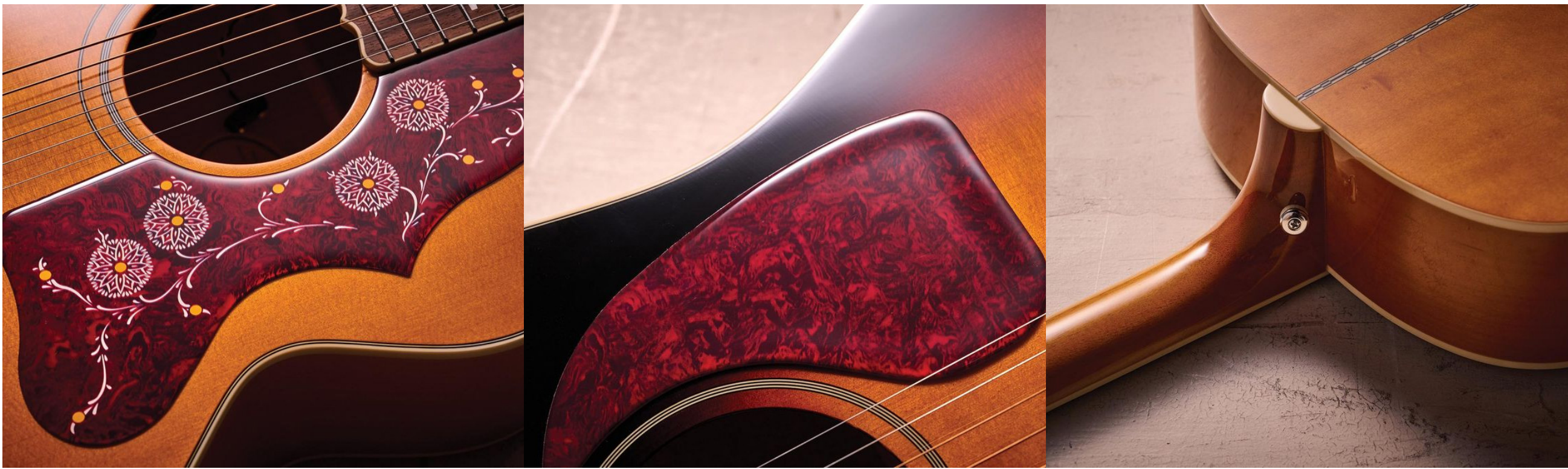




Epiphone J-45 Studio and J-200 Studio

A brace of familiar Gibson acoustic designs bearing the Epiphone brand name and a price tag of around one tenth of an original

BY NEVILLE MARTEN

IN RECENT TIMES we've examined a host of Epiphone guitars, both acoustic and electric, many of which have exceeded the magical \$/£1k barrier.

In the main, they've proved to be superb instruments that, in some cases, have caused us to question why we'd part with a load more cash for something with that 'other' name on the headstock.

Here, though, we find two unashamedly budget guitars, neither of which busts even the \$/£500 ceiling. It will be interesting to see how the degree of cost-cutting required to hit this price point affects the build, playability and sound.

Checking over the big-bodied J-200 Studio reveals that it's very tidily built, both inside and out. While a five-ish grand Custom Shop Gibbo is constructed using solid, and often finely figured, maple for its back and sides, here we find what Epiphone calls 'layered' (we might say laminated) plain maple.

Solid spruce, however, is employed for the guitar's top. It has to be said that the orangey ageing looks a little garish and unsubtle, but at this price point one can't really expect hand-rubbed toner.

The neck - which on a 'real' J-200 would be flamed maple with a rosewood centre strip and a black 'stinger' painted on the rear of the headstock - here is some kind of unspecified mahogany. In order to save timber and therefore cost, the headstock has been scarfed on, and the heel is a two-piece affair.

Rosewood is the timber of choice for the bound fingerboard with its 20 fine to medium frets. It's dark and nicely grained and the general fit and finish hereabouts is really very good.

Gibson's super jumbo is recognised as one of the handsomest instruments around and Epiphone has had a pretty good stab at replicating that - the essence of it, at least.

The fingerboard carries one of the original model's most famous trademarks, its graduated crown inlays, and while they're not real mother-of-pearl here, they do offer a passable facsimile.

The flower-embazoned scratchplate on the other hand, which is where these things often fall down by looking thin, cheap and poorly painted, is thick and smoothly bevelled, and looks particularly classy. The guitar's moustache-style bridge, also from rosewood, bears four fake pearl inlays in a style that looks familiar but is not an authentic Gibson design.

Due to its ultra-simplicity, the J-45 manages to do a more convincing job of looking original than its sibling. The dotted rosewood fingerboard is dark and matches the solid spruce top's tobacco sunburst finish perfectly. The 'belly up' bridge (again rosewood) looks dead right and, to be honest, from the 10th row the guitar - with its short Epi headstock - could easily be mistaken as the real thing.

The body's back and rims, this time of layered mahogany, receive a dark stain that's very convincing and does a better job than the J-200's aged blonde polyester of hiding the neck's heel and headstock splices.

Overall, the build quality of both guitars is very good indeed, and attention to detail excellent. Although it's obvious they've been built to hit a certain price point, Epiphone has cleverly managed to avoid the instruments coming across as bargain-basement fodder.

