



PHOTOGRAPHY KATHARINE LANE-SIMS

## Ibanez SAS36FM, SAS32FM & SA260FM £379, £379 & £299

Three new additions to the super-slim SA range, featuring the soon-to-be renowned True Duo humbucker by Simon Bradley

After returning to the mainstream well over two decades ago, Ibanez has subsequently attracted some of the coolest and hippest endorsees of any similar company. What's even better for all concerned is that the company has, for the most part, been able to hold on to them ever since and

the various, ever-changing versions of the JEM, JS and PGM models remain immensely popular and, hence, very good sellers. And not just due to their respective designers' continuing musical activity.

Other similarly great players have moved on from the register, one such

example being Aussie fusion genius Frank Gambale. After a rise in profile thanks to a six-year stint with the finger-melting Chick Corea band, Gambale was approached by Hoshino (Ibanez's parent company) in 1986 with regard to producing a signature model, and a year later four FGM

It's good to see a trio of new Ibanez electrics that fly in the face of tradition in that they're perfect for clean and more staid styles



The body contours on all three models will not allow for right-angled jacks

a slab back and, while we're at it, a non-locking pivot vibrato.

The reason for this journey through history? The three guitars we have here are brand new additions to the SA range now available in Blighty, offering a more than competitive price and a few innovations along the way.

### SAS36FM

All three guitars here feature a humbucker in the bridge position and this is where we find the first pleasant surprise. Described as a True Duo pickup, the design incorporates not two but a trio of coils to allow for the provision of a genuine stacked single-coil-size humbucker. It's the row of flat polepieces rather than the hex screws that acts in this fashion and, as the spec includes both a standard five-way plus a push/pull pot on the volume control, there are more sounds available here than you may first expect.

With the switch in position one you have a standard humbucker; pull up on the pot and the solo'd stacked single-coil humbucker is ready to go. In position two the middle pickup is combined, in parallel, with however you've set the bridge unit; position three allows the middle to be solo'd. Positions four and five are middle and neck, and solo'd neck respectively. It's certainly impressive.

The curved nature of the front face of the SA is attractively mirrored by the ergonomic chrome pickup surround, and the slick jack input is a hangover from the early Sabre days. By the way, if you use a lead with right-angled jacks, most won't fit in here without the non-recommended use of a hammer: forewarned, as they say.

As ever with designs from this end of the market, the merest inclusion of any sort of abalone or mother-of-pearl adds extra dollops of perceived quality to a guitar and, if done as well as here, we have no problem with the practice. The cap of genuine flamed maple is nicely bound in both white and abalone too.

There is a small belly contour to the rear of the mahogany body and the edges have been nicely rounded off to continue the streamlined vibe: weighing in at under 2.5 kilos it's thin too, measuring a mere 31mm thick by the end strap pin.

Although Ibanez re-established its contemporary name as a maker of hot-rod rock guitars in the eighties, thanks in part to the wonders of the Edge double-locking whammy, it's a more staid pivot vibrato here, specifically the SAT Pro bridge. Doffing its hat at the low-mass Wilkinson design, this design offers locking saddles that disallow any horizontal movement, added to string stability. With the bar pushed all the way down, the strings become just about 90 per cent slack and, thanks to a graphite nut and some serious levels of string stretching, tuning stability is... well, we'll get to that.

The set maple neck comprises of three pieces for enhanced sustain, tone and stability and ends in the classic Ibbey headstock, complete with Schaller M6-a-like tuners.

This is a more substantial neck than the bend-in-the-wind feel of those old FGM models and offers medium frets and a rosewood 'board adorned with small abalone inlays alongside a wide yet comfy shallow 'D'-shape.

**SOUNDS:** We're not saying that the SAS36 doesn't rock, but its forte is absolutely within the clean and slightly driven domains. Each of the seven possible settings are beautifully transparent, with position four a bang-on perfect tone for funky chops and position two, with the stacked single-coil switched in, akin to a beefed up Tele neck pickup. And these are just two highlights.

In fact, this comparison with the good old T-type is pertinent right across the board as, with more and more gain added into the equation, the tone becomes in turn sharper and more aggressive – it's all good.

