

RECORDING KING CAROLINA RD-27 & CAROLINA RO-16 £379 & £199
ACOUSTICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL GODWIN



Recording King Carolina RD-27 & Carolina RO-16

£379 & £199

What's in a name? Guitarist finds out with these acoustics formerly known as Johnson... *by Henry Yates*

Last year saw the AXL Corporation pulling off its latest canny move. Deciding that the Johnson brand it had exported from China since 1993 was being put at a disadvantage by its name, and noticing that Recording King – previously associated with the Gibson archtops of the 1930s – was out of copyright, the US company put forward a reported \$250,000 for rights to the name! The upshot, as unveiled at last year's Musik Messe trade show, and with some international exceptions, is that all models known as Johnson will henceforth be re-badged Recording King. By all accounts, it's a move that has already sparked a huge response among US dealers, but as Guitarist took delivery of the 'new' Carolina RD-27 and RO-16 acoustics, we wanted to know if all this goes deeper than the logo on the headstock.

Carolina RD-27

UK distributor Westside Distribution tells Guitarist that AXL is taking Recording King very seriously indeed, meaning that we can expect major range expansion, cutaways, uprated specs and models that skim the

thousand-pound mark. For now, though, the Recording King range simply picks up where the Johnson regime left off. We still have Series I and II ('I' denoting cheaper instruments with laminate bodies, 'II' offering superior solid timbers), plus the choice of either a rosewood or mahogany back and sides, in either a '000' or dreadnought format. When Guitarist tested a Series I Johnson Carolina dread' last year, we were impressed, save for a slight lack of character that you might expect from laminates.

The Rivals

Carolina RD-27

There's plenty of cut-price dreads out there to make life difficult for the RD-27, and with a solid spruce top and a slim, fast-action neck, **Tanglewood's** thrifty **TD8-ST** (£229) is certainly one of them. For a few quid more, **Takamine's** **G330S** (£245) has a classy solid spruce top and sultry rosewood body, while stretching just past the RD-27 will bag you the all-solid dream machine that is the **Ozark 3755** (£455).

Will the Series II RD-27 be better?

AXL got into the Chinese market earlier than most, snapping up a dedicated factory and a fastidious workforce, while closer to home, they've attracted USA talent like Greg Rich (ex-Gibson, and principally responsible for acoustic design) and Scott Zimmermann (ex-Fender, and charged with quality

control). Doubtless, this explains why the RD-27 is so successful in its bid to convey pre-war 1930s authenticity, while this specific model also feels a little tidier than some Johnsons we've seen. The new name, it seems, has encouraged the (already excellent) Tianting-based production line to raise its game.

In terms of spec and styling, the new Recording King Carolina RD-27 is the old Johnson Carolina JD-27 with a different logo on the headstock. There's little visual revolution in the combination of a solid Englemann spruce top and solid rosewood body, contoured into a Martin-esque square-shoulder shape, and backed by a forward-X bracing pattern. But it works so beautifully together, and is backed by such tasty trimmings – including mother-of-pearl along the rosewood board and on the headstock, butterbean tuners,

As you'd hope from rosewood, there's a real warmth and resonance to the RD-27



The RD-27's rosewood bridge adds to its classy, understated looks



vintage bevelled pickguard and diamond volute on the one-piece neck – that it catches the eye. Less is definitely more.

At least, until you pick it up. The physical dimensions of the RD-27 are hefty in every direction, with a typical dread body depth, a yawning expanse of soundboard and a neck whose chunky profile, we feel, lends itself brilliantly to flatpicking but makes barres a little punishing. We love the old-school chunkiness, but singer-songwriters might want to check out the 000, while technicians might want to wait and see if AXL makes good on its promise to release a cutaway version.

Sounds

The deep body offers booming projection, while the all-solid voice simply leaves its Series I counterpart for dust once you warm up your chops. As you'd hope from rosewood, there's real warmth and resonance in the low register that's particularly effective in dropped folk tunings, and it's complemented by a

The Rivals

Carolina RO-16

There are plenty of good 000 models vying for your wallet, and for just a little more than the RO-16, the **Crafter T045N** (£259) does a decent Martin-like impression with great materials. **Ozark's 3760** (£340) is a little more again, but recently impressed Guitarist with its tonal class, while **Tanglewood's TW60** (£429) has a luxurious vintage vibe that goes some way to justify the additional outlay.

spruce-flavoured snap in the highs and a deliciously mellow mid-range, adding up to a voice that feels idiosyncratic but adaptable to many styles. It's all down to the raw materials – and we'd suggest it's worth going the extra financial mile to get them.

