** Gotoh tune-o-matic bridge and stop tailpiece, vintage-style machineheads with aged plastic buttons
- **ELECTRICS** 2x Seymour Duncan Antiquity humbucking pickups with individual volume and tone controls, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch
- **SCALE LENGTH** 24.75"/629mm
- **NECK WIDTH** 43.4mm at nut, 53.1mm at 12th fret
- **NECK DEPTH** 22.3mm at nut, 25.6mm at 12th fret
- **WEIGHT** 8.6lbs/3.9kg
- **FINISHES** Antique Amber (as reviewed), Antique Classic
- **CONTACT** Eastman Musical Instruments Europe
www.eastmanguitars.eu

EASTMAN ANTIQUE VARNISH SB59/V £1,769
ELECTRIC GUITAR







Unlike a traditional Les Paul, the Eastman's neck is one-piece mahogany with no headstock wings. The fascia and fingerboard are ebony

LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

Gibson Custom's True Historic '59 Les Paul aged by Tom Murphy is - wait for it - **£8,999**, but it's the closest that the Nashville company has ever got to capturing the essence of a vintage Burst. A smarter choice might be to pick up a used Collector's Choice model and drop a set of Monty's PAFs in it: several friends of the mag have done just that and ended up with monster guitars for significantly less cash. The highly-rated **Rock N Roll Relics Heartbreaker Ice Tea £3,299** is hand-built in San Francisco and features Dave Allen pickups. In the same price range as the Eastman from the Gibson stable is the **Les Paul Traditional T 2017 £1,849**, which comes equipped with Burstbuckers and a hi-gloss nitrocellulose finish.

less resistant to stains than a nitro or poly finish. That said, it's easier to blend in repairs, and we're guessing that if you are attracted to this type of aesthetic in the first place then the prospect of adding your own playing wear to the areas where the amber colour coat has been rubbed through at the factory is appealing.

Seymour Duncan's alnico II-loaded, Antiquity humbuckers lend the guitar a lively, airy quality that's a satisfying platform for anything you throw at it

There's also a redder Antique Classic finish available, but if neither are your thing then the regular Eastman SB59 model is available in pristine nitro for £1,399. We'd love to see an Antique Varnish version of a lemon burst.

The one-piece mahogany back is bonded to a highly-figured, bookmatched flame maple cap that has vivid, three-dimensional shimmer as it moves under light, and while construction generally follows the LP

tradition, departures include a one-piece mahogany neck with no 'wings' on a headstock outline that we prefer to the larger, more flared design on Eastman's thinline and archtop models. 22 Jescar nickel silver, medium-jumbo frets have been installed neatly over the binding, so there's a little more playing area available than that offered by the traditional Gibson method, and there's no chance of strings catching on nibs.

The fingerboard, headstock fascia and truss-rod cover are ebony, the visible grain and lighter areas of which are more pleasing in combination with the body's amber hue than a jet-black variety might be. Some buffing compound is visible in the pores of the headstock veneer, but as our review model is a prototype we'll give Eastman the benefit of the doubt - in any case, it's something we've seen from other brands on USA-made instruments of twice the price.

There's no Les Paul-style sliver of maple visible in the cutaway, but lifting out the bridge humbucker reveals that the solid maple cap has a healthy depth of 16mm at its thickest point. Popping out the neck pickup reveals a long neck tenon extending about two thirds of the way into the pickup cavity - it all bodes well for old-school tonal depth and sustain.

In use

Dimensionally, the Eastman's neck feels closer to a typical R8 than an R9, but given the variation between nominally identical Gibson reissue models, let alone original Les Pauls, we're talking in rather general terms. Regardless, the Eastman's nicely-rounded profile means there's a satisfying fatness but not too

satisfying platform for almost anything you throw at it. The sonic signature reminds us a little of the Seth Baccus Nautilus we reviewed recently, loaded with Bare Knuckle VH II humbuckers: there's some PAF-like extended treble and a slightly softened lower-midrange, and the result is at once more vintage-sounding and more versatile than the syrupy mids of many single-cut instruments.

With the SB59/V hooked up to a clean-ish 6V6 combo, single-note lines are vocal and deliciously creamy, with audible bloom. The ebony fingerboard brings a little extra definition and snap and there's a selection of high-grade clean tones that you might not expect from an instrument that shares so many common features with a guitar coveted by several generations of hard-rockers - don't forget that original Bursts are capable of some of the prettiest cleans you'll ever hear and can even do country convincingly. Here, chiming arpeggios are remarkably well served.

Although proceedings darken up rather more than we'd like when the volume controls are rolled back, there's little to complain about in full-throated, wide-open drive mode. When the amp is cranked or a Tube Screamer is introduced (and the low end and mids really snap into focus with the latter), from classic-rock crunch to fluid, sustaining lead, it's all present and correct.

