

The guitars we've rounded up for our electro-acoustic group test are: (clockwise from top left) Yamaha APX-Special II, Washburn EA20, Fender Montara Flame and the Applause AE-136. The picture opposite shows their relative depths – the bowl-backed Applause is the only deep-soundbox model on test.

CD TRACK 13

PHOTOS: ASHTON JAMES / THANKS TO WALCOT RECLAMATION 01225 444784

EA ecstasy

An acoustic guitar is a vital part of a player's armoury, and a built-in pickup makes it ideal for live use. KARL FOSTER tracks down four good-value instruments.

ACOUSTIC guitars have always been a swine to amplify. The elements that give the instrument its loud tone – the soundbox and soundboard – create severe hassles when you stick a microphone in front of it and turn the PA up. It's bad enough trying to stop a mic from howling, never mind a stringed wooden box that's been designed to respond to vibrations and amplify them mechanically.

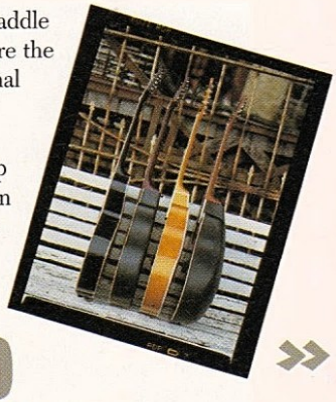
To beat that annoying 'woooommmmmm' that emanates from the speakers, the sound engineer has to cut offending frequencies, which thins out the guitar's sound.

Another drawback is that once you've got an acceptable sound, you have to hold the guitar at the right distance from the mic throughout the performance. Fine if you're playing seated, but it's hard to hold still when standing up. Move a little too close to the mic and we're back into feedback territory. Back off and the volume drops away very quickly.

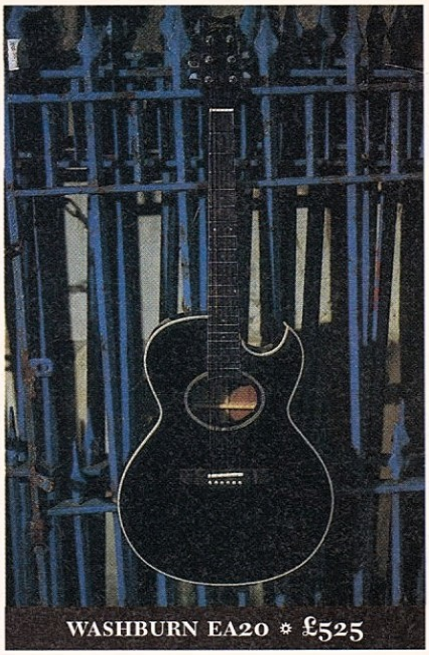
One solution is to use a magnetic pickup mounted across the soundhole, but you lose the guitar's natural tone this way. Alternatively, you could install a pickup that responds to the vibration of strings and soundboard – which is exactly what the four manufacturers in this group test have done.

Each model under review has an under-saddle transducer and active tone circuitry to capture the instrument's natural sound while offering tonal flexibility and on-stage mobility.

To help you decide which is the right instrument for your needs, we've rounded up a sample of four electric-acoustics of between £400 and £550 and rated their performance. Let's see how they get on…