### IBANEZ SAS36FM

**PRICE:** £379

**ORIGIN:** China

**TYPE:** Double-cut solid-body electric

**BODY:** Mahogany with bound flame maple top

**NECK:** Maple, glued-in

**SCALE LENGTH:**

648mm (25.5-inch)

**NUT/WIDTH:** Graphite/43mm

**FINGERBOARD:**

Rosewood

**FRETS:** 22, medium

**HARDWARE:** Ibanez SAT

Pro SAT30S vibrato,

Schaller-a-like tuners

**STRING SPACING,**

**BRIDGE:** 53mm

**ELECTRICS:** Ibanez True

Duo humbucker (bridge)

and two AHS single-coils,

five-way lever, volume,

tone and humbucker

push/pull coil-split on

volume pot

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):**

2.49/5.5

**OPTIONS:** The entry-

level GSA60 goes for

£179, while the beautiful

flagship Prestige

SA2020FM retails at

£699. If a flame top isn't

for you, check the

metallic black SA320X

(£449) or stripped-down

SA120 (£229)

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISHES:** Trans grey

(as reviewed), dark red

stain

**Headstock**

**0121 508 6666**

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

## The rivals

**IBANEZ SAS36FM**

PRS SE EG SSH £499

Godin Freeway Classic

£449

Yamaha Pacifica 612V

£419

The EG is as close as

PRS is likely to get to

a Fullerton-inspired

double-cut and, with

a wide-fat neck, PRS

pickups and fittings

plus the usual attention

to detail, it's worth

checking out pronto.

The all-black version

is especially cool.

Although the Freeway

offers an HSH con-

figuration, it certainly

has the raw power to

cross swords with any

similarly priced rock

machine. A beautiful

poplar/maple body and

a neck to die for are

just some of the plus

points. If you've been

living under a rock for

the past aeon or so and

have yet to try one of

the myriad Pacificas out

there, then do so at your

earliest convenience.

Great value, excellent

construction and a

versatile performance

are common all down

the line

models were added to the catalogue. Frank's now with Yamaha, of course, but during the Ibanez design process he used on occasion the now long-gone RG540 model, a design that mutated into the Sabre – or S – range still available today.

The ultra-thin mahogany body and neck provided a surprisingly big tone with an unrivalled playing comfort, not to mention an eye-popping desert yellow finish option first seen on Vai's original batch of JEM777 models.

In fact, so insubstantial can S Series guitars feel that some players were put off by the whole idea, so Ibanez reworked the design to continue the super-curved body contours and mahogany tonewood but to also include



Above: Ibanez SAS36FM

Below: Ibanez SAS32FM

**IBANEZ SAS32FM**

As SAS36FM except...  
**ELECTRICS:** Ibanez AH3 humbucker in neck  
**FINISHES:** Trans lavender blue (as reviewed), dark red sunburst

**The rivals**

**SAS32FM**  
 Dean Hard Tail Select Vibrato £559  
 Maverick F-1 £499  
 ESP LTD H-100FM £349  
 Just a touch above the price of the Ibanez gives you a lovely Dean double-cut that proves its catalogue isn't dominated by spiky Dime tributes. Spec includes a lovely flamed top and Duncan Design covered 'buckers with Les Paul-style controls. The underrated Maverick range always offers great construction values and the F-1, with a nod towards the mould-breaking RG design, offers 24 frets, smooth double-locking whammy and genuinely excellent pickups. Although the H-100FM is a hardtail, it'll beat you around the face and neck with its massive tone and agathis body topped off with flamed maple at the drop of a hat. Cool headstock too

→ As you enter out-and-out rock territory, typified by cascading high gain, this high-end treble and insistent crystalline character starts to grate. This is a good thing up to a point as solos and other forays up the neck easily stand out, all strident and authoritative, but for more basic rhythm lines it's not so good – there's just not enough flesh for our liking. It also has to be reported that our example required constant retuning during our testing, and not just after a bout of Vai-inspired dive-bombing either, which is a shame.

Still, there's no tried and trusted rule that states that an Ibanez should automatically be perfect for rock and not much else and, if your style is based around clean and more laid-back overdrives, the feel and look demands you check this out.

**SAS32FM**

Although we'd agree that this model is simply the HH-configured version of the SAS36, it is distinct in its own right. Fair enough, its spec is identical in feel, fixtures, fittings and materials to that of the 36, aside from the distinct provision of a neck humbucker in place of the pair of single-coils. It's a standard Ibanez AH-3 model while a True Duo, complete with push/pull volume pot, resides at the bridge. Position two on this five-way lever combines the

IBANEZ SAS36FM	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<b>WE LIKED</b> Cool vibe and look	
<b>WE DISLIKED</b> Frustrating tuning stability; harsh performance	

IBANEZ SAS32FM	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<b>WE LIKED</b> Lovely finish; excellent neck pickup options	
<b>WE DISLIKED</b> Still the dodgy tuning	



SAS36FM: its forte is in the clean and slightly driven domains

relevant setting of the bridge 'bucker with the inside coil of the AH-3, position three offers both humbuckers, position four the two neck coils and position five the neck in all its glory. The only other difference to point out is the stunning trans lavender blue

hue of this example: it shows off the flame maple top to an absolute tee.

