



Freshman  
Apollo 3 DC

Takamine EG481SCX

Group Test

## Mid-Priced Electro Acoustics

Natural acoustics are great around the campfire, but you'll **need power to fill a venue. Ditch the microphone and strum as you are** with these plug-and-players

WORDS HENRY YATES



Tanglewood  
Evolution TW28  
CE XFM

Ibanez JSA5

**L**et's hear it for electricity. Not only does it power the boring stuff, like light bulbs, computers and life-support machines, but it's also the reason why you're able to hit the back wall of Wembley with your intimate acoustic ballads. Essentially, there are two ways to make an acoustic go electro. Pampered purists insist on a 'natural' Martin combined with a condenser mic, but that's easy for them to say because they've got a troupe of techs to set it up. Working musicians all know it's far easier to roll up with a plug-and-play, piezo-equipped, preamp-fitted electro-acoustic, and start knocking out *Nothing Else Matters*.

Electro-acoustics are everywhere. Almost every luthier makes them, and as a result prices are competitive, with TG able to set

an upper limit of £500 for this Group Test and emerge with change. First in the line-up is the JSA5 (£399), the latest collaboration between Ibanez and Joe Satriani, and a tantalising beast to be sure. Tanglewood's Evolution TW28 CE XFM (£399) is the same price and just as magnetic, with a flamed maple body, while Takamine's EG4B1SCX (£399) brings a spot of Hells Angel attitude to this month's test. Finally, for top whack, there's the new Freshman Apollo 3 DC (£499), a hefty beast whose creators swear it'll pay back your investment. ■

**"ELECTRO-ACOUSTICS  
ARE PRICED VERY  
COMPETITIVELY"**

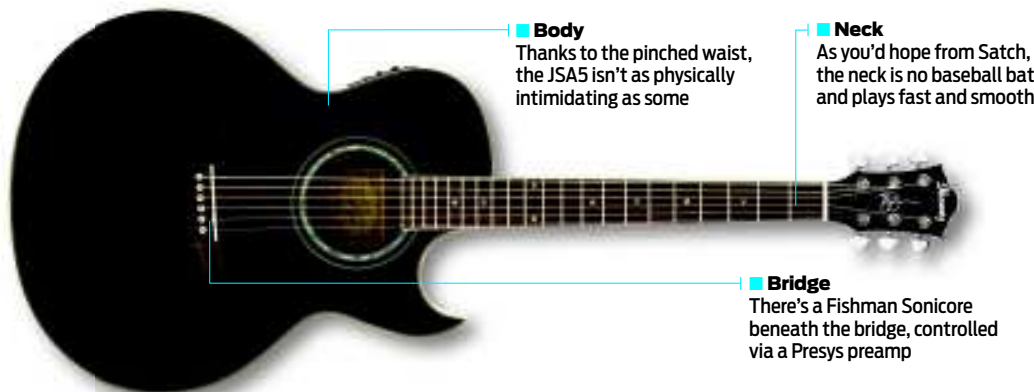


Flip the page to  
find out which one  
won our Group Test  
head-to-head



## Ibanez JSA5 £399

Strumming with the alien



### Body

Thanks to the pinched waist, the JSA5 isn't as physically intimidating as some

### Neck

As you'd hope from Satch, the neck is no baseball bat and plays fast and smooth

### Bridge

There's a Fishman Sonicore beneath the bridge, controlled via a Presys preamp

**H**ard to imagine Joe Satriani doing anything as prosaic as strumming an A minor, but the shred godfather reckons he's sold on the Ibanez JSA5. "It feels great, plays great and sounds wonderful," spouts Satch. "It has outstanding projection, an impressive dynamic range with a powerful clear tone, and a full and balanced sound that's perfect for strumming, soloing or delicate fingerpicking."

Apparently designed by Satriani himself, the JSA5's slim



103mm body and whopping 405mm soundboard are more like a jumbo, adding up to the most manageable player in the test, even before you throw in a slim neck that feels like it's been transplanted from an electric. By

comparison, though, the tone is more derivative. The Sonicore piezo does a great job conveying the JSA5's natural jangle, and the keen note definition is admittedly great for solos, but overall there's perhaps not quite the departure you expect from an instrument with Satriani's name above the door. It sounds great – but so do a hundred spruce/mahogany models priced less than £399.

**Conclusion:** The JSA5's physical performance leaves you in no doubt this is a player's guitar,

and we're all for that. To be clear, we do like the tone, but can't help feeling a sense of déjà vu and stealing envious glances at Satch's more expensive JSA10 (£899), whose solid rosewood body and flashier electronics could throw the tonal curveball this model needs. A good showing, but not quite enough.

