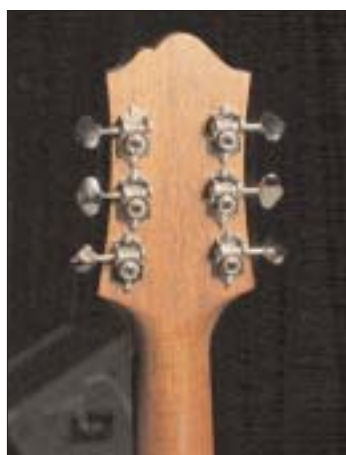


ZOOM



Vintage freaks will dig the retro-style Grover tuners.

INSTANT GRATIFICATION EF-500M

WHO'S IT FOR?
Budget-minded fingerpickers seeking a nicely crafted, small-body guitar with a vintage heritage.

KUDOS
Solid-wood construction. Excellent playability. Balanced tone.

CONCERNS
Satin finish looks plain.

PRICE
\$915 retail
\$549 street

INSTANT GRATIFICATION EF-500RA

WHO'S IT FOR?
Budget-minded fingerpickers seeking a nicely crafted, small-body guitar with snazzy looks and a vintage heritage.

KUDOS
Solid-wood construction. Extensive abalone inlays and ivoroid binding. Excellent playability. Balanced tone.

CONCERNS
Mix of "Depression-era" matte sunburst finish and flashy inlay visually incongruous.

PRICE
\$1,499 retail
\$899 street

EPIPHONE MASTERBILT SERIES

TESTED BY ANDY ELLIS

For the last several decades, the venerable Epiphone brand has been primarily associated with budget acoustic and electric imports. As a member of the Gibson family, Epiphone has the ability to produce inexpensive, *legal* copies of Gibson classics—including the Les Paul, ES-335, J-45, and J-200—as well as repros of its own '50s and '60s champs, such as the Casino thinline electric and Texan flat-top. Having recently introduced the excellent Elitist series (reviewed Jan. '03, when known as the "Elite" series)—a premium, made-in-Japan line of acoustics and electrics—Epiphone has taken aggressive steps to fill the huge price gap between its own starter models and pricier, made-in-U.S.A. Gibsons.

In another bold move, Epiphone has revived its Masterbilt mark, this time applying it to a series of Chinese-built acoustics. The Masterbilt steel-string range includes three basic styles—a small-body concert model, as well as square- and slope-shoulder dreadnoughts—all rendered in a variety of solid tonewoods. To get a feel for the extensive Masterbilt line, we reviewed four representative instruments: the EF-500M, EF-500RA, AJ-500RE, and DR-500P.

EXPLORING COMMON GROUND

Though these test instruments are very different animals, they share many attributes. For example, each model has a solid Sitka spruce top, hand-scalloped Sitka spruce braces, mahogany kerfing, a 25½"-scale rosewood fretboard, and a rosewood bridge.





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Players looking for vintage tone and vibe will dig the old-school dovetail neck joint and hide-glue construction. All four flat-tops feature 20-fret necks that join the body at the 14th fret and are adorned with carefully cut, cleanly set fretboard inlays.

With its asymmetrical “offset notch” tip, tapered sides, bell-shaped trussrod cover, and mother-of-pearl scripted logo and stickpin inlay, the headstock references classic Epiphone models from the 1930s. Masterbilts also feature open-back Sta-Tite tuners—a recent addition to the Grover line that look retro, but offer high-end performance, thanks to their 18:1 gear ratio.

One major departure from the Epiphones of yesteryear is the finish. Rather than using gloss lacquer, Epiphone relies on a thin satin coat to protect the wood. On the up side, the body gets to vibrate freely, so these Masterbilts are quite loud. But, as with all satin-finished guitars, handling noise is more pronounced with the Masterbilts than with a gloss-finished guitar. This finish also makes the instruments appear somewhat dull.

The interiors are uniformly tidy, with sharply cut braces, clean kerfing, and no visible glue residue. Though not spectacular, the body, fretboard, and headstock binding is decent. The fretwork is particularly noteworthy on all four instruments. The medium-size wire is nicely crowned, evenly trimmed, and well polished. Unlike many budget-oriented guitars (and even some expensive models), these frets have no file marks, flat spots, or sharp edges.

As a bonus, all Masterbilts include a lightweight, plush-lined, fabric-covered case constructed of rigid foam (similar to bike helmet lining). Shoulder straps and a generous external pocket give you the convenience of a gig bag, yet the foam shell provides significantly more protection than standard bag padding.

AUDITORIUM MODELS

With a generous 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ " nut width and digit-friendly 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ " string spread at the saddle, the two EF-500M and EF-500RA are specifically designed for fingerpickers. Measuring a tad more than 15" across the lower bout and 4 $\frac{3}{8}$ " deep, the smallish body is comfortable to hold on either leg. Epiphone calls this an auditorium instrument. Size-wise, its body resembles a Martin 000, but the fretboard has a longer, dreadnought-scale length.

Where the well-balanced 500M and

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500RA differ is in their body wood and trim. The plainer 500M features solid mahogany back and sides, and the pimped-out 500RA features solid rosewood construction, oodles of neatly cut and fitted abalone trim, and extensive ivory binding. The 500M has nickel Grovers, while those on the 500RA are gold plated. Reminiscent of Harmony and Stella paint from the '20s and '30s, the RA's matte sunburst finish is very cool. Whether its back-porch vibe complements or clashes with the ornate abalone inlay and ivory binding is something you'll have to decide for yourself.

