

MARTIN RETRO SERIES D-18E & HD-28E £2,149 & £2,749  
ELECTRO-ACOUSTICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY LOBY SESSIONS



# Martin Retro Series D-18E & HD-28E £2,149 & £2,749

Combining technology and tradition, Martin's Retro Series travels back in time and aims to offer a selection of new, old-sounding electro-acoustics... *by Steve Harvey*

As well as a visitors' centre, pickin' parlour and factory, Martin Guitars' HQ in Nazareth, Pennsylvania boasts a museum, which plots the firm's 175-year history interwoven through American culture. Among the 170-plus guitars on display are iconic, classic Martins from the 30s and 40s – known as the 'Golden Era' of guitar making. It's these unique, highly valuable guitars that form the lifeblood of Martin's new Retro Series of electro guitars.

Martin Guitars and Fishman Electronics have enjoyed a collaborative association for over 20 years. During a brainstorming session in early 2011, Martin CEO Chris Martin put forward the idea of recording some of the museum's pre-war Martins to Larry Fishman, CEO of Fishman Electronics. As Chris Martin himself says: "All of the guitars in the museum are great-sounding guitars, but some are spectacular." This is because they possess unique tonal characteristics attributed to the passing of time.

The concept was simple: to record selected 'Golden Era' guitars and, in a similar way to

the earlier Aura series of Martin electros (which reproduces the studio-mic'd sound of a guitar), turn the recordings into software that could be read by Fishman's preamps, thereby offering access to the sounds of these vintage instruments. The 'tone donors' used included a 1942 D-45, a 1941 D-28, a 1937 D-18 and (on loan from Vintage Instruments) a 1934 long-scale 000-28 model. If the project was successful, then plugging in the resulting guitars would

be the closest thing we could get to acoustic time travel.

The project employed the services of Grammy Award-winning producer and acoustic recording guru, Bill Vorn Dick, and his famed Mountainside Studios in Nashville. He assembled a collection of vintage and boutique microphones – some dating back to the 1930s – and began painstakingly and meticulously recording the museum pieces. The results were then passed to Fishman who, forging a new

technology path, set about turning the recordings into software readable by its F1 Aura preamp systems.

Phase three involved Martin creating an all-new series of non-cutaway electros, vintage in appearance but benefiting from the enhanced playability of recent Martin models, with features such as the Performing Artist Series high-performance neck and its reshaped taper and low-oval profile. In terms of the guitars' dimensions, the two review models you see here are identical, though their neck profiles differentiate them from 'standard' Martin dreadnoughts. Retro looks come courtesy of ageing toner applied to the solid Sitka tops; silk screen decals on the classic Martin headplate; butterbean open-gear tuners; and 1930s-style ebony bridges.

Interestingly, while traditional bone has been used for the nuts on both guitars, Graph Tech's Tusq is the



The nickel open-gear tuners are a nice vintage touch on these Retro guitars

## The Rivals

Yamaha's mic-modelling technology is found within the **CPX1200** (£1,219) and features three presets and five-band anti-feedback reduction. The **Adamas CVT 2080** (£2,299) offers the VIP-5 onboard blender providing five images, three-band EQ and built-in tuner. Appealing to a younger demographic, but still offering Aura technology, is **Martin's Performing Artist** series. The **DCPA3** (£1,899) is a cutaway dreadnought



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chosen material for the compensated saddles. This is because Tusq, apparently, transfers string vibration to the undersaddle pickup much more evenly than bone – a prerequisite for an electro whose amplified performance is all about delicate tonal inflections and nuances.

The Fishman Aura Plus preamp system is not new to the marketplace, having been previously featured on Performing Artist series guitars. As fitted here, the Aura Plus system has two distinct modes of operation: Easy and Performance. As you'd expect, Easy mode is a simple, uncomplicated way of getting amplified, offering three pre-selected, pre-blended images, identified by a simple 1, 2 or 3 on the 18mm diameter display LED. Pressing the left Edit button scrolls through these presets. Pressing a fourth time takes you to 'P', which, in Easy mode, denotes an unblended, pickup-only signal. Tone shaping in Easy mode is limited with just the Edit button offering a mid-scoop/boost. Unfortunately, due to its multi-functionality, the Edit rotary

has no limit, either left or right, so it can be a little difficult orientating where the control is set, particularly on a dimly lit stage. This is not the case with the right volume control, which also engages the tuner (whether or not the guitar is plugged in). Sharps are indicated by a tiny dot in the top-left-hand corner of the display, which is also not the easiest to see unless you drop the headstock away from you, squaring the display up to your line of sight.