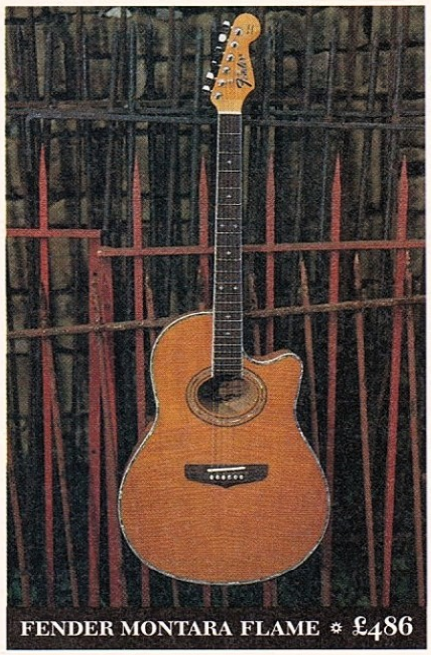
SUB-£550 electric-acoustics



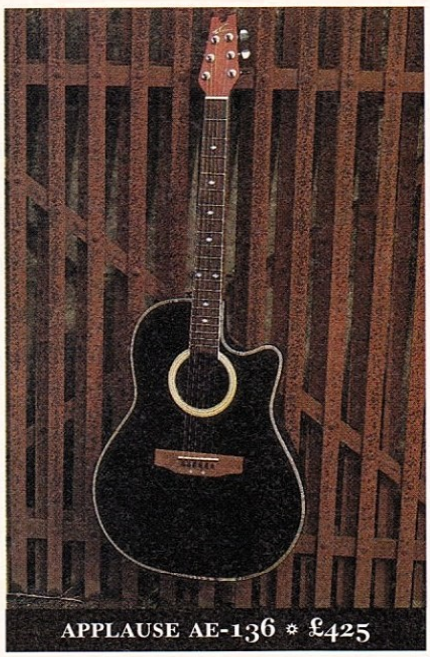
WASHBURN EA20 * £525



YAMAHA APX-SPECIAL II * £465



FENDER MONTARA FLAME * £486



APPLAUSE AE-136 * £425

THE CONTENDERS

	WASHBURN EA20	YAMAHA APX-SPL II	FENDER MONTARA	APPLAUSE AE-136
FRETS	21	22	22	20
NUT WIDTH	43mm	43mm	43mm	41.5mm
TOP	Spruce	Birds eye maple	Flame maple	Spruce
BACK/SIDES	Mahogany	Agathis (kauri pine)	Maple	Lyrachord
NECK	Mahogany	Nato	Maple	Mahogany
FINGERBOARD	Rosewood	Rosewood	Rosewood	Rosewood
TUNERS	Grover chrome	Yamaha chrome	Fender chrome	Ping chrome
EQ	3-band & contour	2-band	3-band	2-band
All models feature under-saddle pickups and active tone circuitry				

EA ecstasy

CONSTRUCTION

THOSE far-eastern luthiers certainly know their craft. Each model is constructed and finished very nicely for the price. The Korean Fender is the flashest-looking of the bunch, with abalone inlaid around the soundboard and soundhole. A gloss finish shows off the flame maple, while the neck is enhanced with neatly inlaid cruciform fret markers. The dressing of the narrow frets isn't so hot – they feel rough at the ends – and a good look at the inside shows up crudely glued lining, particularly around the cutaway. Still, the wood's good, particularly the straight-grained rosewood of the fretboard.

Yamaha's APX presents a wonderfully purple face to the world. The gloss lacquer appears to sink into the birds eye maple a little, but the lushness of the purple-burst finish makes this machine stand out. I'm not a fan of the matt-black rear, though. The back and sides are made from agathis (kauri pine, a softwood), which is unusual for a steel-strung acoustic so it could be that the matt coating is a strengthener.

Inside the body there's excellent workmanship. The glue is very neat and we've a Martin-esque bracing job, with narrow, high braces in the upper bout and fat, shallow braces in the lower. Neck-wise, the fat frets are very well finished, though the rosewood fingerboard is a little bland-looking. But, the mahogany of the neck has a good, straight grain.

The Applause has an artificial bowl made of Lyrachord, which apparently is formed in America then shipped off to Korea to have the rest of the guitar stuck on to it. It's a deep bowl with a rather ugly splatter-effect finish, but the audience won't notice. They'll be too busy preening themselves in the high-gloss, black, spruce soundboard. Inside, the struts look a little rough, as does the glue job, but the ivoroid binding around the outside is neat enough considering how tricky it must be to match the soundboard to the bowl. Neck-wise, fret dressing is not up to the standard of the Yamaha, but the rosewood board has a nice, straight grain.

