

KNAGGS CHENA TIER 3 & PRS JA-15 £3,099 & £4,455
ELECTRICS



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Pro Semis

With more than a nod to the jazzers in our guitar-playing community, both PRS and ex-PRS master luthier Joe Knaggs have sumptuous semis. But can they really be worth this kind of money? **by Dave Burrluck**



Knaggs Chena Tier 3 & PRS JA-15 £3,099 & £4,495

Neither of these single-cut hollowbodies can be called cheap. PRS's JA-15, designed in conjunction with top US player Paul Jackson Jr, is nearly the most expensive guitar in PRS's standard line-up – only the Modern Eagle Quatro beats it. Our Knaggs Chena, reviewed here in its start-up Tier 3 specification, seems positively cheap by comparison, although it gets closer and even overtakes the JA-15 when it comes to the Tier 2 and Tier 1 specifications.

Long-time PRS employee Joe Knaggs spearheaded the design of the PRS Archtop and Hollowbody back in the mid 90s, although the JA-15, a slightly larger beast, appeared after Knaggs had left PRS in 2009 to start his own-name company. The Chena, part of the more Gibson-esque

Influence series, is clearly a Knaggs guitar, but shares a similar lineage to the JA-15. So, which is best? Round one...

Knaggs Chena Tier 3

Irrelevant of its outline, this guitar is imbued with Gibson tradition. If we had to put a name to the guitar from feeling the neck alone, we'd say late 50s Gibson. The weight

suggests an ES-125 or early ES-335 – the size, something a little more contemporary... PRS's Singlecut Hollowbody, perhaps? But its less rounded lower bout is more Fender-y, while the faux edge binding and medium flame reference PRS... but why wouldn't they? There's no hint of modernism to the headstock – it's simply beautifully understated, like

the guitar. It also doesn't look 'perfect'; the finish isn't mirror-shiny, and you can see the grain in places. It looks a little old, a little experienced.

But it looks to the future in many ways – not least the construction. Like the PRS Hollowbody design (and indeed the JA-15, although the back is maple), the sides and inside carve of the back are cut from a solid one-piece slab of mahogany. The arched top is carved separately, then joined to the body to seal the form. Here, though, the back is thicker, which allows a rear belly cut, plus, viewed from the side, the whole thing tapers in thickness – it's thickest at the



An understated headstock gives the Chena class



Knaggs claims his bridge design 'drives' string vibration into the body



base – and the back is slightly concave, too. There's no centre block, but the top and back are connected by a block that sits underneath the bridge – just as you'll find on the PRS Hollowbody or the JA-15. The scale length adheres to classic Gibson, as does the neck-to-body join, just past the 16th fret – pretty close to a Les Paul.

Then there's the bridge and tailpiece assembly, which is basically a tune-o-matic-style bridge that sits over the protruding 'legs' of the tailpiece, creating a one-piece assembly that Knaggs believes drives the string vibrations more efficiently into the body. Electronics are simple: twin

Seymour Duncan '59 uncovered humbuckers, shoulder-placed toggle selector switch, but only three controls: two volumes and master tone. It's a superb instrument that draws from history to create a very forward-looking design, which looks and feels like it could have been made in the 50s or 60s.

PRS JA-15

If the Chena seems a little more Gibson thinline, the JA-15 seems to hark back further to the hollowbody archtop. It's slightly bigger, measuring 382mm (15 inches) across its lower bouts, as opposed to the Chena's 360mm (14.2 inches). It's deeper, too, with the rim

Picking which of the two plays 'better', when both play like you dream a guitar should, is hard to identify

measuring 60.6mm (2.39 inches) as opposed to the Chena's max rim depth of 53.6mm (2.11 inches). In terms of overall depth, measured by the bridge the JA-15 is a stately 79mm (3.11 inches), the Chena trimmer at 58mm (2.28 inches).

The visual appearance is a little more classic. It appears it's a conventional hollowbody construction, with a carved back and front joined to the sides. But, like the Chena, that's

not the case. Here, the top is solid spruce (two longitudinal braces are carved into the underside of the top), the sides are mahogany, and the back is a very nice bookmatched flame maple. The deep burst finish is immaculate and high-gloss – it's more sharply presented.

