

Rocked & Rated



Höfner CT
Club



Ampeg
AMG100

Group Test

Mid-price superstar guitars

Middle-of-the-range doesn't mean middle-of-the-road, as TG discovers with four electrics that will melt your eardrums but not your credit card...

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Flip the page to find out which one won our Group Test head-to-head

Dean
Vendetta 4.0

LTD EC-256

Top-dollar guitars are like high-maintenance girlfriends. They're happy enough in the climate-controlled, parquet-floored sanctuary of the recording studio, but they don't like to be taken on the road and pelted with pint glasses in a biker bar. Breadline guitars are like a one-night-stand. They don't demand the same respect, but you can't imagine yourself settling down with one.

This Group Test is about the guitars that reside between the gutter and the stars. When you hit a certain price point – let's call it £450 – you'll find that guitars start to blossom. Tonewoods get sexier. Pickups get saucier. Hardware gets fruitier. In short, by investing just a few hundred quid more than you strictly *have* to, you'll unlock a tier of big-name electrics whose tone is classy enough for recording, but whose chin is strong enough to soak up the abuse of the

road. You'll rock harder with a mid-price guitar too, because you won't be: a) terrified to move for fear of invalidating the insurance on your '58 Les Paul; or b) wincing in pain as your £50 Crapocaster gives you repeated electric shocks.

With the recession in full swing, and the world's luthiers scrambling for our disposable income, you'd be amazed what you pick up in the £450 and £600 price bracket.

Mid-price mayhem

TG is staring in awestruck wonder at our selection of four 'mid-range' electrics. They don't look 'mid-range'. They don't smell 'mid-range'. Across the board, they exude all the class

and breeding of a guitar you'd expect to find around the neck of a signed musician with royalties rolling in. The omens are good.

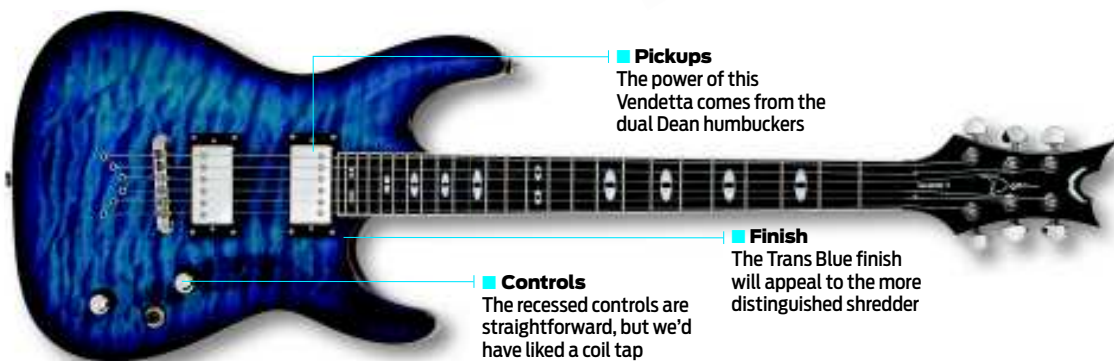
The prices might hover in the same ballpark, but each of these models has a very different vibe and audience. Like at a wedding, we've got something old – that's the Höfner CT Club (£525), based on the Beatles-endorsed models of the 60s – something new, in the shape of the mahogany-based Ampeg AMG100 (£489) and LTD's distressed EC-256 (£449), and something Trans Blue, by which we mean the eye-catching Vendetta 4.0 from Dean (£599). There's some serious artillery here. Let's pull the trigger. ■

"WHEN YOU HIT A CERTAIN PRICE POINT THE TONEWOODS GET SEXIER, PICKUPS SAUCIER AND HARDWARE FRUITIER"



Dean Vendetta 4.0 £599

Is the Vendetta better?



