

GEAR EPIPHONE MASTERBILT AJ-500M VS

This guitar features all solid wood construction: a Sitka spruce top and mahogany back and sides

Epiphone guitars are famous for their slim comfortable necks, and this guitar is no exception

£625

EPIPHONE MASTERBILT AJ-500M

YESTERDAY, KICK-ASS (AFFORDABLE) ACOUSTICS SEEMED SO FAR AWAY... WORDS: ED MITCHELL

> THE SIZZLE

Let's play a game of word association. What's the first thing that pops into your head when you hear the name Epiphone? We're not mind readers, you understand, but we'll wager a bet that you just got a nice image of a reasonably priced Les Paul floating about in your skull. Epiphone have done such a sterling job with their electric guitar range that it's easy to forget these guys make some decent acoustics, too. Well, we reckon their new AJ-500M VS acoustic could be the guitar to change that. Straight from the box this guitar gave us a real wake up call, with regards to the great shape Epiphone's acoustic range is in these days.

The AJ-500M VS is part of the Masterbilt series. By the way, before our inbox is swamped with emails from eagle-eyed typo spotters, the word Masterbilt is supposed to be spelled that way. That's what Epiphone reckon, anyway. Can we move on now?

WHAT'S IT GOT?

Whether or not this guitar turns out to be any good, you have to admit it's pretty. The round-shouldered body looks classy with that vintage sunburst finish. The dead tree bits of the AJ-500M VS are all-solid. You can get all-solid wood guitars for half the price of this Epiphone these days, but it always delights our eyeballs when we scan

WHO'S IT FOR?

Any player that gets moist for a great acoustic guitar sound. Like us!

INFORMATION

ORIGIN: Korea
TYPE: Round-shoulder electro-acoustic
TOP: Premium solid Sitka spruce
BACK AND SIDES: Premium solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, with dot inlays
FRETS: 20 medium
HARDWARE: Nickel open gear Grover machineheads
PICKUP: L.R. Baggs Element
CASE: No
FINISH OPTIONS: Vintage sunburst (shown), natural satin
CONTACT: Rosetti 01376 550033
WEB: www.epiphone.com

ALTERNATIVELY

Washburn D52SW CE – £599
Taylor 110-E – £699
Guild GAD-40CE – £599

the specification sheet and see that we're getting real chunks of lumber. What's so great about solid woods anyway, we hear you ask? Many affordable acoustic guitars are made from sheets of wood laminated together with glue. It does the job, after a fashion. Solid wood is different: it's sliced from the tree and turned into parts for the guitar and the only glue used is to stick the parts together. Solid wood flexes and vibrates and well, it just sounds alive. It also allows the tone of the guitar to mature with age, producing a sound that'll put a tilt in your kilt for years to come.

There's a term used in the guitar industry to describe some budget instruments made in the Far East. Insiders call these instruments 'G.L.O's' or 'guitar-like objects.' Basically, this is a mass-produced product that looks like a guitar, produces a fairly decent tone but is not expected to last a lifetime, and in some cases not even until the next General Election. And crucially, it won't age well. These items will service the needs of the beginner, but they're a stopgap until something better can be afforded. The thing is, the price gap between G.L.O's and quality guitars, like this Epiphone, used to be wider than the Grand Canyon – we're talking a £1,000 plus. These days, it's just a few hundred pounds. OK, that's still a lot of money, but it does mean the dedicated

acoustic guitarist has a real chance of getting their hands on something great.

Right, let's get back to talking about wood. The AJ-500M VS has a solid Sitka spruce top and solid mahogany back and sides. The part of the neck that fits your palm is also made from mahogany while the fingerboard is our old pal, rosewood. The 20 frets are well seated and quite chunky for an acoustic guitar, but we like that. The headstock carries a full compliment of six vintage style open-gear Grover machineheads. And we love the headstocks understated elegance with a touch of Art Deco style. This is starting to sound like *Changing Rooms*, so we'll move on...

There's a hidden surprise in the AJ-500M VS. If you peer into the soundhole, you'll see a little wheel poking out. This is the volume control for the onboard L.R. Baggs pickup system. The only other indication that it's in there is the strap button/cable input on the bottom of the guitar and the battery bag inside. We like the fact that the pickup doesn't compromise the guitar's great looks.

BUILT TO LAST?

