

# Gibson Firebird X | £3,299

Gibson claim it's a revolution. **Stuart Bruce** wonders if this bird will fly or if it's destined for extinction



## WHAT IS IT?

A self-tuning electric guitar with on-board audio processing

## CONTACT

Who: Gibson  
Tel: +44 (0)800 444 2766 1  
Web: [gibson.com](http://gibson.com)

## HIGHLIGHTS

- 1 Very playable guitar
- 2 Robo-tuning
- 3 Some clever technology

**A**t the New York launch of the Firebird X Gibson, CEO Henry Juszkiewicz smashed a Gibson SG, which he dismissed as “the past” before holding the Firebird aloft and announcing “This is the Revolution”. In terms of electric guitar technology this is pretty out there. Robo-Tuners, on-board DSP, Bluetooth foot pedals, USB link for programming and firmware updates, open architecture software for third-party app development and its own Apple-like app store. You could be tempted to agree, but before we get to all that tech stuff let's start with the basics.

## The guitar

The guitar itself is beautifully put together. Unusually for a Gibson it has a maple fingerboard and although based on the original Firebird shape is much smaller and very light. It's a tiny bit neck heavy but whether on the knee or

on a strap is comfortable and very playable. The neck is thin and wide with a satin finish that feels smooth and doesn't stick even on a very hot day.

Access to the top frets is excellent with a lovely heel into the body and the

fret profile is low so fretting is very precise and slides are very easy. On the back of the guitar there is a big panel covering the electronics and a battery compartment. The rechargeable batteries are easy to swap in and out which is handy because with battery life averaging about two hours you're going to be doing it pretty often.

On the top of the guitar there is another recess containing six sliders, which allow you to edit many of the FX parameters. Personally I'm not so keen on the way it looks but it is a quality instrument that arrived well set up and is a pleasure to play.

## The electronics

As you can see the Firebird X has a few more controls than your average Electric, 13 to be precise. The central item is the Gear Shift knob, which is

## Apps, Edits and DSP

The DSP part of the Firebird X is based around the kind of chipsets used in Pro Tools so it should be capable of some good quality processing. Along with the guitar comes a box called the G-Node. This can be used as an interface to connect the guitar to a computer.

Gibson provide editing software so you can fine tune the on-board effects. The DSP is open source



so third party developers can write apps for the system which Gibson plan to sell through their own online store. This isn't around yet but the idea is an exciting one. Gibson see the Firebird X as the

jumping off point for this technology through their product range so considering what I and others think of the basic onboard sounds, it's a shame some of these alternatives aren't already available.





the one above the five-way selector switch. To get the guitar started you pull this up and it lights up like a Christmas Tree. It's an 11-way switch and depending on which mode you're in, it selects different tunings or banks of preset sounds. Next to this is the black tone knob and the silver volume control.

modes. The potentiometer controls the level of the piezo pickup in the bridge, giving electro-acoustic sounds.

The red one controls distortion, EQ and compression, the blue reverb, delay and modulation. Dependant on which of the three functions you select the potentiometer controls the level of the

Luddites and technophobes but we choose our electronics carefully because we are all looking for our own sound.

This, for me, is where the Firebird X falls down. The current crop of on-board FX just don't sound that good to my ears. The distortions sound thin and a bit nasty, the reverbs tinny and the EQ

is too limited. The modulation FX are very 'digital' sounding and it's altogether reminiscent of those early cheap guitar multi-FX from the late '80s.

## Until you get this technology sounding great, I wouldn't go smashing any more guitars

The five-way selector switch is also mode dependant and either switches pickups or swaps between patches in the banks selected with the Gear Shift. There are 55 presets available that you can edit and overwrite should you choose. There are also three 'tog pots'. These look like traditional Gibson three-way pickup selectors but the switch shaft also contains a potentiometer. The grey one at the bottom switches between tuning, pickup selection and bank selection

effect and the blue and red sliders on the top of the guitar allow more complex parameter editing.

### The pedals

All these controls on the guitar could feel very overwhelming were it not for the addition of the two floor pedals. These work via Bluetooth and simply link themselves to the guitar as soon as you switch them on. Like the guitar they work with rechargeable batteries but can be powered by an external PSU, which is provided. One pedal has a treadle and three switches, the other just nine switches. Each pedal has a display and it's here that you can see what's going on. You can change presets and the treadle can be set up to control various FX including wah and octaver and in conjunction with the controls on the guitar it's possible to manipulate the sound and have a pretty good overview of what's going on.

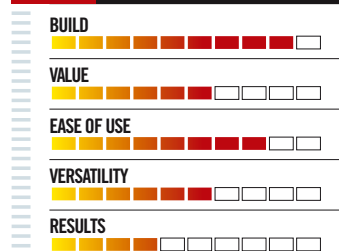
### The sound

Now there has been a lot of stuff on the internet about how guitar players hate complexity and that's why they will hate this guitar. However, compared to my and many other players' recording rigs with its pedalboard and rack gear, the Firebird X feels refreshingly simple. Guitar players are not a bunch of

There are some great guitar plug-ins out there and the fact that NI's excellent Guitar Rig 4 comes bundled with the Firebird X is perhaps a tacit admission that the on-board DSP currently isn't all it should be. You can use the straight pickups without the DSP and through my rig it sounded great. Maybe if the Gibson App store takes off and developers create some quality effects, this kind of approach will work, but at the moment it's a big if.

Henry, revolution implies moving forward but until you get this particular technology sounding great I wouldn't go smashing any more guitars. Right now that SG looks like a big part of your future and the Firebird X has a fair bit further to go. **FM**

### FutureMusic VERDICT



With many clever design features, a highly playable guitar is let down by some very poor sounding DSP FX.

### SPECS

**Software:** Guitar Rig 4, Ableton Live8, Gibson's own Editing software.

#### System Requirements

**PC:** 1.5GHz Pentium 4 or Celeron compatible, 1GB Ram (2GB recommended), Windows XP or Vista  
**Mac:** 1.25GHz G4/5 or faster (Intel recommended), 1GB ram (2GB recommended), OS X 10.5 or later

#### Hardware:

**Firebird X Guitar**  
**Tuners:** Robo Head  
**Bridge:** Tune-O-Matic Piezo Robot Gtr

#### Pickups:

**Neck:** FBX-Alnico V  
**Middle:** FBX-Ceramic  
**Bridge:** FBX-Alnico II  
**Output:** 1/4" stereo jack

#### Weight:

**3.1kg**

#### Accessories:

Bluetooth Continuous Pedal  
 Bluetooth Number Controller Pedal

#### G-Node interface:

**I/Os:** 1/4" Jack Stereo input, SD Card slot, Back Panel: Two 1/4" Jack Outputs, USB socket, ADAT optical out, 5-Pin MIDI Out Socket, Ariel connector, MIDI Out

### ALTERNATIVES



**Gibson Les Paul Studio Robot Guitar**

**\$4,442**

**Native Instruments Guitar Rig 5 Pro**

**179 Euro**

A self-tuning Gibson with a first class set of amp and pedal simulations. Great sounds await you.

[native-instruments.com](http://native-instruments.com)



**Gibson SG Special Robot Guitar**

**\$3,599**

**IK Multimedia Amplitube 3**

**269 Euro**

Another great self-tuning Gibson with the power of the other fantastic set of virtual amps and pedals.

[ikmultimedia.com](http://ikmultimedia.com)