Pickups
The power of this Vendetta comes from the dual Dean humbuckers

Controls
The recessed controls are straightforward, but we'd have liked a coil tap

Finish
The Trans Blue finish will appeal to the more distinguished shredder

At a glance

Dean Vendetta 4.0

BODY: Mahogany, with quilted maple top and back
NECK: Maple thru-body
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 24
SCALE: 25½"
PICKUPS: 2x humbuckers
CONTROLS: Volume Tone, 3 way selector switch
HARDWARE: Nickel
FINISH: Tiger Eye, Trans Amber, Trans Red, Trans Blue [pictured] Scary Cherry
CONTACT: Bill Lewington 01268 413366
WEB: www.deanguitars.com

Spring has sprung, and even the most die-hard metal fan enjoys a break from the confines of a black paint job, so we selected Dean's Vendetta 4.0 in a cool looking Trans Blue finish.

The sizzle: This Vendetta's not your usual pick of metal lords Dean's crop; it fits in a stand for a start. But while the body takes a more standard form, it's dressed in a striking quilted maple top and back with cool 'Evil Eye' inlays glaring back at



you from the fingerboard. Still, it's not just a pretty face – Dean axes are as big on tone as they are on aesthetics, after all – so you get a solid mahogany body, thru-body neck and stringing, a fixed bridge and a brace of Dean

humbuckers that leave you in no doubt that the Vendetta 4.0 is cut from a cloth that's well and truly ready to rock.

We say: When you strap on this Dean its thin body fits you snugly – it's comfortable for seated practice as well, unlike some of its spikier brothers. Its neck scores on comfort factor too, as TG easily clamps barre chords on the accommodating 'board.

Tone wise, the clean sound is sweet enough, with the thru neck certainly adding some weight

to the sound. But it's when you crank the gain that the metal heritage on which the Vendetta is built comes growling to the fore. The dual humbuckers are a key element to the Vendetta's tone, but this also make this guitar the shredder of this line-up, so it's just not as rounded as some others in the Group Test.

SUMMARY

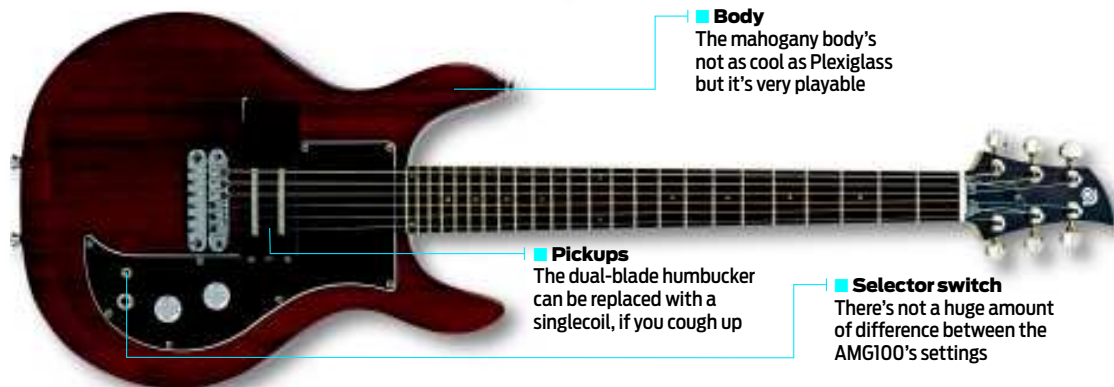
For: Very playable, sexy looks
Against: A bit one dimensional



TG says: V for very good effort

Ampeg AMG100 £489

There's always one



Body
The mahogany body's not as cool as Plexiglass but it's very playable

Pickups
The dual-blade humbucker can be replaced with a singlecoil, if you cough up

Selector switch
There's not a huge amount of difference between the AMG100's settings

At a glance

Ampeg AMG100

BODY: Solid lightweight mahogany
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 24
SCALE: 24.75"
PICKUPS: 1x dual-blade humbucker (transferable)
CONTROLS: Master volume, master tone, 3-way tone circuit selector
HARDWARE: Nickel
FINISH: Vintage Cherry [pictured], Blonde, Black
CONTACT: Loud Technologies 01494 557398
WEB: www.ampeg.com

Ampeg's transparent Dan Armstrong ADA6 might have been a legend since 1969, but rocking it topless makes your beer belly look like an arse on a photocopier. Spare your blushes with this opaque version.

