

MARTIN D-28 JOHN MARTYN £4,399
ACOUSTICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE CAUDERY



Martin D-28 John Martyn £4,399

Created in Martin's custom shop and commissioned by Westside Distribution, this square-shouldered D-28 celebrates the music of John Martyn *by Steve Harvey*

Since 1931, Martin Guitars of Nazareth, Pennsylvania has been building guitars that bear the name of an artist. Be it Gene Autry, Johnny Cash or Paul Simon, artist models are an important and ongoing part of the Martin story. For the most part however, the privileged few bestowed with the honour of a Martin Guitar in their name have been American artists, many of whom have been comparatively lesser known on these shores.

In 2007, Westside Distribution began an ambitious programme to redress the balance somewhat. Plans for a special series of guitars released in honour of British Martin-playing artists were hatched, and with Martin Guitars' full backing and endorsement, Westside began drawing up a select list of names and making approaches. As a result, April 2007 saw the release of the Rory Gallagher dreadnought while a few months later the Davey Graham OM model was released. Westside is at pains to stress that the UK Artist guitars are not signature models or an attempt to faithfully recreate

the artists' favoured model. Rather they are commemorative editions released to celebrate British artists whose impact on the musical landscape of this country is undeniable. The third in this exclusive series is the John Martyn model.

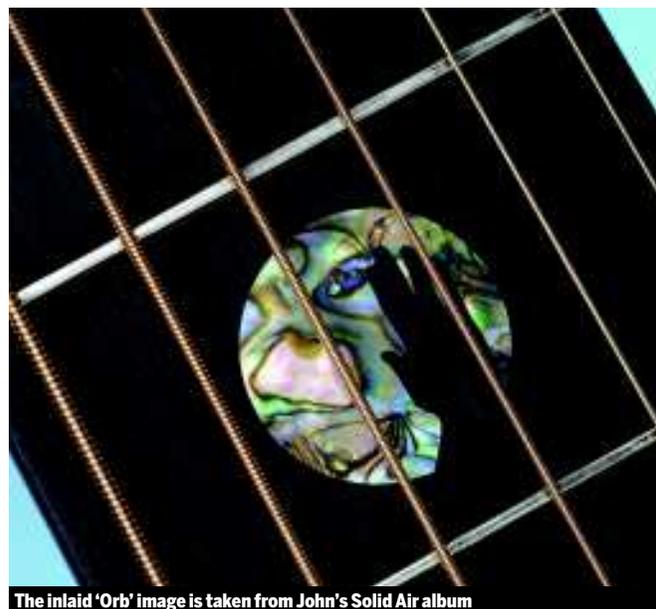
The Martin John Martyn UK artist model is based primarily on a D-28; for many, the benchmark by which all

dreadnoughts should be judged. However, as a result of the collaboration between Westside and the artist, the John Martyn model features some interesting and exciting variations to the standard D-28.

A high-quality selection of Sitka spruce has been used for the top, while the sides and two-piece back are East Indian rosewood – a wood that's fast becoming the preferred

alternative to the depleting stocks of Brazilian rosewood. The panels to both the guitar's soundboard and back are beautifully book-matched. The decorative centre strip to the back is a flawless and tasteful example of parquetry, while black coloured boltaron – a PVC plastic used by Martin since the late sixties due to its anti-discolouring properties – has been used for the binding as well as the heelcap and tapered end-piece. White boltaron, meanwhile, is chosen for the side dot markers. The purfling is standard D-28 style.

A bevel-edged, partially transparent tortoiseshell pickguard sits around the classic, style-18 soundhole rosette while a bone compensated saddle sits snugly within the black ebony bridge. Abalone pearl dots top the black bridge pins and black ebony has also been used for the



The inlaid 'Orb' image is taken from John's Solid Air album

The Rivals

All selected rivals feature a high-grade Sitka spruce top and East Indian rosewood back and sides. **Huss & Dalton's TD-R** (£2,540) is a fantastic dreadnought offering a full-bodied, rich tone. The **Collings D3** (£3,599) is similar to the **D2H** model (£3,099) but comes with gold Waverly tuners and a bound headstock and neck. **The Santa Cruz D** (£2,950) has impressive balance and volume thanks to its tapered bracing. **Martin's** most affordable all solid slot-head dread is the mahogany **D-15S** (£1,399).