**SOUNDS:** Although the transparent overtones are still present they're far less intrusive than on the 36, which we can only put down to the slightly



IBANEZ SA260FM	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p><b>WE LIKED</b> Can't argue with anything at this price</p> <p><b>WE DISLIKED</b> It's the ugly ducking compared to the two swans</p>	

→ increased amount of tonewood thanks to the lack of a central single coil.

Whyever this is, there's no doubt that rock rhythms are better served here and, hand in hand with the same great clean performance, the SAS32 is probably the better of the two tonally. Of course, the option of flicking to the neck humbucker to try out those Velvet Revolver licks is always a cool option, and here the basic skinny tone ensures that this setting also cuts through.

Those irritating tuning niggles were also a problem here and, considering the usual high standard of Ibanez QC, this was a nasty surprise. Maybe increasing the number of tremolo springs to four or including a complimentary bottle of Nut Sauce with each unit sold could be options.

**The tonal character of a bolt-on neck will often contribute to a slightly more clipped Fender-like tone. Interestingly that works to the SA260's advantage here**

### SA260FM

With the most affordable of the three here, the only differences are easy to spot: the unfinished three-piece maple neck that's a bolt-on, unbound fingerboard and yet still genuine flame maple top. All electrics, including pickup spec and switching, follow those of the SAS36 to the letter too.

As the rear of the neck boasts a matt finish rather than a painted gloss version, the feel is slightly different, and although this isn't meant to voice a positive or negative opinion either way as it's not a relevant criticism, we actually preferred this guitar's playing experience to the previous guitars.



The SA260FM's playing experience was our favourite of the three

**SOUNDS:** In theory the tonal character of a bolt-on neck when compared to those of a glued-in or through-body construction will often contribute, especially with vibrato, to a funkier, slightly more clipped Fender-like tone. Interestingly that works to

the SA260's advantage here, rounding off that intrusive high-end to leave the basic tone much more in the Stratocaster's ballpark. The good points of the SA36's performance apply equally to this instrument, with

rock and high-gain tones continuing to cut through, albeit without actually breaking the skin here.

### Verdict


It's good to see a trio of new Ibanez electrics that fly in the face of tradition in that they're perfect for clean and more staid styles and, if the tuning issues can be addressed, purveyors of funk, disco, pop and the like may have found an option to try other than yet another Telecaster.

The True Duo humbucker is an excellent idea (though we've seen similar coil configurations from Bartolini and EMG, for example) that works excellently and, in tandem with

a push/pull pot and standard five-way lever, allows each guitar here to offer a total of seven options.

We wish we could get over the overly abrasive nature of the SAS36 and SAS32 when we turned up the heat, but we can't ignore what our ears are telling us and it's not as if the Ibanez catalogue as a whole doesn't offer the modern rock player a wealth of exceptional instruments. Poor tuning stability is a problem here too, but we're confident that Ibanez will sort out these teething problems as soon as possible.

A standing ovation is due for the good price of each of these guitars and, even if they may not immediately appeal as a number one instrument, each or any of them would serve as a more than efficient back-up.

Instructed to choose one of the three, we'd probably go for the SAS32 simply due to its neck humbucker and the lovely finish, and we would urge you to try one through an overdriving amp to see if we're right. Play any of these guitars cleanly, however, and you'll agree that we are. 

### Ibanez SAS36FM

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Ibanez SAS32FM

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Ibanez SA260FM

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### IBANEZ SA260FM

As SAS36FM except...

PRICE: £299

ORIGIN: Indonesia

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, also at £299

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.18/7

FINISHES: Trans grey (as reviewed), gold amber

## The rivals

### IBANEZ SA260FM

Yamaha Pacifica 412V

£299

Squier Black Mirror Fat

Strat £269

Jackson JS20 Dinky

£199

The 412 sits right in the middle of the contemporary Pacifica range and is the perfect stepping stone between your very first electric and a guitar that you'll be buried with. Great pickups and feel, we'd fight to the death for the translucent black option... Hopefully we'll be able to bring more details on this unusual Squier in due course and, to our eyes, it's not dissimilar to the criminally deleted Iron Maiden Fender Strat. Specs include a mirror scratchplate, all black finish and HSS configuration of Squier pickups. This entry-level Dinky offers a flame maple veneer atop a body manufactured from Indian cedar and packs a punch with HSS Jackson pickups. Albeit a far cry from the Custom Shop original that launched a generation, it's a cool axe with which to rock!