The sizzle: The ADA6 was famous for its Plexiglass body, and although ditching it for a wafer-thin mahogany disc has cost the AMG100 some 'look-at-that' points, this model retains



the symmetrical doublecut and option of transplanting the dual-blade humbucker for a singlecoil (sold separately). It's enough to "distinguish the AMG100 from all other guitars", apparently.

We say: The AMG100 is much lighter than the ADA6, and while the balance isn't perfect, you won't find better access. We're starting to understand why everyone from Dave Grohl to Keith Richards are fans – it makes everything feel effortless.

Plug in and you get mixed results. The AMG100 has an unforgettable nasal attack, and when you pump the distortion, the ragged roar is truly unique. However, flicking the tone selector doesn't make much

difference. Clearly, you need to swap in the optional singlecoil for real versatility – who's gonna bother doing that mid-set?

In a market where most guitars are 50s retreads, this quirky, one-of-a-kind axe came close to winning our gold award, but it just missed out.

SUMMARY

For: Cool looks, great access, tone
Against: Not very versatile

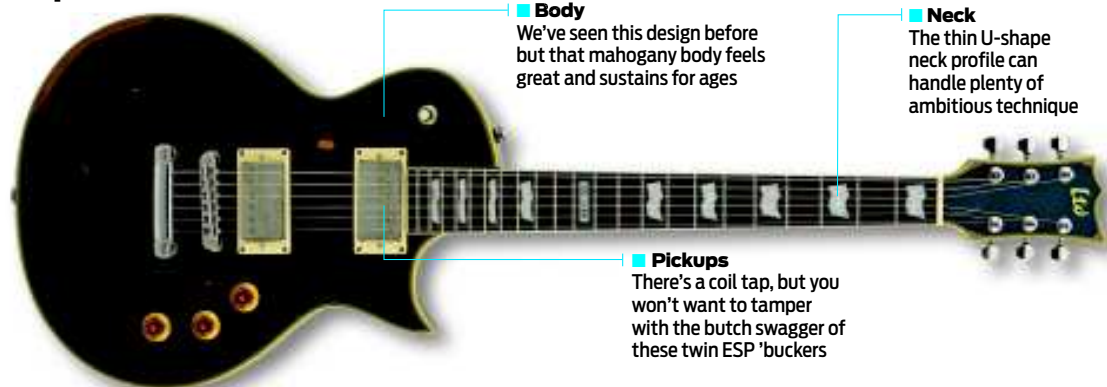


TG says: It's a red devil

"THE LTD IS AN UNDILUTED JOY, WEIGHING IN AT A FRACTION OF THE BULK OF A LES PAUL"

LTD EC-256 AVB £449

Chip off the old block



Body
We've seen this design before but that mahogany body feels great and sustains for ages

Neck
The thin U-shape neck profile can handle plenty of ambitious technique

Pickups
There's a coil tap, but you won't want to tamper with the butch swagger of these twin ESP 'buckers

At a glance

LTD EC-256 AVB

BODY: Solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, set
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with block inlays
FRETS: 22
SCALE: 24.75"
PICKUPS: 2x ESP LH-150 humbucker [with coil tap]
CONTROLS: 2x volume, 1x tone, 3-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Nickel
FINISH: Aged Vintage Black [pictured], Aged Honey Burst
CONTACT: Selectron UK 01795 419460
WEB: www.espguitars.com

Hello, is that LTD? Yeah, well there's something up with the EC-256 you've sent us – it looks like it's gone 12 rounds with Zakk Wylde. Meant to look like that, you say? Aged finish, you say? Right. Sorry.

The sizzle: LTD hasn't bothered with marketing blurb for the EC-256, and we don't blame them because there's not a lot to gush about on paper. Dig beneath the aged finish and this is a traditional electric that verges on



the unimaginative, with the deep mahogany body and set neck paired with twin humbuckers and a tune-o-matic bridge in the tried-and-tested configuration you've seen a thousand times before. And yet... there's a whiff

of promise about this axe that stops us writing it off.

We say: It's not groundbreaking, but the EC-256 has been done so well that we don't care. Aside from the minor criticism that the XJ fretwire is slightly bulky beneath the fingers, this guitar is an undiluted joy, weighing in at a fraction of the bulk of a Les Paul, with a thin U-shaped neck profile that means your fingers are as mobile as you are.