An acoustic guitar is a hollow wooden box with a neck sticking out of it. If you sit on it, you'll break it. Drop it down a flight of stairs and it'll be fucked. Put it next to a radiator, knock it over while you're cleaning

EPIPHONE MASTERBILT AJ-500M VS GEAR



Take a peek inside and you'll see this guitar's discretely mounted L.R. Baggs pickup system



your bedroom, or let it get soaking wet and you'll spend the next few hours trying to explain your hapless antics to your insurance company. Acoustic guitars need to be loved. The AJ-500M VS is built as well as any acoustic guitar we've tried over the years. It will outlive you, *if* you treat it with respect.

HANDS ON

There's nothing more satisfying than getting your hands on a truly great acoustic guitar. Nothing that we're allowed to print anyway. A guitar that comes to life in your hands, one that makes every chord and lick sound like a million dollars, is worth its weight in gold. You can always give a mediocre electric guitar a tonal leg up with a decent set of pickups and a proper setup. Or just whack it through some effects to disguise its infuriating puniness. An acoustic guitar has

to come up with the goods on its own. If its tone sucks then there's not a lot you can do about it.

That's why picking up the AJ-500M VS gave us such a buzz. This thing sings! Have a listen to the little ditty we recorded with it on this month's TG CD (Gear Demo). Isn't that pretty? The fingerpicked rhythm part you can hear was played on the new Paul McCartney Texan (see boxout overleaf), straight to microphone with no effects. We were blown away by Macca's guitar, but then it does cost £3,000. But just listen to the performance we got from the AJ-500M VS. We used it to play the lead licks on the tune. In that instance, we recorded the guitar using a microphone and the inbuilt L.R. Baggs pickup. And no, that's not cheating. Combining the two signals results in a well-rounded recorded tone – you get the sound of the guitar and the room you're recording in. Try it the next time you're laying down some acoustic tracks.

As you can hear on the CD, the AJ-500M VS didn't disgrace itself in the company of its well-heeled brother. And it costs a fifth less than the McCartney model! Studio engineers love guitars like this because they take the hard work out of getting a decent sound on tape. TG's engineer was pleased with the behaviour of both our Epiphones. It took a couple of minutes to set up the mics and plug the pickup into the recording desk, but then we were good to go. The pickup system is excellent. It'll sit you above the mix in a live setting, but you probably won't need it for small solo gigs because this guitar is

loud. Even fingerpicked we found that the tone leapt from the soundhole with plenty of power backing it up. It actually made the guitar difficult to test at first – well, it was midnight and our walls are paper thin. Once the neighbours had buggered off to work, we put the AJ-500M VS through its paces.

Kicking off with a little fingerpicking, we were pleased to hear a bright full tone. There's plenty of treble for sure, but we got oodles of bass to balance out the sizzle. The bass strings produce that piano sustain thing you expect from top quality US-made guitars. By that we mean if you strike the string, it sustains for ages. Nigel Tufnel of Spinal Tap would be proud!

Strum this guitar with anything approaching vigour, and you'll awake a mighty beast. Like we said, this guitar has a big voice (although it never gets out of hand) even when you're bashing the hell out of it Proclaimers-style. The sound is always balanced, which we expect from a megabucks American guitar but not from an axe that will set us back £625. This mid-priced guitar is beginning to look pretty special. We'd be surprised if it plays great, too. Surely, they have cut corners somewhere? Come on Epiphone dudes, 'fess up!

Well, spank TG and call us rotten little doubters because the playability of the AJ-500M VS is every bit as good as the tone. The necks on vintage Epiphone guitars were generally slim, and that is what we have here. It's no toothpick, but the neck profile is accommodating enough to make a whole night of barre chords easy on your left hand. →

Take a look at all that glorious mahogany! The satin finish is flawless



GEAR EPIPHONE MASTERBILT AJ-500M VS

→ The action (string height) is comfortable, too. Epiphone have not tried to give this guitar the type of action that you would expect on one of their Les Pauls. A low string height on an acoustic can choke the tone and sustain. By raising the strings slightly, Epiphone have allowed the guitar to breathe. Even if you're used to an electric guitar setup with a low action, you will make friends with this guitar quickly. We did...

