

MASTER MODELS

MASTERBILT BY THE MASTER RACE? ACCORDING TO THE PUNDITS, CHINA IS SET TO REPLACE THE US AS THE DOMINANT SUPERPOWER. **PAUL ALCANTARA** PACKS HIS LITTLE RED BOOK AND HEADS EAST...

Introduced all the way back in 1931, Epiphone's original Masterbilt [stet] series was intended to outdo then-competitors Gibson, with a line of archtop guitars that were bigger and fancier than anything that the Kalamazoo-based company had to offer. As it turned out, Gibson would have the last laugh when it acquired the Epiphone name in 1957, having remained its parent ever since.

Several of the old Epiphone models continued in production, alongside which Gibson added a number of Epiphone-branded versions of its own guitars. Among these were the round-shouldered Texan (J-45/50), square-shouldered Frontier and rosewood-bodied Excellente models, the latter of

which was fancier than any of the dreadnought flattops in Gibson's own catalogue. With the close of the 1960s, production was moved to Japan, and for a time the Epiphone name was applied to a series of entry-level acoustic and electric instruments.

Four decades days later, Epiphone is of course now firmly established as the official 'entry level' option to Gibson-style guitars, just as Squier is to Fender. Built in China, the revived Masterbilt line ups the ante, however, and is intended to bridge the gap between Epiphone's lower end range, and the Japanese-built Elitist guitars.

While neither of the guitars on review is intended to be an accurate recreation of a vintage Epiphone or Gibson model, they nevertheless manage to capture many of the qualities of their illustrious forebears. ➔

GBINFO



EPIPHONE MASTERBILT DR-500PNS

PRICE: £779
 BUILT IN: China
 SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
 NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.68 inches)
 STRING SPACING AT NUT: 35.25mm (1.39 inches)
 TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
 BACK & SIDES: Solid maple
 NECK: Set maple
 FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
 FRETS: 20 medium size
 BRIDGE: Rosewood belly-bridge
 STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 53.25mm (2.1 inches)
 MACHINEHEADS: Gold-plated Grover Sta-Tite
 WEIGHT: 2.27kg (5lbs)
 FINISH: Natural satin
 CASE: High quality, semi-rigid gigbag included
 LEFT HANDERS: Not available

CONTACT: Rosetti Limited
 PHONE: 01376 550033
 CONTACT: www.rosetti.co.uk

GBINFO



EPIPHONE MASTERBILT AJ-500R

PRICE: £940
 BUILT IN: China
 SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
 NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.68 inches)
 STRING SPACING AT NUT: 35.25mm (1.39 inches)
 TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
 BACK & SIDES: Solid rosewood
 NECK: Set mahogany
 FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays
 FRETS: 20 medium size
 BRIDGE: Rosewood 'upside down' belly bridge
 STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 53.25mm (2.1 inches)
 MACHINEHEADS: Gold-plated Grover Sta-Tite
 ELECTRICS: Available with LR Baggs pickup, £985
 WEIGHT: 2.27kg (5lbs)
 FINISH: Natural satin
 CASE: High quality, semi-rigid gigbag included
 LEFT HANDERS: Not available

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THE TAPER CAPER

NICE ATTENTION TO DETAIL

■ Viewed from the side, Epiphone's Masterbilt headstock tapers along its length, becoming gradually thinner as it moves away from the nut.

This is a feature of Gibson acoustics built before 1950, and despite the fact that neither Epiphone is intended as an accurate recreation of a vintage model, its inclusion demonstrates a reassuring commitment to detail on the part of the manufacturer.



■ The AJ model has a 'reverse' belly bridge, ie, it's stuck on 'upside down'...



■ ...while the DR's bridge is on the 'right' way around

"THESE OPEN-BACKED TUNERS FUNCTION AS WELL AS, IF NOT BETTER THAN, MANY SEALED UNITS"

GBOPINION

EPIPHONE MASTERBILT AJ-500R

GOLD STARS

- ★ Appearance captures vintage Gibson vibe
- ★ Sounds as good as it looks

BLACK MARKS

- Satin finish appears dull and cloudy

IDEAL FOR...

Perfect for the bluegrass flatpicker, and equally at home in any application that calls for a powerful flattop with plenty of bottom end

BODIES & NECKS

Joining the body at the 14th fret with a broad, Gibson-style heel, the DR-500PNS's (the square-shouldered guitar) three-piece maple neck has a full, rounded profile that supports your left hand with a feel that's reassuringly solid. The AJ-500R's neck, which has a similar shape, is constructed from a single piece of mahogany.

Both models feature a distinctive offset headstock that's integral to the neck (there's no scarf joint). In the case of the AJ-500R, the headstock is multiple bound, while the DR-500PNS makes do with a single layer of cream plastic. The old-style Epiphone script logo and 'stickpin' motif are inlaid in pearl, looking more upmarket than the standard Epi logo, while a set of gold-plated Grover Sta-Tite tuners

add a classy vintage vibe (with an 18:1 gear ratio, these open-backed tuners function as well as, if not better than, many sealed units).

Bound rosewood fingerboards are inlaid with cleanly executed pearl position markers – slotted diamonds for the DR-500PNS and simple dots for the AJ-500R. It's attention to detail that makes one guitar stand out from a crowd of similarly-specced models, so it's good to find the Epiphones' plastic nuts sitting snugly in their grooves and cut to the correct height for an easy action at the first fret. 20 medium sized frets, all of which are appropriately crowned, shaped and polished, neatly overlap the binding with no sharp edges.

Moving down to the body, it's clear that the DR-500PNS is based on Martin's square-shouldered dreadnought (as were Gibson's Hummingbird and Dove), while the AJ-500R has the slope-shouldered silhouette found on various Gibson acoustics from the Advanced Jumbo to the much-loved J-45.