The neck here is slightly trimmer in depth, especially further up, with less of the Chena's rounded, big feel. The 'pattern' profile (the old

The Rivals

Gibson's 'jazz standard' **ES-175** (approx £2,750) is a 406mm-wide (16 inches) single-cut hollowbody. All-maple laminate construction with dual '57 Classic humbuckers – it oozes heritage. A more compact 362mm-wide (14.25 inches) thinline is the **ES-339** (approx £1,850), with centre block and choice of neck profiles.

Collings' single-cut **SoCo Deluxe** (from approx £5,200, also available in a large laminate 16LC version) is a 381mm (15-inch) centre-blocked semi, with solid maple top and mahogany back and sides. **Fret King's** **Black Label Elise** (£749) is a 368mm-wide (14.5 inches) semi, a downsized offset ES-335-alike – a superb choice if you're on a budget



The JA-15's bridge, tailpiece, humbuckers, pickup rings and knobs are all PRS designs

‘wide-fat’) has a slight hint of a V to its shoulders, which fools your hand into thinking it’s smaller than it is. It’s an ebony fingerboard, too, although ebony is rarely used by PRS on its electrics, and bound, which, again, is unusual for a PRS – unlike the ever-present bird inlays. The headstock outline returns to the early 80s Santana style, less obviously modern than the pointed head that is synonymous with the brand. It adds to the more classic look, more ‘artisan’, even though the inlaid headstock signature on the almost unfinished ebony facing looks a bit over the top, while the truss-rod cover, with its large ‘JA-15’ logo, just looks out of place.

As ever, the scale is 635mm (25 inches), slightly longer than the Chena’s 628mm (24.75 inches). The JA-15’s neck meets its body between the 15th and 16th frets, so is subtly different to the Chena.

Smith’s more-than-credible stab at the Gibson tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece looks almost hand-shaped from

aluminium and brass. The 53/10 humbuckers are also proprietary designs, and for controls, we have a volume, tone and three-way selector switch setup. Then there are the open-back Phase III tuners... even the pickup rings and knobs are all proprietary, intelligent designs.

Sounds

We play both guitars for some time before we plug in. There’s a profound old-Gibson-semi tonality to the Chena: that slightly honky resonance, trim bass and clear but smooth high-end. The JA-15 sounds a little newer, a little crisper, with a little more acoustic-ness to its sound, perhaps as you’d expect with the differences in construction. The Chena’s neck not only feels bigger, dimensionally, but the string spacing seems broader, too – which it is at the nut, though it’s slightly tighter at the bridge. Slightly smaller frets on the Chena add to an older-style feel, though picking which plays ‘better’, when both play

like you dream a guitar should, is harder to identify.

Plugged in, there’s almost a reversal of the acoustic tonality. The Chena sounds like a whole heap of Gibson-style thinlines. It’s a little more open, less ‘solidbody’ than an ES-335 – more like an ES-330, perhaps. At lower volumes, nailing older jazz styles is easy. The tone control becomes the ‘style’ control – that shoulder-placed three-way makes pickup changes really easy, especially when playing seated. The sounds are balanced, and the neck pickup is wonderfully full and vocal.

The JA-15 sounds quite different. Its pickups are lower in output – they sound older. It’s definitely more ‘jazz’, less blues, but that ultimately depends on the player. The sounds have more acoustic-ness to them; they’re textured and very analogue, while the neck just disappears in your hand. For this player at least, a shoulder-placed toggle would be the icing on a very evocative-sounding cake, while a dual-volume setup

like the Chena’s just gives more subtle tonalities – important if your actual amp sound stays the same through a set, as it does for many jazz stylists.

Both guitars work well with louder, rockier or dirty blues tones. If that’s more where you lean, the Chena takes a lead. Those beautiful on-the-edge-of-musical-feedback tones are easily achieved – and, really, your PRS option would be either a single- or double-cut Hollowbody. But the JA-15, with its darker, almost softer sound, also takes gain and volume well. There’s less solidbody-like snap and sparkle, though, which is something the Chena has in bucketloads.

