Asher Guitars **PREMIER Guitar**



TESTED BY SHAWN HAMMOND SEPTEMBER 20, 2015

Considering how many revered players own his instruments—luminaries as diverse as Lindsey Buckingham, Maroon 5's James Valentine, Greg Leisz, Chris Robinson, and Redd Volkaert—it's surprising how low a profile Bill Asher has. We've admired his work before (Modern Builder Vault, December 2011), but this is our first crack at reviewing one of his lovely guitars.

PG spotted the GT-3 shown here at Summer NAMM this year and was immediately smitten. We asked Bill to send it off for a cover photo shoot last issue, and he did so after leaving Nashville for Venice, California, where he builds from a small shop while his wife, Jessica, handles marketing, web, and other business matters. Once we got the GT-3, we couldn't send it off to its next destination, Chicago Music Exchange, before giving it a whirl.

Teisco Del Grace

With its flowing single-cut outline, modified ashtray bridge, compensated brass saddles, and Tele Custom-ish anodized-aluminum pickguard, the Asher GT-3 might strike some as a boutique nod to Leo Fender's first solidbody. Only the Lollar Gold Foil pickups hint at another design inspiration just below the surface: In an effort to summon off-the-beaten-path tones of yesteryear, Bill Asher gave the GT-3 a body and neck of solid mahogany—just like many foil-sporting '60s Teisco Del Reys. He also greatly expanded the versatility of the instrument's traditional 5-way selector and master volume and tone knobs by adding a 6-position Varitone-like knob.

Finish and setup work on our surprisingly light GT-3 was primarily exquisite: Fret and nut ends were rounded and nicely polished for exceptional playing comfort,

the various parts fit together nicely (though there was a tiny, asymmetrical gap on the treble side of the neck joint), and both the rich tint on the back of the neck and the crème body finish were perfect, save for a pinhead-sized dimple at the neck heel.

Grace, Meet Grit

Though vintage Teisco, Harmony, and Airline guitars have skyrocketed in popularity in recent years, it's probably safe to say that the average guitarist still has little experience with the "gold-foil" pickups that are a big part of many of those old instruments' unique tones. Some more affordable guitars these days feature pickups with a similar visual aesthetic, but true gold-foils-the ones preferred by Cooder,



RATINGS

Pros:

Classic-yet-unique visual vibe. Quality craftsmanship. Lightweight. Exceptional EQ flexibility.

Cons:

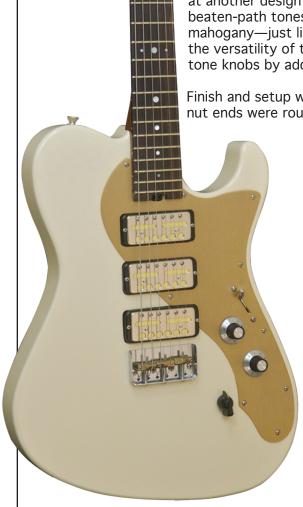
Pickups can sound strident with some rigs. Pricy. Minor detail issues.

Tones:

Playability:

Build/Design:

Value:







Jack White, and Dan Auerbach—feature a very unorthodox construction approach that uses rubberized ferrite magnets and a very thin wire bobbin. The resulting tones are harmonically rich and surprisingly hot.

How Jason Lollar's three authentically old-school Gold-Foils sound in the Asher is quite interesting—it's nearly equal parts Strat, Tele, Teisco and, thanks to the ultra-versatile Varitone knob, even Gibson. With typical Strat switching combinations, the GT-3 (in Varitone position 1) offers bridge-pickup sounds that are a cross between Strat-y sting and Tele twang, a couple of flavors of fat, funky in-between sounds, a beefy yet cutting middle option, and a robust, bell-like neck tone. But that's only scratching the surface.

Whoa, Trigger

To explore the GT-3's many switching options, I plugged it into my go-to rig, an EL34-powered Jaguar HC50 running in tandem with a 6973-powered Goodsell Valpreaux 21. This dual-amp setup blends clean, "American"-amp warmth with the girth and liveliness of a larger "British" amp on the verge of breakup. Through this rig, the GT-3 exhibited surprising volume and lots of bristling harmonics, two key qualities that players who prefer primal tones dig about authentic gold-foils: They tend to react to aggressive attack with a grittiness that can be positively primeval—perfect for rowdy roots music.

Each click through [the Varitone's] range decreases high-end sparkle and increases midrange skwonk and low-end definition.

With its volume and tone full up, and the Varitone in position 1, the Asher yielded this rawness in spades. Bringing the master tone control back proffered an impressive range of color, even quasi-cocked-wah sounds. Then there's the Varitone knob: Each click through its range decreases high-end sparkle and increases midrange skwonk and low-end definition. By position 6, the treble is so attenuated you get dark, smoky sounds reminiscent of a humbucker-equipped semi-hollowbody with tone knobs rolled back—even with the Asher's master tone fully clockwise. Even the soloed bridge pickup becomes remarkably warm at this setting.

The thing that struck me most about the GT-3's responsiveness was how the pickups are more like humbuckers than single-coils—not in terms of tone, but in how they interact with your rig. I primarily play vintage-style single-coils because of their sparkling clarity and how exceptionally adaptive they are to playing dynamics. With a heavy stainless steel pick I can go from a punchy, ruthlessly cutting sound to quiet tinkling by simply loosening my pick grip and easing up on my attack and/or using my fingertips. But when I plugged the Asher into this same rig that yields such spectacular results with Teles, Danelectro lipsticks, and Jazzmaster-style pickups, the steel pick was simply too grating for similarly nuanced playing, even with a very gentle attack and no boost or drive engaged.

Now, obviously I could have adjusted my amps' foundational tones or perhaps tried different picks, but I found these contextual lessons telling: To incorporate the Asher into a rig I find superb with many other guitars, I had to significantly alter my technique. That said, the alternate approach did yield wonderfully rich, delectably textured results—thumping R.L. Burnside-inspired rhythms from your thumb, down-home alt country when you grab and snap the stings, and sauntering roots rock when you flick, slap, and strum. Truly, these are sounds you just won't get from other pickup types.

The Verdict

Far from just another T-style, the Asher GT-3 is one of the most beautifully distinctive and sophisticatedly understated single-cuts we've seen in some time. But despite its Fender-ish outline, the GT-3 really shouldn't be thought of as a Tele variation. Depending on your rig, the unique tones from its Lollar Gold-Foils could be problematic if you'd like to switch between it and other guitars with more traditional pickups onstage. But as long as you know what you're getting into, you'll find that the pickups yield a wide array of rootsy tones, even before you factor in Bill Asher's simple yet astoundingly powerful control array. Simply put, in terms of features and execution, the GT-3 is a thoughtfully designed, lovingly built instrument that walks the line between tasteful art and highly practical tool.