Performance mode is engaged by holding down the Edit button while inserting a cable into the standard jack output located just behind the strap button. Here, the full

capabilities of the F1 Aura Plus shine, giving us access to blend, bass, mid, treble, a compressor and its 'search and destroy' anti-feedback system.

Navigating around the menus does take time to get to grips with, but putting in the time is well worth the effort, because the tone-shaping options on offer here are wide-ranging, impressive and rewarding. Mercifully, for those who like to 'fiddle', restoring factory resets is an easy procedure, and erases any alterations made in Performance mode.

The power-hungry Aura Plus system uses up a fully charged nine-volt battery in a little over 24 hours. We like that the

battery is not anchored inside the compartment and, once the compartment door is opened, it slides out easily.

As you'd expect with £2,000-plus Martins, the build quality, attention to detail and overall presentation is excellent. The label-free insides are clean and tidy, every joint is crisp, and the gloss finish is flawless.

### Martin Retro D-18E

The Retro D-18E is an all-solid affair featuring a bookmatched solid Sitka top and mahogany back and sides. Tortoiseshell-colour binding edges both the guitar's back and front, and complements the Delmar pickguard. Though simplistic in appearance, the D-18E does have a classic air about it, be it the ebony 30s-style bridge, old-style abalone position inlays, or vintage-style tuners, Martin clearly intended the D-18E to

Although it's time-consuming, some glorious tones await when you venture into Performance mode



The tuner is accurate, but a little hard to read



The overall finish and presentation is as flawless as you'd expect at this price

hark back to yesteryear – it's a fine looking guitar.

### Sounds

Acoustically, the Retro D-18E offers a clean, bright, crisp tone with lots of power and projection. It's a mid-heavy sound that's sensitive to dynamic variations. Direct comparisons with a standard D-18 (reviewed in issue 356) reveal a slightly more woody tone compared to the Retro

guitar, but overall they sound very similar in character.

Though enjoying the guitar acoustically, we were eager to plug in. Switching between the three presets in Easy mode, we're impressed with the difference each setting offers. All three produce full, rich, slightly bass-heavy outputs, but with varying degrees of attack and presence. We'd argue that these presets are good enough to not ever need to venture into

the seemingly endless options of Performance mode.

However, venture we did – and although it's time-consuming, some glorious tones await. Rolling the mids out gives us some very likeable sounds for picking, while boosting mids and treble provides lots of attack and bite for solos and choppy chord work. Biasing the output to full image creates some stunning sounds, though we'd suggest a good acoustic

amp is essential to fully realise the Aura technology.

### Martin Retro HD-28E

With its herringbone purfling, ornate centre strip to the back, and white bridge pins, the HD-28E carries more of a 'retro' feel than the D-18E. When added to the rich, grain-prominent rosewood back and sides, there's a sense of acoustic royalty. Boasting extremely high standards of craftsmanship and finish, from every angle the HD-28E is a stunningly impressive guitar.

### Sounds

Acoustically, the HD-28E performs very differently to the D-18E. Offering us a more mellow, lush and overall richer



They may be Retro guitars, but there are plenty of modern comforts, such as a second, heel-mounted strap button



## Martin OM-28E £2,749

18 gigs into a 30-date tour *Guitar Techniques* editor, Neville Marten, reports on the review dreadnought's brother – the OM-28E Retro

"I'm a big fan of the guitar itself. It's simple, very classy, and wonderful to play over long gigs. I'm less convinced by the Aura Plus, however. If you're expecting your common-or-garden, modern electro tone – warm bass, tinkly treble and strong piezo mids – this will come as a surprise. The sounds are of actual, real acoustic guitars, which aren't always as sweet and pretty as you might imagine. However, everything is clear, precise and 'real'; it sits beautifully in the mix and sounds very rewarding coming back through my monitor.

"Having tried all nine Performance mode sounds and edited several of them, I've reverted to using it in Easy mode – my guess is that most players will do the same. The

factory presets are all usable gigging sounds (and you can tweak volume and tone on the fly), whereas the selections in Performance mode would work superbly in the studio should specific sounds be required. You can edit them all, yet I suspect only hardened recording guitarists would ever use more than one or two (I alternate between Easy presets one to three depending on the sound on stage, and have never needed anything else).

"The tuner read-out isn't brilliantly angled. I have to twist the guitar's neck down into a non-playing position so it comes fully into sight. The 'A' note, for instance, has the top cut off. Also, the two-second wait for it to engage (and mute the signal) is too long for a

quick guitar change. I often need to whip the acoustic off and an electric on in about five seconds, and another two added on just won't do. Worse, if another band member is making noise, the tuner picks this up and the read-out goes haywire, making on-stage, mid-gig tuning impossible. Again, it's better suited to home and studio use.