Carolina RO-16

Greater diversity is promised when AXL gets a handle on the Recording King brand, but for now it's a straight choice between the dreadnought and its spin on the 000-style, demonstrated here by the RO-16. Guitarist had a Johnson JO-26 on review last year, and we found the slim contours and pinched waist gave big returns for minimal effort, combined with a tight, authoritative and balanced tone. All being well, the feel of the RO-16 should be no less impressive (from the scale length to the string spacing, the physical dimensions are the same). But the fact this model belongs to Series I, and therefore offers a laminate body, suggests that it's unlikely to match the tonal showing.

That's one of remarkably few corners that have been cut to get the RO-16 to its £199 price. Style-wise, this is a virtual retreat of the RD-27, and while that means it might not arrest the attention of the young market it is presumably aimed at, sensible punters will recognise that they're getting a hell of a spec for a wafer-thin outlay. An attractive slice of solid Englemann spruce is the timber of choice for the top, and while the bevelled tortie pickguard is AWOL along with the volute and one-piece neck, sweeteners like the butterbean tuners and bone

nut are still included. In terms of build, meanwhile, if Recording King hadn't put a different logo on the headstock to denote this belongs to Series I, you probably wouldn't realise.

Moving straight from a dreadnought to a 000-style puts performance in perspective and underlines how fundamentally different the two models are.

Where the RD-27 is bulky and unrefined, the RO-16 is slim and slight, measuring less than 100mm rim-to-rim, and pinching the waist to such an extent that it sits tight to the lap. In terms of playability, we feel the wider 61mm string spacing at the bridge, short scale and 'V'-neck profile add up to a paradise for fingerpickers, giving us the

The RO-16 is slim, measuring less than 100mm rim-to-rim, and pinching the waist so that it sits tight to the lap



The RO-16's laminate back and sides may compromise tone, but they look tasty enough >



The headstock is finished off with vintage-style butterbean-button tuners

There's a sense of crispness when your fingertips dance across the fretboard

confidence to push the technique.

Sounds

Assuming you keep one eye on the price tag, realists should be pleased with the RO-16's spin on the 000 tone. There's a general sense of crispness when your fingertips dance across the fretboard, with a warm walking bassline easily picked out with a fleshy thumb, and a pleasant tug-of-war between the snap of the spruce and the reasonable warmth from the laminated mahogany. It's an admirable performance for the money but the compromise in terms of timbers is quite obvious: if you're looking for a tonal investment, it's worth biting the bullet, breaking into Series II, and investigating the RO-26 at £299.

Verdict

We can't wait to see where the Recording King range goes next. For now, these strong bang-for-buck instruments offer a tantalising hint at the brand's potential, matching keen pricing with good build and features.

It would be churlish to fault the RO-16 for the price, but testing it alongside the much better RD-27 underlines the fact that the

laminated body just doesn't have the character and detail in comparison with an all-solid wood guitar. For that reason, it's better suited as a beginner guitar, or the one to go for if your budget just won't stretch. Its Series II rival meanwhile will impress all but the most discerning punters. All-in-all, a great showing. Long live the Kings.

The bottom line

Carolina RD-27

We like: The all-solid format and the resultant organic tone

We dislike: The visuals are dues-paying but slightly dull

Guitarist says: A dark and interesting tone in a bruising package

Carolina RO-16

We like: The astonishing value and watertight performance

We dislike: There's a dip in tonal character that we'll put down to the laminate back and sides

Guitarist says: Impossible to fault at the price – but Series II has more class



Recording King Carolina RD-27

PRICE: £379
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Dreadnought acoustic
TOP: Solid Englemann spruce with vintage rosette
BACK/SIDES: Solid rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 120mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 395mm
NECK: One-piece mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 644.5mm (25.4-inch)
TUNERS: Butterbean-style
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.7mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with abalone snowflakes
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/55mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.91/4.2
OPTIONS: RD-26 (£349) also available with mahogany body
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Natural gloss
Westside Distribution 0141 248 4812
www.westsidedistribution.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Recording King Carolina RO-16

PRICE: £199
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: 000-style acoustic
TOP: Solid Englemann spruce with vintage rosette
BACK/SIDES: Laminate mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 98mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 385mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 632.5mm (24.9-inch)
TUNERS: Butterbean-style
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/44.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with abalone snowflakes
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood/61mm
WEIGHT (kg): 1.79
OPTIONS: RO-17 (£249) also available with laminated rosewood body
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes
FINISH: Natural gloss

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★