Washburn's EA20, also known as the Newport, is another Korean-built instrument and is very black indeed. The all-over gloss black finish and off-white binding are very well done, and there's neat construction inside. The darker rosewood of the fretboard looks good, while the fretting itself is reasonable. The only real quibble is the design of the bridge, which looks a little chunky compared with the elegance of the rest of the guitar.

Construction ranking

1. YAMAHA APX-SPECIAL II
2. WASHBURN EA20
3. APPLAUSE AE-136
4. FENDER MONTARA FLAME

FEATURES

WASHBURN has some pretty trick devices on the EA20. It's the only guitar here with individual bridge saddles, indicating that the manufacturer hasn't had to make too many compromises on action and intonation. Under-saddle Fishman pickups feed into a British-built Equis II pre-amp which features three-band equalisation via slider controls, an overall level control and a knob marked 'contour'. This enables you to sweep the mid band of the EQ to fine-tune your sound. Very handy indeed, as are the battery power indicators. Power comes on when you plug a lead in and a green LED flashes to tell you this, which is a mite distracting. A red LED comes on when the battery is low, and presumably goes off completely when the battery's very low indeed.

A peek at the bottom-block area reveals an assembly housing the battery compartment, output jack socket and – a bit of a pro feature – a male XLR connector. It's obvious that this guitar is intended for serious stage use, which makes the cheapie-plastic strap button at the lower bout look like a bit of an oddity. Even more curious is the absence of a strap holder on the upper bout or heel. Word is that Washburn doesn't usually have a second strap button on its guitars, but has been known to install one if you ask.

The Applause delivers through a piezo under-saddle pickup toting bass and treble sliders and a gain control. These sit proud of the body so you've got to take a little care not to knock them. A check switch helps you monitor the battery, which is inserted by means of a compartment in the top of the upper bout – a neat and obvious place for it. The pinless walnut bridge, a typical Ovation feature, makes for easy re-stringing and a non-skid pad on the lower waist stops this bowl-backed guitar slipping off your knee when played seated. Which brings me to the most obvious feature – that big Lyrachord bowl tacked on to the soundboard.

There are mixed opinions on composite soundboxes. Some people hate them, some people swear by them. One thing they are, however, is strong. Of all the guitars here, the Applause would probably come out best in a fight. However, the bowl, and the fan-bracing pattern of the soundboard (rather than x-bracing common to most steel-strung guitars) do affect the sound.

Yamaha gets around the control-knocking problem with spring-mounted rotary pots. Press the top of the pots and up they pop. You dial in bass, treble and volume settings, then push them back down. Neat. I prefer sliders because you can see your settings at a glance, but the contacts in a rotary pot are less likely to get gunked up.

The matt finish on the back and sides is meant to stop the instrument from sliding about against your body while playing, which can be a problem with light acoustics. It still looks funny on a flat-backed acoustic, though.

One thing that really grates is battery access. Aside from not being able to tell when the battery's past its best, removing the battery to check or replace it is a right old faff. You have to loosen the bottom strings, reach into the soundhole and prise the holder from its Velcro strip to release the cell.

While the Fender has the most copious cosmetics, it's also a bummer on battery replacement. There's a springy metal clip mounted inside the guitar at the upper waist which holds the battery, so it's string-loosening time again when power is low. However, it does have a power LED indicator and three-band EQ controls, the latter of which are a bit fiddly, but so small that it's unlikely they'll get knocked. The traditional in-line Fender headstock also features, which some people prefer because it's easier to tweak the tuning with your right hand if you're fretting with your left. Of course, this type of headstock necessitates the traditional Fender string retainers because it doesn't angle back far enough to keep the top strings happily ensconced in the nut.

Features ranking

1. WASHBURN EA20
2. APPLAUSE AE-136
3. FENDER MONTARA FLAME
4. YAMAHA APX-SPECIAL II

Alternatively...

There's quite a number of options available from the makers represented here, so call for info. Honourable mentions also go to the Takamine G series (EG10 and EG15 non-cutaway at £475 and £495 respectively, plus the EG332C cutaway dreadnought at £529), the Seagull S6 with LR Baggs 3-band active EQ (£439, or £515 for the cutaway version) and Peavey's DP21P (£455) and SDII PCE (£525).