Side-mounted Waverly 4063 tuners adorn the slotted headstock

If the guitar itself is mightily impressive, it is nothing compared to the remarkable tone that gushes out from the heart of this extraordinary instrument

headplate. The mahogany, satin finished, low-profile neck employs a beautifully executed dovetail joint. A simple, yet ultra-stylish old-style C F Martin decal adorns the headstock along with side-mounted Waverly 4063 tuners.

As stated earlier, from a structural point of view, this is not a 'regular' Martin D-28. The neck dimensions and choice of headstock were influenced by Martins within John Martyn's own collection. In discussions with Westside, Martyn requested a wider fingerboard than that of a regular dreadnought (1 11/16ths-inch) and expressed a preference for one with the same dimensions as a 000-shape Martin he owned (1 3/4-inch). A slotted headstock was also agreed upon in recognition of a rare '0' shape from the very early 1900s. The John Martyn D-28 possesses components of the three Martins owned by the man himself.

One of the most endearing decorations to this D-28 is the

inclusion of what Westside refer to as the 'Orb' at the 5th fret. Anyone familiar with Martyn's music will immediately recognise it from the front cover of the 1973 album *Solid Air*. This thoughtful but subtle feature, along with the wider fingerboard and slotted headstock, totally personalises the instrument and gives it a wonderful sense of character.

The workmanship and design that have gone into this model are second to none and its presentation, even under close scrutiny, is as good as you'll see anywhere. Without getting into subjective issues such as using Brazilian rosewood or super exotic inlay, it's hard to see how this guitar could be improved.

Sounds

If the guitar itself is mightily impressive, it is nothing compared to the remarkable tone that gushes out from the heart of this extraordinary instrument. In terms of its dynamics, the John Martyn

D-28 has three principle attributes: enormous sustain, ultra-sensitive responsiveness and hit-between-the-eyes clarity.

When played in tandem with our house D-18 (a fine guitar in its own right), the John Martyn D-28 sings louder and longer. Paradoxically, conventional wisdom dictates that forward shifted bracing – which the D-28 has – detrimentally affects sustain, but not so here. This guitar plays as if the guys at Martin have installed a hidden sustain pedal.

The definition of the full and balanced tone is noteworthy too. Whether strummed hard, delicately finger-picked or speedily flat-picked, the John Martyn D-28 has a pronounced, bell-like resonance and clarity right across the tonal spectrum. It somehow causes similar sized and expensive instruments to sound as if they're being played through a woollen blanket. The slotted headstock is no doubt a contributing factor to this as the added break angle of the

strings over the nut drives the soundboard more than conventional block headstocks. But whatever the causes, it's a truly impressive guitar.

Verdict

Simply put, the John Martyn D-28 is the finest dreadnought this reviewer has ever played. Everything about it is just right and the longer we spent with it, the more it opened up and demonstrated that there's nothing it can't do. It is only the whopping price tag that causes a wince, but for those that can afford one, this limited edition will perform and reward in abundance. There was no one quite like John Martyn, and this unique and outstanding guitar is a fitting way to keep his memory alive. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Every single thing: build, finish, presentation and awesome sound

We dislike: Coming to terms with the fact that we'll probably never own one

Guitarist says: An extraordinary guitar in recognition of an extraordinary musician