These guitars arrived ready for the stage or studio. Both have very low actions, well-radiused nut slots and saddle, and light (.012-.053) strings. On the 500M, the *B* string sits a bit high in the nut, but otherwise the setups are stellar. Fans of pre-war Martins will murmur appreciatively when they feel the V neck profile, yet pickers used to slimmer, modern shapes aren't likely to object to the vintage contour.

Sonically, both flat-tops compete favorably with more expensive instruments. With its mahogany body, the 500M offers a round, balanced bass, sweet mids, and crisp, detailed highs. The rosewood 500RA has a bit more low-end twang and projects more aggressively. With almost zero neck relief, neither guitar is set up for pounding. I could make them buzz with vigorous strumming, but they both sounded fabulous for bossa-flavored comping, Travis picking, piedmont blues, and neo-classical counterpoint. Offering better-than-average intonation—even with uncompensated saddles—the EFs sound musical up and down the fretboard.

DREADNOUGHT MODELS

The Masterbilt dreadnoughts come in two body styles: a square-shoulder (think Gibson Hummingbird) and a slope-shoulder (Gibson Advanced Jumbo) model. The slope-shoulder AJ-500RE has a solid Indian rosewood body and came equipped with an optional Baggs Element Active System, a package that includes a saddle pickup, class-A endpin preamp, mesh battery bag, and soundhole-accessed volume control. From the first strum, I bonded with this light, responsive guitar. It plays fast, and it sounds fat and throaty. Cushioned by a

EF-500M SPECS

- 1³/₄" nut width
- 25¹/₂"-scale rosewood-on-mahogany neck with vintage V profile and dovetail joint
- Nickel-plated Grover 18:1 Sta-Tite vintage-style tuners
- Solid Sitka spruce top
- Hand-scalloped Sitka spruce braces
- Solid mahogany back and sides
- Bone nut
- Rosewood bridge

EF-500RA SPECS

- 1³/₄" nut width
- 25¹/₂"-scale rosewood-on-mahogany neck with vintage V profile and dovetail joint
- Gold-plated Grover 18:1 Sta-Tite vintage-style tuners
- Solid Sitka spruce top
- Hand-scalloped Sitka spruce braces
- Solid Indian rosewood back and sides
- Bone nut
- Rosewood bridge

INSTANT GRATIFICATION AJ-500RE

WHO'S IT FOR? Flatpickers, songwriters, and rockers who want the fat, twangy sounds of a rosewood slope-shoulder Gibson dreadnought without the corresponding price tag.

KUDOS Solid-wood construction. Excellent playability. Killer acoustic tone. Baggs electronics.

CONCERNS Satin finish looks plain.

PRICE \$1,165 retail/\$699 street

EDITORS' PICK AWARD

DR-500P SPECS

- 1¹¹/₁₆" nut width
- 25¹/₂"-scale rosewood-on-maple neck with dovetail joint
- Gold-plated Grover 18:1 Sta-Tite vintage-style tuners
- Solid Sitka spruce top
- Hand-scalloped Sitka spruce braces
- Solid maple back and sides
- Bone nut
- Rosewood bridge with compensated plastic saddle

AJ-500RE SPECS

- 1¹¹/₁₆" nut width
- 25¹/₂"-scale rosewood-on-mahogany neck with dovetail joint
- Gold-plated Grover 18:1 Sta-Tite vintage-style tuners
- Solid Sitka spruce top
- Hand-scalloped Sitka spruce braces
- Solid Indian rosewood back and sides
- Bone nut
- Rosewood bridge with compensated plastic saddle
- Satin natural finish
- L.R. Baggs Element System

twangy bass, the snappy mids and brassy overtones sustain and decay gracefully—a flatpicker's delight. The compensated plastic saddle provides excellent intonation, and the onboard electronics are handy, unobtrusive, and easy to use. Other than lowering the slightly high *B* string at the saddle, I wouldn't change a thing about this guitar. Heavy-handed players will have no problem overdriving the slinky setup, but increasing the relief on the rounded neck—or switching to a set of medium-gauge strings—would resolve such issues.

With its maple body and 3-piece maple neck, the square-shoulder DR-500P has a strong midrange emphasis. Weighing a little more than the 500RE, the 500P sounds barkier and less twangy. Combining the basic materials of Gibson's J-series jumbos with the body of a dreadnought, the 500P seems especially suited to the singer-songwriter who values chunk more than shimmer. Like its slope-shoulder sibling, the 500P

has an inviting setup, intonates sweetly, and is fun to play. Its round neck profile feels familiar and reassuringly sturdy.

CLOSING ARGUMENT

Boasting solid tonewoods, above-average construction, and competitive prices, Masterbilt guitars deliver an excellent balance of sound, playability, and value. I was especially jazzed by the slope-shoulder AJ-500RE, which stands up sonically to similar instruments costing two or three times as much. If you can live without the luscious gloss finish of a Gibson Advanced Jumbo, you'll find much of its mojo in this Masterbilt sibling. The AJ-500RE's burly, yet crisp acoustic tone, sexy shape, superb playability, Baggs Element System, and lightweight case make it an excellent choice for up-and-coming flatpickers, rootsy rockers, and hard-working club musicians. You get a lot of guitar for about \$700, which is why the AJ-500RE receives an Editors' Pick Award. ■

INSTANT GRATIFICATION DR-500P

WHO'S IT FOR?

Songwriters and rockers seeking dreadnought volume with a pronounced midrange.

KUDOS

Solid-wood construction. Excellent playability. Punchy tone.

CONCERNS

Satin finish looks plain.

PRICE

\$965 retail
\$579 street

CONTACT

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