Verdict

With only a gold-plated hardware option on the JA-15, it’s very much what you see is what you get. The Chena, in its Tier 3 specification, is cosmetically simpler, which certainly accounts for the £1,396 price difference. But it’s this simplicity (and price!) that draws us to the Chena, and

The JA-15’s sounds have an acoustic-ness to them; they’re textured and very analogue, while the neck just disappears in your hand



The PRS has the company’s proprietary locking tuners: quick string changes




The JA-15 has a more traditional hollowbody archtop design than the Chena



Visible grain contributes towards the Chena T3's beautifully aged finish

There's an old-Gibson-semi tonality to the Chena: that honky resonance, trim bass and clear but smooth high-end

makes us wish PRS would do a 'Stripped', more basic, more affordable version of the JA-15 – there's a danger this guitar would upstage the rest of the band, especially at more low-key, small-combo jazz-style gigs, where the ES-175 is usually as fancy as it gets.

Tonally, both are quite superb, although different. For older-style jazzier and bluesier work, the JA-15 really sounds like an old guitar, and would be our suggestion for a more classic jazz player moving into more modern fusion, perhaps. But that's sort of where the Chena takes over. It's bluesier, poppier, more 'solidbody', but still with all the openness, expression and dynamics of a good thinline. In that regard, it's more versatile. Either way, if you're lucky enough to be in the market for a guitar like this, frankly, you'll be spoilt for choice. Truly awesome. 

The Bottom Line

Knaggs Chena T3

We like: Style; sound; versatility; playability

We dislike: Nothing – this is a guitar for life!

Guitarist says: If your interests lie on the jazzier side of the tracks, this guitar will take you there. Mature in sound and style

PRS JA-15

We like: As the Knaggs, a stylish, versatile guitar that plays and sounds fantastic

We dislike: Lack of options: we'd like to see it 'Stripped'

Guitarist says: The oldest, jazziest-sounding PRS Hollowbody to date. For a compact, modern archtop, we've not heard better



Knaggs Chena Tier 3

PRICE: £3,099 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway, archtop hollowbody electric

BODY: Figured maple top, mahogany back and sides

NECK: 1-piece mahogany, '59' profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.4mm (1.71")

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Knaggs 2-piece adjustable bridge/tailpiece, Gotoh open-backed tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:

51mm (2")

ELECTRICS: 2 Seymour Duncan SH-1 '59 humbuckers, 3-way lever pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.84/6.25

OPTIONS: P-90 single coils (no charge)

RANGE OPTIONS: The Chena is available in Tier 2 (from £4,499) and Tier 1 (£5,999) specifications. See website for full details

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: California Sunset (as reviewed), Opaque Black, Golden Natural, Hickory Burst, Aged Scotch and Winter Solstice. More colours coming soon

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Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



PRS JA-15

PRICE: £4,495 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway, archtop hollowbody electric

BODY: Spruce top, mahogany sides and flamed maple back

NECK: 1-piece figured maple, pattern profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")

NUT/WIDTH: Friction-reducing/43.1mm (1.7")

FINGERBOARD: Bound ebony, mother of pearl and paua heart bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: PRS 2-piece adjustable bridge/tailpiece, PRS Phase III locking tuners (brass posts) with aluminium buttons

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:

52.5mm (2.1")

ELECTRICS: PRS 53/10 Treble and 53/10 Bass humbuckers, 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and master tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.84/6.25

OPTIONS: Gold-plated hardware adds £325

RANGE OPTIONS: PRS's Hollowbody range includes the Hollowbody II and Singlecut Hollowbody II (both £4,150) that both feature the PRS/LR Baggs piezo system; the Hollowbody 12-string without piezo system costs £3,950

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: McCarty Tobacco Sunburst (as reviewed), Amber Black, Antique White, Black, Fire Red Sunburst, McCarty Sunburst, Tri-Colour Sunburst and Vintage Natural

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Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★