### SUMMARY

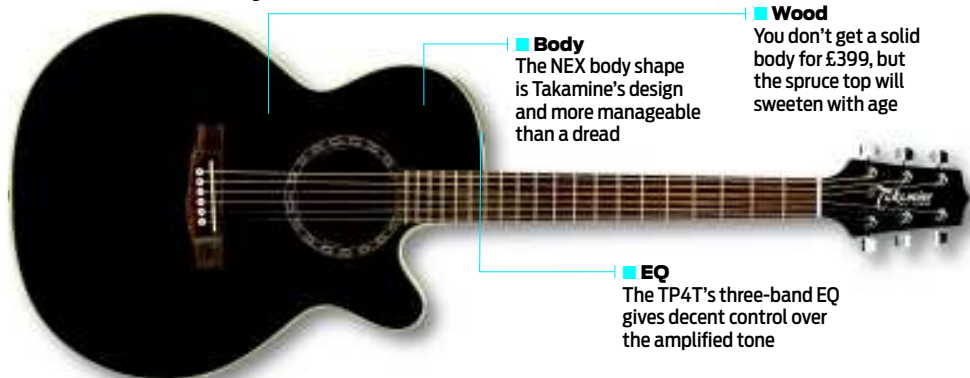
**For:** Physical performance, keen tone  
**Against:** Lack of tonal identity



**TG says:** No ordinary Joe

## Takamine EG481SCX £399

Black rebel motorcycle club



### Body

The NEX body shape is Takamine's design and more manageable than a dread

### Wood

You don't get a solid body for £399, but the spruce top will sweeten with age

### EQ

The TP4T's three-band EQ gives decent control over the amplified tone

**S**ome rockers worry that an acoustic will turn them into a bare-footed hippie. No danger of that with Takamine's cutaway bruiser, which banishes such drippy connotations with its hearse-inspired paint job and Hells Angel bike chain rosette. The timbers are a familiar spruce/mahogany combo, so the twist could be the hourglass NEX body.

The NEX is a fair compromise: its pinched waist gives decent control, the bloated lower bout



delivers plenty of mid-range 'boom', and the chunky neck bears out Takamine's claims that this axe would suit fingerpicking singer-songwriters. Unplugged, there's nice jangle and a winning

blend of both tonewoods. Plucked notes are given an underpinned warmth by the laminate mahogany, but the bite of the solid spruce top ensures open chords don't turn soupy.

You should be able to protect that tone with a decent acoustic amp, but the TP4T preamp gives good scope to fatten lush chords or boost the treble for solos too.

**Conclusion:** Beneath the biker attitude, the EG481SCX is a grown-up and balanced electro.

It hasn't got the world-class character that would see it on the rack at a top recording studio, but it's a tough, tone-packed workhorse that doesn't drop the ball in any department and gives you enough control over the amplified tone to ensure nobody will hate it.

### SUMMARY

**For:** Comfortable, tone, good EQ  
**Against:** No world-class character



**TG says:** Taka chance on me!

### At a glance

#### Ibanez JSA5

**BODY:** Solid engelmann spruce top, laminate mahogany body  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with dot inlays  
**SCALE:** 641mm"  
**ELECTRONICS:** Fishman Sonicore pickup and Presys preamp  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Black [pictured]  
**CONTACT:** Headstock Distribution Ltd 01215 086666  
**WEB:** www.ibanez.com

### At a glance

#### Takamine EG481SCX

**BODY:** Solid spruce top, laminate mahogany body  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with shell inlay  
**SCALE:** 644mm  
**ELECTRONICS:** TP4T preamp/CP102C pickup  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Black [pictured]  
**CONTACT:** Fender GBI 01342 331700  
**WEB:** www.takamine.com

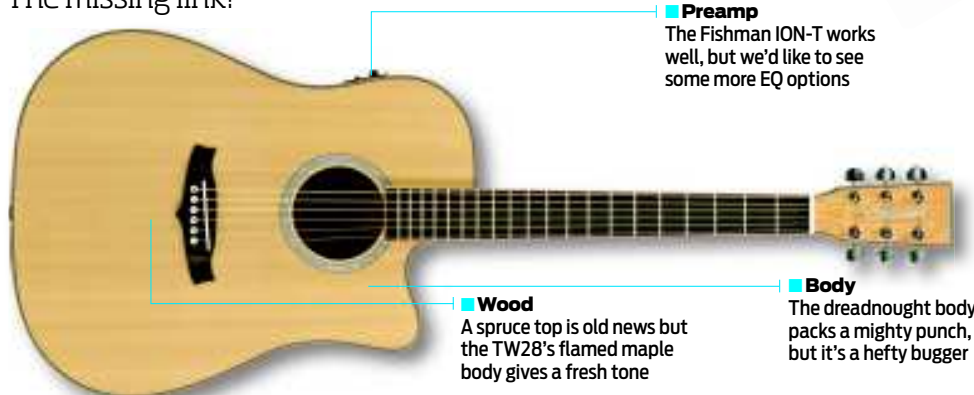
# "FRESHMAN'S APOLLO 3 NAILED THE RAW ACOUSTIC SOUND AND RELAYED IT THROUGH AN AMP"

MID-PRICED ELECTRO ACOUSTICS **★ GROUP TEST**

## Tanglewood TW28 CE XFM

£399

The missing link?