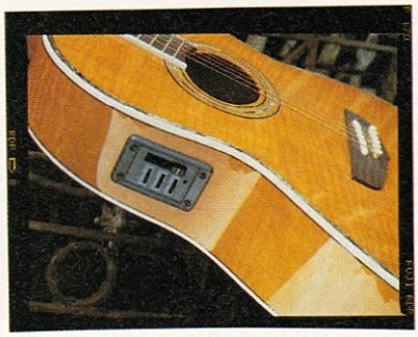
On the CD

TRACK 13 The guitars appear in this order;
Applause AE-136,
Fender Montara Flame,
Yamaha APX Special II,
Washburn EA20.
Each is played with a variety of techniques and dynamics, around the same eight-bar chord pattern. They are all recorded direct from their pickups using reverb, EQ and a small amount of compression. The bass line is played by a Wal Pro-I through a compressor. The backing track was written on an Atari ST running Steinberg's *Cubase* software with a Roland Sound Canvas. Guitars and bass: Joe Bennett

Top left we've the Washburn with recessed controls. The Yamaha, top right, has pop-up knobs, while Fender's EQ, bottom left, has small, fiddly sliders. Applause's EQ is vulnerable to knocks.









SOUND

THESE guitars are designed with amplification in mind, but the unplugged, natural sound is going to have a major bearing on what comes out of the speakers.

The Applause has perhaps the most distinctive tone, with typical Ovation-esque 'zing'. The tone of bowl-backed guitars really cuts through and, while some consider the sound plasticky, I like the bite of it. It's a deep-bowl design so you'd expect the bottom end to be fuller than the shallow-bodied guitars on test, but bass response is not all that significant. The pickup also performs well, giving a good representation of the guitar's tone.

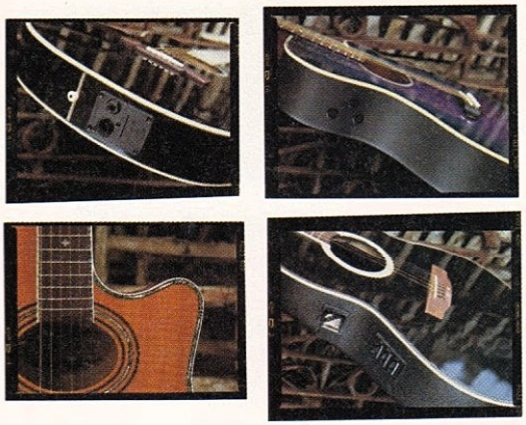
The best balanced guitar acoustically is the Fender. The strings sing across the whole range, which is great for full chord work. Plug it in, though, and the sound becomes brittle. Fiddling with the EQ makes some impression, but the pickup doesn't seem to handle the instrument's natural depth of tone too well.

While the Yamaha plays very nicely, its small body makes for a middly sound and boxy bottom. The tone of the unplugged instrument is quite mellow and this follows through when it's amplified. Probably better used through a mixer for laid-back, 'woody' passages – a little gentle jazz, maybe.

Washburn's is a very warm-sounding instrument when played acoustically. Again, the bottom-end is a little boxy, although brand-new strings enliven it considerably. Plug it into the desk and the Fishman pickup/Equis pre-amp combination really shines, offering a smooth, flat response that really does sound like a miked-up acoustic.

Sound ranking

1. WASHBURN EA20
2. APPLAUSE AE-136
3. FENDER MONTARA FLAME
4. YAMAHA APX-SPECIAL II



Certain features of each guitar stand out immediately. Clockwise from top left: Washburn's EA20 offers pro-style XLR audio out; Yamaha's pop-up volume and EQ knobs avoid control-bashing hassle; Applause has a neat battery compartment, and just look at the inlay on the Fender.