THE BOTTOM LINE

You know sometimes when you meet that special person? Y' know, the one who makes you feel good, laughs at all your jokes and feels nice when you give them a loving squeeze? They even get on with your mates and everybody reckons you make a lovely couple. Well, that happened to us. Only it was a guitar that gave us the smug grin that says, 'I'm sorted.' Epiphone have really come up with the goods with the AJ-500M VS. Spelling mistake or not, whoever is responsible for building the Masterbilt guitars deserves a big fat bonus. Well, a kiss and a cuddle at the very least...

To be honest, we've played some mighty fine acoustic guitars over the years, but we

can't remember the last time we tried an acoustic we instantly wanted to buy. The AJ-500M VS is that guitar. We love the way it looks, the sensible approach to playability and that discrete L.R. Baggs pickup system. More than that, we're crazy about the sound. It fills the room like some guitar-driven surround sound system. We'd be happy to take the McCartney Texan home, of course, but the AJ-500M VS is no booby prize.

"Hopefully, from now on when you hear the name Epiphone you'll think of this guitar, one of the greatest guitars to pass through TG Towers"

Like we said, the price difference between those 'G.L.O's' and quality instruments like our Epiphone, is narrowing all the time. At £625, this guitar is already a bargain, but shop around and you'll get a great deal. Hopefully, from now on when you hear the name Epiphone, you'll think of this guitar, one of the greatest guitars (not just acoustic) to pass through TG Towers.

FOR: The whole package, baby!

AGAINST: We've spent all our Xmas money!

TG RATING



TOTAL GUITAR EXCLUSIVE! EPIPHONE PAUL McCARTNEY TEXAN

TAKE YOUR FIRST LOOK AT MACCA'S NEW SIGNATURE EPIPHONE PRICE £2,995

As someone once said, "Money can't buy me love." True, but if you've got plenty of green you can have a ridiculously great acoustic guitar. In fact, you can buy a reissue of the guitar that Paul McCartney used to record The Beatles' classic *Yesterday*. And that's the guitar you see before you – the Epiphone Texan. Why is a bass player getting his own signature acoustic? Because Macca wasn't just an outstanding bassist, he also played great guitar (listen to *Blackbird* and *Mother Nature's Son* from The Beatles' 'White' album to hear Macca in top form).

To commemorate McCartney's association with Epiphone, the company has produced a limited run of 250 US-made Texans and a further 1,964 Japanese-made guitars. The production run of the Japanese Texans signifies 1964, the year that The Beatles conquered America. We asked Epiphone to fly us a Japanese-made Texan from the States so we could try it before anyone else... and they did! The American version, built in Gibson's Montana factory, costs the best part of £8,000. Our guitar costs less than half that, but it's still a hefty chunk of change. Can it really be worth that much?

That's a tough one to answer, folks. What we can say is that this guitar is awesome. The construction and finish are exactly

what you'd expect for a top line guitar. It reeks of quality and attention to detail. The specifications are similar to our AJ-500M VS. Solid woods are used throughout: spruce for the top and mahogany for the back and sides and neck. The rosewood fingerboard has 1960s style parallelogram inlays that look the business. Of course, the first thing we did when we took the Texan out of its case was to have a go at *Yesterday*. Paul McCartney could have taken his pick of any acoustic guitar, but we can see why he picked the Epiphone Texan. It's so easy to play for one thing, thanks to its slim neck. It also has plenty of volume (although not quite as much as our AJ-500M VS) and it should go down a storm at the local acoustic night. It certainly proved its worth in our recording studio, as you can hear on this month's TG CD.

If this guitar was built in the US, then £3,000 wouldn't be considered outrageous. The question seems to be, 'Is Japanese craftsmanship worth less than the work of Americans?' We underestimated the price of this guitar (before we'd even tried it) simply because it was made in Japan. That was our mistake. The craftsmen who built this guitar did an amazing job and if we had the money, we'd bag this guitar quicker than you could say *Helter Skelter*.

INFORMATION

ORIGIN: Japan
TYPE: Round shoulder acoustic
TOP: Solid spruce
BACK & SIDES: Solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, with vintage 1964 profile
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, with parallelogram inlays
FRETS: 20 medium
HARDWARE: Nickel vintage style machineheads with white buttons
ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Adjustable bridge saddle
CASE: Professional padded case
FINISH OPTIONS: Antique natural (shown)
CONTACT: Rosetti 01376 550033
WEB: www.epiphone.com