Playability and sounds

In the bad old days, the playability and sound of cheap imported guitars was often questionable, to say the least. Today, however, American parent companies keep a close watch on their partner factories' production and quality control. So we're delighted to report that our Epiphone J-200's action is spot on, right out

"Even with their sub-\$500 tickets, these guitars have been built with some degree of care and expertise"

of the box.

Around the nut area the strings are low and it's easy to fret chords and single-note lines. Venture further up the neck and barre chords don't fight back, while lead licks come out cleanly with absolutely no fretbuzz.

Epiphone calls the J-200's neck's shape a "1960s SlimTaper D profile", but it isn't particularly D-shaped, more like a shallowish C. Whatever you call it, it's very comfy and a real pleasure to play.

With a slightly more vintage-profile "rounded C" neck, the J-45 Studio feels like an old pal. As with its stablemate, the action is perfectly set and, while neither guitar has the fingerpicker's beloved 44.5mm nut width (both are typical Gibson fare at 43mm each), picking and strumming are equally well served.

The J-45's shorter 629mm scale means it handles string bends - should you attempt them - a little better than the 648mm scale and slightly tauter feel of the J-200. But, frankly speaking, neither instrument could be faulted from a playability point of view, most especially at this price.

Sonically, while it didn't match the similarly sized 1995 Taylor jumbo we had to hand as a comparator, our big Epiphone did a brave job of trying. There's not the big, booming bottom-end you might expect from a guitar of this size, but it's perfectly acceptable, and thankfully the treble side isn't harsh or tinny.

In fact, overall the tone is balanced and pleasant, whether picking or strumming, and anyone buying this guitar would not be disappointed from either its playability or sound perspective.

Tonally, the J-45 seems to have a little less in the top and bottom than the J-200, making it a tad more focused but at the same time a little less open-sounding. It's not half bad, though, and while it seems a little more 'enclosed' against a Martin OM-28, at \$/£449 one would have to be the harshest of critics to complain.

This model was always the perfect all-rounder, and while the laminated bodies of both guitars are bound to restrict their sonic depth and openness, our J-45 kicked out a good level of well-balanced tone when strummed and a sweet if not overly rich and woody tone when fingerpicked. Its shorter scale length will also doubtless contribute to the less snappy sound.

We have to remember these instruments' lower price tags. And with that in mind we can state that anyone starting out their acoustic journey on either model will enjoy a positive and rewarding experience. With their onboard Fishman S-Core under-saddle pickups plus soundhole-placed volume and tone controls, each of these guitars is ready to hit the stage when you are.

Verdict

It's easy to imagine that expensive US- or European-made acoustics are all individually craftsperson-made, while cheap East Asian ones are spat out of machines with never a hand touching them in the process.

Truth is, you can't build an acoustic guitar at any price without a good degree of hands-on work. And from their setup alone, we can tell that these guitars - even with their sub-\$/£500 tickets - have been built with some degree of care and expertise.

GUITAR VERDICT



They play extremely well, and while they won't scare your Custom Shop Martin, Collings or Breedlove in the tone stakes, they'll do a darned fine job of fulfilling the dreams of any aspiring acoustic guitarist. And if you're a seasoned electric player seeking out a good-looking, playable and not-half-bad-sounding knockabout flat-top in either of these legendary Gibson styles, then look no further.

PROS

- + Well set up straight out of the box.
- + Nice build for price.
- + Stage ready.
- + J-45 is a decent strummer or fingerpicker.
- + J-200 Studio has great tone for this money.

CONS

- J-200's blonde finish is a little garish.
- For a large instrument, lacks bottom end.
- J-45 lacks the openness of an all-solid instrument.

SPECS

EPIPHONE J-45 STUDIO

ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Round-shouldered steel-string flat-top acoustic with pickup
TOP: Solid spruce
BACK/SIDES: Layered mahogany
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406mm (15.98")
NECK: Rounded C profile, mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 628.65mm (24.75")
TUNERS: Vintage 'Kluson' style with cream plastic buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Plastic/43.815mm (1.725")
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with pearloid dot inlays
FRETS: 20 medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Belly-up rosewood with compensated plastic saddle/54mm (2.125")
ELECTRICS: Fishman S-Core under-saddle pickup with Presys VT preamp and soundhole volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 2.1/4.629
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISHES: Vintage Sunburst (as reviewed), Epiphone Natural

J-200 STUDIO

ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Jumbo, non-cutaway acoustic with pickup
TOP: Solid spruce with 4-ply binding and floral J-200 pickguard
BACK/SIDES: Layered maple
MAX BODY WIDTH: 431mm (17")
NECK: 1960s slim taper, D profile, mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Nickel Kluson style with plastic 'keystone' buttons
NUT/WIDTH: Plastic/43mm (1.69")
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood with graduated crown inlays
FRETS: 20 medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood 'moustache' style with pearloid inlays, compensated plastic saddle/54mm (2.125")
ELECTRICS: Fishman S-Core under-saddle pickup with Presys VT preamp and soundhole volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 2.2/4.85
LEFT-HANDERS: Available
FINISHES: Epiphone Natural (as reviewed), Vintage Sunburst
CONTACT: Epiphone