We think Eastman is really onto something with its Antique Varnish series. Most of us walk into a guitar shop or research a potential purchase with the model closely associated with our playing heroes in mind, but if we take a more pragmatic view, the reality is that you'd have to spend an awful lot more cash than this to get an aged finish with a play-me vibe and tones on a par with the SB59/V from an American-made instrument - either from a boutique maker or with a famous logo on its headstock. 🎸

Guitar VERDICT

- + Vintage-like feel and sounds make it difficult to put down
- + Custom Shop vibe at a production line price
- + Great to see a different approach in the me-too aged guitar market
- Brighter volume roll-off would make for even more versatility

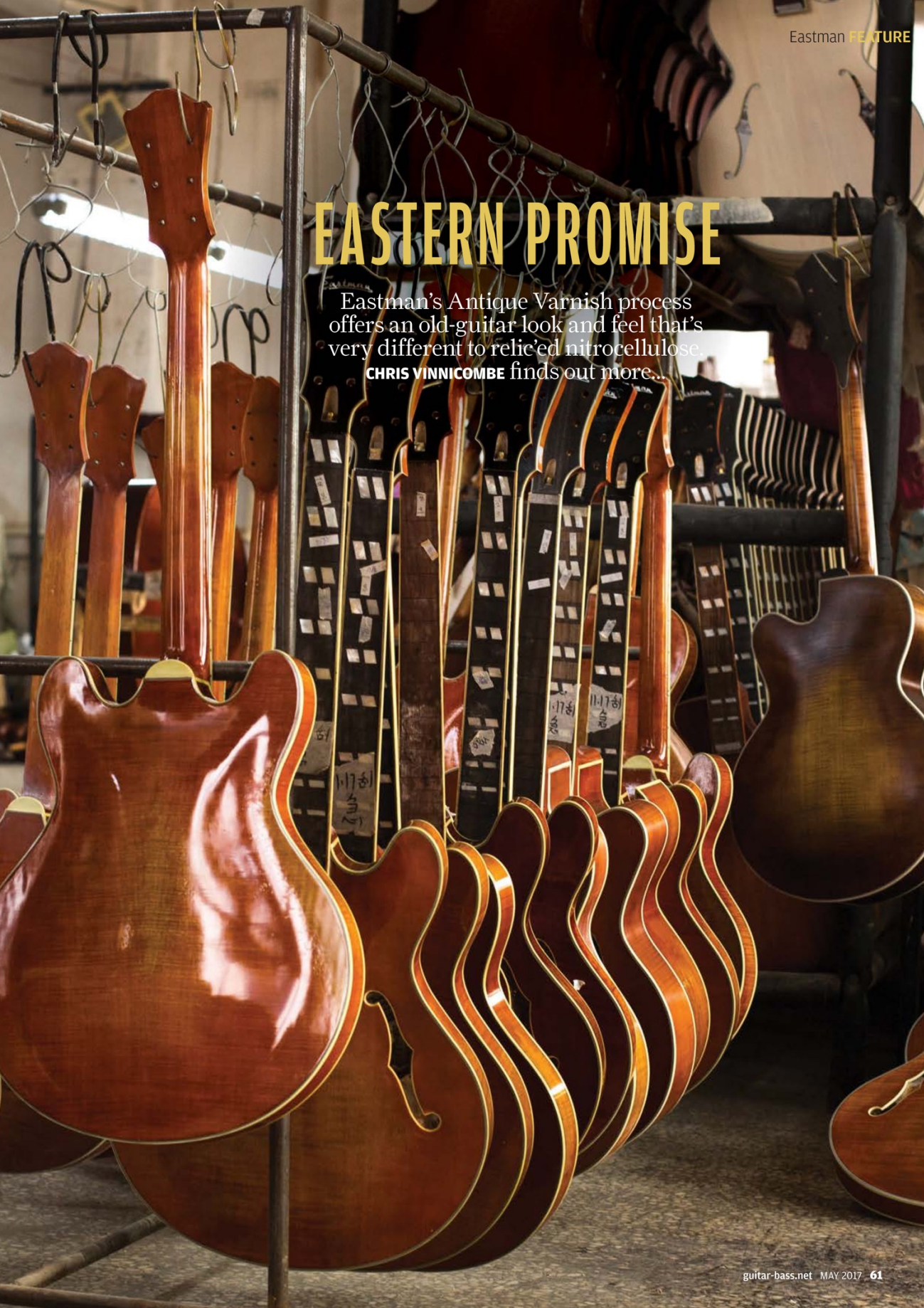
A tremendously playable single-cut with an expressive array of tones and an old-guitar aesthetic vintage fans will love

9/10

EASTERN PROMISE

Eastman's Antique Varnish process offers an old-guitar look and feel that's very different to relic'd nitrocellulose.

CHRIS VINNICOMBE finds out more...





“**E**astman violins have always distinguished themselves with their varnish, and especially their beautifully antiquated look and feel. My idea was to bring that beauty to the guitar division,” says Eastman Europe director and product manager Pepijn ‘t Hart when we quiz him about the company’s Antique Varnish finishing process.

The roots of the proprietary process go back to the earliest days of company founder Qian Ni’s workshop in China. Li Hua Rong, who manages Eastman’s Beijing-based high-end varnishing department, is willing to shed some light on how the unique finish is achieved. “The process itself,” she explains, “features six distinct steps, starting with base coat application to fill the grain, directly moving to colour application and concluding with the French polish.”

Ultimately, three or four coats are applied and sanded thin, and the result is softer than

lacquer, which the company claims creates a smoother tone and provides a suitable surface for ageing techniques that Li is reluctant to reveal even to members of the company’s inner circle.

As someone more familiar with violins than guitars, Li initially needed Pepijn to illustrate the areas in which a guitar would naturally wear over decades of playing. “It was very funny,” he remembers. “Li asked me to air guitar the sample instrument I brought to the varnish shop. There were no strings on the guitar, just a body and neck. I played it as if I’d just joined the Stones and she took notes about where and how a body should age naturally.

“When I wanted to see how their famous antiquing process was done, she firmly shut down and told me it was a secret and not for anyone to witness!” However she does it, it certainly creates a distinctive look and feel and brings something genuinely new to the artificially-aged guitar market. 🔄



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antique varnish series

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