"The system eats batteries, too – three shows for me, maximum – so you'll need a good supply of them if you're using the guitar a lot.

"All that said, the OM-28E Retro plays superbly, it looks lovely, and the Aura Plus can sound incredible. In fact, despite the functional grumbles, it's still the best stage acoustic sound I've ever had."





The Tusq saddle gives a clearer signal to the undersaddle pickup than a bone one

Offering a mellow, lush and rich timbre compared to the D-18, the HD-28E is hard to put down

timbre, the HD-28E is hard to put down. Yes, it sounds a little 'new' right now, but even so, its sheer richness and depth has a maturity and warmth that's impossible not to enjoy.

Engaging the Aura Plus in Easy mode offers the same presets and very similar tones. However, when selecting 'P' in Easy mode we find the pickup output offers more warmth than in the corresponding setting on the D-18E. The other notable differences between the amplified characteristics of both guitars are in Performance mode, when blending in the pickup signal. The HD-28E possesses more depth and 'plump' than the D-18E, thus affecting the blended output, which is particularly noticeable when the blend is biased to the pickup. Overall, the HD-28E is a highly impressive electro, capable of a wide range of amplified tones suitable for just about any style.

### Verdict

Without the original Golden Era guitars to hand, we can't make an accurate judgement on how closely the F1 Aura Plus replicates those museum pieces. We can, however, confirm that these guitars are exceptional electros. Though costing considerably more, the HD-28E appears to have it all: timeless styling, a beautiful acoustic voice and fantastic

electro sounds, despite some on-stage practicality issues with the tuner.

Martin's Retro series is aimed at more traditionally-minded players than its Performing Artist series, and will excel in any home or any studio. Their tones work superbly in a live environment, too, though how many people will realistically submit such finery to regular gigging life remains to be seen. In any case, top marks to Martin and Fishman for travelling back in time to create forward-thinking guitars worthy of anyone's collection. **G**

### The Bottom Line

#### Martin Retro D-18E

**We like:** Build quality, finish and electronics

**We dislike:** Perhaps the acoustic tone could have a tad more bass

**Guitarist says:** An attention-grabbing electro in terms of both looks and tone

#### Martin Retro HD-28E

**We like:** Everything!

**We dislike:** Nothing... except perhaps the price

**Guitarist says:** One of the most exciting and rewarding electros Martin has produced in recent times



### Martin Retro Series D-18E

**PRICE:** £2,149 (inc 445 hardshell case)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Dreadnought 14-fret electro

**TOP:** Solid Sitka spruce

**BACK/SIDES:** Solid genuine mahogany

**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 123mm (4.8")

**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 396mm (15.6")

**NECK:** Mahogany

**SCALE LENGTH:** 645mm (25.4")

**TUNERS:** Nickel open-geared with butterbean knobs

**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/45mm (1.78")

**FINGERBOARD:** Solid black ebony with D-18-style green abalone dot markers

**FRETS:** 20, medium

**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Solid black ebony 1930s-style/56mm (2.2")

**ELECTRICS:** Fishman F1 Aura Plus

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1.9/4.19

**OPTIONS:** Available in Sunburst finish £2,399

**RANGE OPTIONS:** D-45E £7,349 and OM-28E £2,749

**LEFT-HANDERS:** Yes, special order, no upcharge

**FINISH:** Polished gloss with ageing toner to top, satin neck (as reviewed)

**Westside Distribution**

**0141 248 4812**

[www.martinguitar.com](http://www.martinguitar.com)



### Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Martin Retro Series HD-28E

**PRICE:** £2,749 (inc 445 hardshell case)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Dreadnought 14-fret electro

**TOP:** Solid Sitka spruce

**BACK/SIDES:** Solid East Indian rosewood

**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 123mm (4.8")

**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 396mm (15.6")

**NECK:** Mahogany

**SCALE LENGTH:** 645mm (25.4")

**TUNERS:** Nickel open-geared with butterbean knobs

**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/45mm (1.78")

**FINGERBOARD:** Solid black ebony with 'diamonds and squares' long-pattern position inlays

**FRETS:** 20, medium

**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Solid black ebony 1930s-style/56mm (2.2")

**ELECTRICS:** Fishman F1 Aura Plus

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1.9/4.19

**OPTIONS:** Sunburst finish available by special order via custom shop

**RANGE OPTIONS:** D-45E £7,349 and OM-28E £2,749

**LEFT-HANDERS:** Yes, special order, no upcharge

**FINISH:** Polished gloss with ageing toner to top, satin neck (as reviewed)



### Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★