### Preamp

The Fishman ION-T works well, but we'd like to see some more EQ options

### Wood

A spruce top is old news but the TW28's flamed maple body gives a fresh tone

### Body

The dreadnought body packs a mighty punch, but it's a hefty bugger

### At a glance

#### Tanglewood TW28 CE XFM

**BODY:** Solid spruce top, flamed maple body  
**NECK:** Maple  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**SCALE:** 648mm  
**ELECTRONICS:** Fishman ION-T  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Natural Gloss [pictured]  
**CONTACT:** EMC 01959 571600  
**WEB:** www.tanglewoodguitars.co.uk

Charles Darwin's evolution theory claims that man is descended from monkeys. Whatever. We're more interested in Tanglewood's Evolution Series, which sets out to skim prices and maintain features for modern guitarists with opposable thumbs. The TW28 is the most interesting, complementing its solid spruce top with a less humdrum maple body.

The TW28 underlines the pros and cons of the dreadnought format, with a deep-pan 117mm



body that can be overwhelming, and an effortless 'boom' and lengthy sustain that means you'll forgive it immediately. Tonally, the maple makes a big, if potentially divisive impact; it brings glorious clarity to your

performance and softens nicely with fingertips, but strummers might miss the mellow warmth of a mahogany or rosewood body, and playing with a pick does make things a little jarring. We've no complaints with the piezo, but the Fishman ION-T preamp doesn't offer any meaningful EQ tweaking capability – you'll need a good acoustic amp to fatten the tone.

**Conclusion:** Many players will love the cut 'n' thrust of the maple-powered bite, particularly

those sick of hearing their precise fretwork muffled by flabby acoustic tone. But the price you pay becomes apparent when you stop playing Nick Drake, strum some Jack Johnson, and are faced with a slightly abrasive tone. No complaints for £399, but it feels like a small step (not a giant leap) for mankind.

### SUMMARY

**For:** Distinctive looks and tone

**Against:** Hefty body, divisive sound

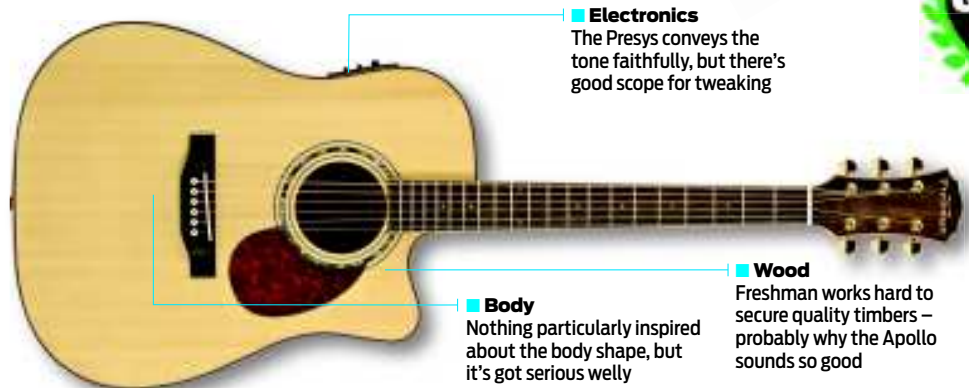
★★★★☆

**TG says:** Evolution, not revolution

## Freshman Apollo 3 DC

£499

We have lift-off



### Electronics

The Presys conveys the tone faithfully, but there's good scope for tweaking

### Body

Nothing particularly inspired about the body shape, but it's got serious welly

### Wood

Freshman works hard to secure quality timbers – probably why the Apollo sounds so good

Freshman founder Sean Kelly makes a good case for the Apollo 3's price tag. "We don't allow second-best," says the Glaswegian luthier. "Everything is done under my design and I source the woods myself, haggling hard to get premium quality tonewoods... The top is solid AA-grade sitka selected spruce. There are a lot of guitars out there; we have to be better."

It's not the biggest name, nor much to look at, but the Apollo



starts impressing from the moment you strum it unplugged. There's a gorgeous balance to the tone that has sometimes been lacking in this test: a rolling, clear, characterful voice that

you'd happily play without the embellishment of amp or effects, with spruce bite and organic mahogany warmth combining to remind you that this thing used to be a tree. Alongside a manageable neck and effortless fingerboard, it's enough to make you forget about the pretty bulky body (and slightly untidy nut). The best news? Plugged in, it's exactly the same – only louder.

**Conclusion:** Freshman has a habit of building dark horses;

the Apollo 3 turned up looking unassuming then proceeded to nail the raw sound we'd been hunting for and relay it through an amp. You could gripe over the extra £100 here, but it's a small price to pay for a great-handling, tone-packed guitar that will sustain you well into your career.

### SUMMARY

**For:** Lovely balanced tone, great feel

**Against:** Doesn't jump off the shelf

★★★★★

**TG says:** Great Scot!

### At a glance

#### Freshman Apollo 3 DC

**BODY:** Solid spruce top and laminate mahogany body  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with dot inlays  
**SCALE:** 648mm  
**ELECTRONICS:** Fishman Presys dual blend system  
**HARDWARE:** Gold die-cast  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Natural finish  
**CONTACT:** Freshman Guitars 01355 228028  
**WEB:** www.freshmanguitars.co.uk