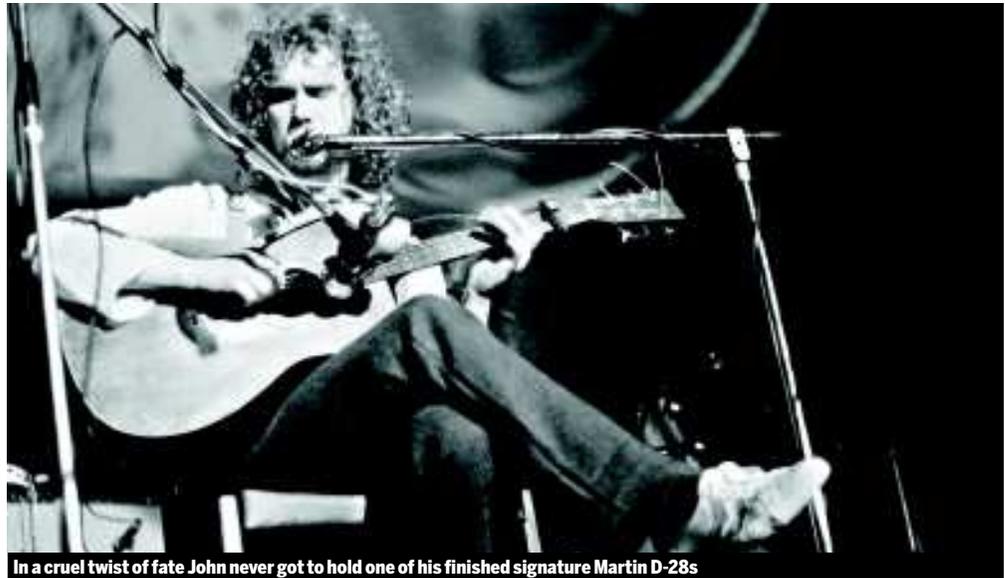
Martin D-28 John Martyn

PRICE: £4,399 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Dreadnought
TOP: Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: East Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 124mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 397mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 643.6mm (25.4-inch)
TUNERS: Nickel-plated Waverly 4063
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/44.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Black ebony
FRETS: 20, small
BRIDGE/SPACING: Black ebony/57mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.1/4.62
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Other UK Custom Artist models are the Rory Gallagher (£3,699) and Davey Graham (£3,099). The Standard Series D-28 costs £2,099
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Clear gloss body, satin neck (as reviewed)
Westside Distribution
0141 248 4812
www.westsidedistribution.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



In a cruel twist of fate John never got to hold one of his finished signature Martin D-28s

Martyn's Martin

We find out how the legendary guitar man was honoured by Martin

Guitarist spoke to Mark De Neys of Westside Distribution about the UK artist series and the story behind the D-28 John Martyn.

Tell us about the concept behind the UK Artist series...

"We here at Westside felt there were some incredible Martin-playing UK artists who hadn't had the recognition of a Martin model in their name. We wanted to honour those whom we felt had moved hearts and minds using a Martin guitar. They were our heroes. We sought permission from Martin Guitars to start our own UK artist programme. They gave the concept their blessing and so we're now on our third guitar. Of the three names we've had so far, no one would argue about their contribution to the history of British music."

When did the idea for a John Martyn model come about?

"We started work on that model at the beginning of 2008. We found a means of getting in touch with John, made the approach and it was very well received. He was very knowledgeable about the history of Martin Guitars. He loved the brand, the instruments and the whole idea really pleased him. He

understood that not everybody gets to have the opportunity to have a Martin guitar released in their name. Despite being so loved and respected as well as an incredible musician, he was just the most humble of men. He couldn't believe that we wanted to create this special model. He was so passionate about it. John wasn't interested in accolades, he just loved to play music."

Can you tell us a little about some of John's contributions to this model?

"John was well-known for playing a D-28 in the seventies so that was the foundation and starting point. However, after many consultations with him we decided upon a few additional features that would twist a conventional D-28. During the process, John kindly took photographs of the three Martin guitars he owned. Surprisingly, they were not all dreadnoughts. One was, of course, the guitar he played for years, but he also had a 000-16 Special Edition and a turn of the century O-size guitar, which had a slotted headstock. Each of his guitars 'gave' something to the new model. Together, we decided that it would make a nice twist to take a 14-fret to the body neck and use a slotted headstock. John also wanted a wider fingerboard.

"When discussing the aesthetics, we really wanted to

see the 'Orb' image from the Solid Air album on the neck. We felt that it was a distinct, instantly recognisable image that, if used tastefully, would suit the guitar well. We located the rights holder and obtained permission. Once it had been inlaid, we sent it over to John – it was literally just the fingerboard with frets fitted – and he was delighted. John also wanted to incorporate the Fleur-de-lis on the guitar. Kindly Dick Boak at Martin Guitars created paper labels that have a watermark of the Fleur-de-lis, which Chris Martin IV and John have signed. We always wanted this guitar to be very tasteful and understated."

What was John's reaction when you presented him with number one?

"In a cruel twist of fate, John never actually got to hold a finished model. Numbers one, two and three arrived here at Westside just before the weekend preceding his death. We'd unpacked them, allowed them to settle, checked everything was perfect and, 12 months after first making contact, we were ready to present him with number one. I called to make arrangements but John wasn't at home to take the call, and I was asked to call back the next day. Sadly, John died that night."