

Asher Electro Hawaiian Model I & Electro Hawaiian Junior Lap Steels

Tested by Pete Madsen

Bill Asher has been building guitars and lap steels for more than 20 years. He has steadily amassed an impressive list of clients such as Ben Harper, Los Lobos, Cindy Cashdollar, and Greg Leisz. Asher Guitars offers a full line of acoustic and electric instruments, including the two electric laps reviewed here: the Asher Electro Hawaiian Model I and the Electro Hawaiian Junior.

I am primarily a bottleneck slide player, playing my guitar in an upright position in a host of open tunings, including open *D*, *G* and *C*. But the chance to check out these lap steels – and get used to holding a steel bar in my palm instead a piece of brass on my pinky – was fun and exhilarating. There are things you can do on a lap steel that you just can't do in bottleneck style. For instance, barring chords on the bass strings while leaving some open high strings can produce cool passages as you slide from chord to chord. Also, there are no annoying frets to get in the way of radical *slidicity*. You can get crazier with you technique, as long as you keep the strings damped. Lastly, it was an opportunity to try some exotic Hawaiian tunings such as *C6*.

Asher Model I

The first thing I noticed when I unpacked the two Ashers was how striking the Model I (\$2,950 retail/\$2,400 street) is. With a figured koa top and a highly complementary Honduras mahogany body, I was tempted to just stare at it for a while. Okay, not really. An instrument this cool looking is begging for you to plug it in and let it rip. Before I did, though, I slid around on it acoustically. The unamplified tone is surprisingly rich and loud, due in part to the eight cylindrical body chambers. You could definitely stick a mic on this Asher and record really cool, vibey tones. Both guitars sport Asher strings, gauged .014-.056, which are strung through the body. I believe this through-body stringing helps the guitars achieve their incredible sustain. Notes played unplugged on the Model I rang a good long time, with a decay that lasted upwards of ten seconds! I then plugged into a 1967 Fender Super Reverb amp and alternated between running clean or through a Boss DS-1 Distortion to check out the Model I's high-volume personality.

The Model I is equipped with two Asher custom lap steel pickups, a 3-way toggle switch, and one volume and one tone knob. Speaking of the knobs, the photo in the literature shows plastic knobs but the guitar I received had metal knurled knobs, which grip better when you get sweaty on stage, and which I prefer for volume and tone swells. The tone knob also has a push/pull pot to split the coils of the pickups.

The tone of the Model I is fat and clean. The Model I provides a sound that has what I would call a lot of "drama" – a wide spectrum from pristine highs to very resonant lows. The bridge pickup is powerful and punchy and works great for ripping blues or sacred steel sounds. The neck pickup has a much more delicate and complex sound, a very nice Hawaiian-style tone. A whole new sonic world opens up when you split the pickup coils

by pulling up on the tone knob, producing a more Tele-like tone that allowed me to dig in a little more with my thumbpick and fingers without getting overpowered by volume.

The Electro Hawaiian Model I has a really responsive tone knob. With the tone all the way down you can strum a chord, slide up and then bring up the tone for a wicked swell. You can also get a cool wah effect by bringing the tone up and down repeatedly.

If I had one complaint, it would be that the pickups don't seem balanced in volume, with the bridge pickup a bit louder than the neck pickup. I also had a problem with the input jack – my chord kept popping out. (Asher has changed the type of jack plate on the Model I to solve this problem.) These points aside, this is a *very* cool instrument and would be a great addition to any blues, rock, country, or Hawaiian guitarist's arsenal.

Asher Electro Hawaiian Junior

Thanks to its more modest price point and no-nonsense cosmetics, the Electro Hawaiian Junior (as tested \$1,500 retail/\$1,275 street) is billed as a “student” model. Both the neck and body are made of solid Honduras mahogany, painted in an understated yet elegant cream color. The Junior sports a single Asher custom lap steel pickup in the bridge position and one volume and one tone knob.

Although this guitar does not have the tonal complexity of its big brother, the tone it does have is *screamin'*, with an extremely punchy midrange. I play a lot of blues and blues-inspired music and I found this guitar was a perfect tonal match for my sensibilities. While the Model I seems to want you to search out its sonic variety and experiment with it, the Junior is more of a plug-in-and-go affair. Like its big brother, the Junior's tone knob is very responsive and provides much more tonal variety than you might expect from a one-pickup instrument. I particularly like running the Junior through the DS-I pedal. It handles the distortion better, providing a tighter sound than the Model I.

Kudos to Asher for making top-quality instruments that are aesthetically pleasing and have killer tone. These laps would be very musical choices for anyone interested in the lap world, particularly blues, country, or roots players who already have some bottleneck chops and are looking to expand their slide palette.