SUMMARY

HAVING given all four instruments a good shakedown, ranked their various aspects and no doubt put one or two noses out of joint among the manufacturing fraternity, you should have some idea of which is the right guitar for you. Although the Washburn scores well overall, you may prefer the mellow tone and playability of the Yamaha. Then again, the distinctive tones offered by the bowl-backed Applause could sway you, or even the deeply gorgeous looks of the Fender and its sweet acoustic tone.

Choosing a guitar is a very personal thing and the best way to do it is to go to your local dealer and try a few out for yourself. This test aims to help you make informed judgements on certain criteria, but what will really make the difference is what your hands and your ears tell you. The CD soundbytes offer a better idea of the sound, but there's nothing quite like picking up the instrument and playing it to really help get your priorities in order. TG

EA ecstasy



BEST BUY

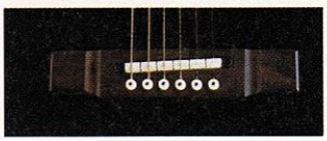
Washburn EA20

Although it's the most expensive of the group, Washburn's EA20 represents an excellent buy. It plays well, is well built and the Fishman pickup makes for an excellent direct-injected sound. The EA20 is one of Washburn's Festival range (Nuno Bettencourt gave his name to the Platinum Edition EA22, you know) which features acoustics in various body depths and finishes.

CONTACT

- **PEAVEY:** Peavey, 0536 205520
- **SEAGULL:** Hohner, 0222 887333
- **TAKAMINE:** Korg 081 427 5377
- **WASHBURN:** Washburn 0462 482466
- **APPLAUSE:** Trace Elliot 0621 851851
- **FENDER:** Arbiter 081 202 1199
- **YAMAHA:** Yamaha 0908 366700

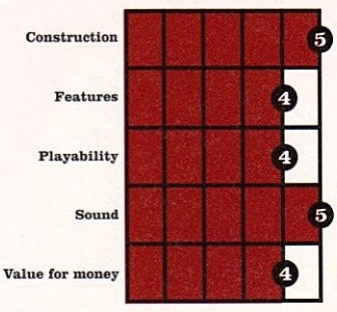
For full addresses see p137



TOTAL GUITAR VERDICT

Washburn EA20

Electric-acoustic guitar • £525



Great tone from the pickup and EQ, plus excellent build quality put the EA20 at the head of the pack.

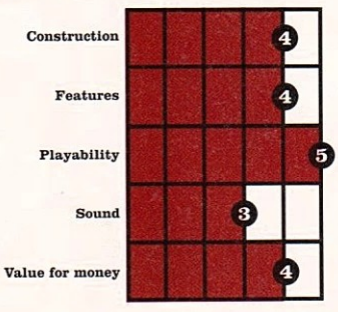
Total rating 88%



TOTAL GUITAR VERDICT

Yamaha APX-SPECIAL II

Electric-acoustic guitar • £465



A mellow guitar with excellent feel. What it lacks in flexibility is made up for in playability.

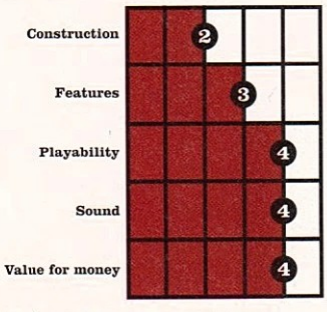
Total rating 80%



TOTAL GUITAR VERDICT

Fender Montara Flame

Electric-acoustic guitar • £486



Fender has a really good looker here. It plays well and performs best unplugged.

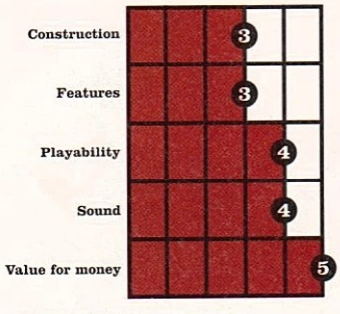
Total rating 68%



TOTAL GUITAR VERDICT

Applause AE-136

Electric-acoustic guitar £425



An excellent budget buy, the Applause has bags of character and a very comfortable neck.

Total rating 76%