There is a coil tap, but you'd be crazy to demasculate the

organic bark of those ESPs. This guitar has everything you need: a creamy, sustain-heavy neck roar; a gutsy 'middle' setting that can bring the funk or the rock; and a knife-through-butter bridge tone that will slice your bassist in half.

Not as clever as the Ampeg, nor as charming as the Höfner, but we fell for the LTD hard.

SUMMARY

For: Monster tone, stellar playability

Against: Concept, bulky fretwire

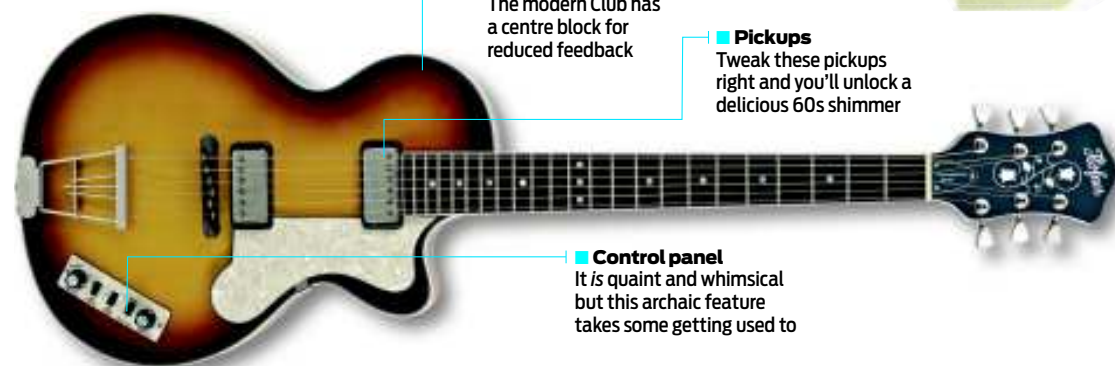
★★★★★

TG says: It's a black beauty

Höfner Contemporary Series Club

We love it, yeah, yeah, yeah

£525



Body
The modern Club has a centre block for reduced feedback

Pickups
Tweak these pickups right and you'll unlock a delicious 60s shimmer

Control panel
It is quaint and whimsical but this archaic feature takes some getting used to

At a glance

Höfner CT Series Club

BODY: Spruce top, maple back and sides
NECK: Maple
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 22
SCALE: 25½"
PICKUPS: 2x Schaller humbuckers
CONTROLS: 2x volume, pickup selector switch, bass, treble
HARDWARE: Nickel-plated
FINISH: Antique Brown Sunburst [pictured], Black, Red
CONTACT: Barnes and Mullins 01691 652449
WEB: www.hofner.com

Don't be alarmed if wet patches appear on your magazine. It's merely your father (who can remember Lennon and Harrison playing Höfner Clubs in the 60s) drooling over your shoulder.

The sizzle: The Höfner website gives few spec details on the Club but assures us that the 60s style guitar before us is no museum piece: "These models are designed for the tough live performance of today's guitarist.



The Club includes a sustain block for a more modern sound, and by virtue of its compact body dimensions it is less susceptible to feedback, even at high volume."

We say: The 60s vibe of the Höfner is spot-on, even if the slavish authenticity can sometimes be a headache (the control panel, for instance, is baffling and archaic). True to Höfner's claims, the aesthetics conceal a bulletproof modern gig weapon, with the bowl-back semi-acoustic body finished to perfection and the neck capable of more than jangled 7th chords.

Be careful with the tone. The 'rhythm' setting can be soupy and the 'lead' a little shrill,

but with patient twiddling of the control board and amp, you'll unlock the holy grail – a fat-bottomed Merseybeat thump served up with plenty of shimmer, decent sustain and no shrieks of feedback.

Nostalgic for the golden age of rock 'n' roll? Join the Club.

SUMMARY

For: Brilliant looks, feel, 60s tone

Against: Stupid controls, a tad shrill

★★★★☆

TG says: A fab four stars