While both guitars have a close-grained Sitka spruce top, the DR-500PNS's back and sides are maple, while the AJ-500R's body is built from Indian rosewood. Solid timbers are used throughout, which bodes well for a full and refined tone that will improve with age, assuming the guitar is built right, of course.



■ The tidy white binding adds an air of quiet elegance to this model



■ Tidily finished, albeit after body and neck have been joined



■ Diamond inlays are tidy, giving the DR-500 a bit of class

"BOTH GUITARS ARE REALLY LOUD WITH IMPRESSIVE SUSTAIN"

The thin matt finish used here works well enough on the maple DR-500PNS, but does little to bring out the subtle figuring of the AJ-500R's Indian rosewood back and sides, which sadly appears a uniform dull grey when viewed from certain angles. Given time, you can expect 'shiny' areas to appear where your body and forearm

make contact with the guitar. On the plus side, a thin finish won't inhibit vibration of the top and, as it turns out, both guitars are remarkably loud.

While the DR-500PNS has a standard Martin-style belly bridge, the AJ-500R is fitted with the 'upside down' bridge characteristic of Gibson acoustics built between 1950 and 1968. Plastic saddles are 'notched' at the second string in an attempt to improve intonation, which is inevitably always a compromise with any fixed-bridge arrangement.

The interiors are clean and tidy with neatly-executed braces and kerfing and none of the fluff, sawdust and glue residue that was once a feature of many entry level, mid priced (and a few expensive!) guitars.



SOUNDS

The Epiphone Masterbilts arrived set up with a low, buzz-free action, making them fun to play straight out of the cases. Both guitars intonate well, and are remarkably loud with impressive sustain characteristics, though a quick strum is enough to reveal that, sonically, the two guitars possess very different personalities indeed.

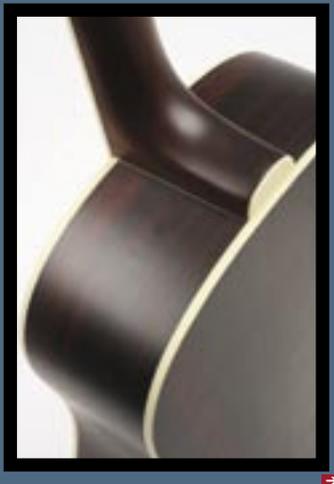
Fitted with a set of light gauge strings (.012 to .053), the rosewood

SLOPE SHOULDERS

HUGE AND SQUARE ISN'T FOR EVERYBODY

■ Gibson debuted its slope-shouldered body shape with the mahogany-bodied Jumbo in 1934.

The rosewood Advanced Jumbo, which was introduced two years later, is considered by many to be the finest acoustic guitar ever built by the company. These days, sloped shoulders are inextricably linked with Gibson's J-45 model, much loved by singers and songwriters the world over.



DETAILS

THE AJ-500R GETS THE ALL-ROUND VOTE WITH CLASSIC APPOINTMENTS AND WARM, FULL TONE



■ Quirky US spellings aside, this should inspire plenty of confidence. Thank God it's not made of 'aluminum'...



■ These Waverley-esque Grovers score top marks for their aesthetics and performance



■ Maple back and sides make for a distinctive sound in combination with the spruce top

GBOPINION

EPIPHONE MASTERBILT DR-500PNS

GOLD STARS

★ All solid timbers plus better-than-average build quality

BLACK MARKS

● Only that the AJ-500 is a better tonal all-rounder

IDEAL FOR...

Making its presence felt in a mix of electric and acoustic instruments

bodied AJ-500R sounds big, bold and assertive, its bright snappy trebles underpinned by a full-bodied, strident bottom end with a fair bit of colour in the lower end.

It'd be perfect in a bluegrass line up, or indeed any setting where the guitar is required to cut through other acoustic instruments. The AJ also sounds good when it's fingerpicked, and would be worth checking out if you require a guitar for vocal accompaniment.

By contrast, the square-shouldered DR-500PNS has a prominent, tightly focused mid-range, its maple body delivering a sound that's bright and punchy, if a tad more harsh than its rosewood-bodied sibling. In fact,

many flattop manufactures steer clear of maple. It has an altogether different tone from rosewood or mahogany, though when judged on its merits, has a pleasing overall timbre – think about a Gibson J-200 or J-185, for example. Personally, I think they work well when strummed in a band mix, where the tone stands out well against, yet doesn't sonically trample all over a mix of other acoustic and electric instruments. Whether you'd go for a maple guitar as your primary instrument is very much a matter of taste – in any case, it will be a discernibly different experience amid the plethora of very similarly specced rosewood- and mahogany-bodied dreads.

GBRATINGS

EPIPHONE MASTERBILT DR-500PNS



GBVERDICT ★★★

GBRATINGS

EPIPHONE MASTERBILT AJ-500



GBVERDICT ★★★

GBCONCLUSION

A GREAT DEAL OF CHARACTER AND GREAT QUALITY FOR SENSIBLE MONEY

■ **The build quality demonstrated here is on a par with that of instruments retailing at several times the price, and confirms an observation that we have made before in these pages; that the Chinese are fast approaching the standard of construction achieved by Japanese manufacturers back in the early 1980s. In fact, the slope shouldered AJ-500R stands out as a superb guitar, regardless of price or country of origin.**

Solid tonewoods, commendable attention to detail and a fair, mid- to semi-pro price are a winning combination – but one that may prove short lived. As China climbs the economic ladder, you can expect to see prices rise. Good news if you live China, not so good for the potential purchaser! So if you fancy one of these excellent Epiphone flattops, grab the opportunity and don't delay. You won't regret it. **GB**