



12-STRING ELECTRIC ROUND-UP £549-£1,239
ELECTRICS



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It's been over 50 years since the electric 12-string first appeared; latest examples are pretty diverse **by Paul Day**

The 12-string electric has been around for well over 50 years, with the first commercially produced instrument appearing in 1954 courtesy of Stratosphere, a small company based in Springfield, Missouri. Danelectro was next to offer a standalone electric 12 some seven years later, in the typically oddball Bellzouki, but the concept really took off in 1963 when Rickenbacker introduced a multi-strung equivalent of its 360 semi.

12-string success was soon guaranteed via high-profile use by bands such as The Beatles and The Byrds (see this issue's

interview with Roger McGuinn on p50, heralding an era in the late sixties when virtually every electric guitar maker offered at least one 12-stringer. Since those heydays, the instrument has become more niche, coming into fashion as its unique appeal is rediscovered, before once again being discarded in favour of the next musical trend.

Choice and availability also tends to echo these changing market moods. Some models prove to be more short-lived than others, but Rickenbacker's benchmark status has ensured consistent popularity and constant production that now spans five decades.

However, these resolutely US-made classics don't come cheap, so more affordable alternatives have long held an attraction for those keen to explore the 12-string electric experience at a lower price point. The current crop of examples is pretty plentiful, indicating that the instrument is enjoying yet another periodic resurgence of interest.

As with any successful electric, a 12-string ideally needs to be designed from the ground up. However, only a very few have been built along these lines and many makers choose to merely modify existing six-string models. This is usually

the easier and cheaper option, but it can adversely affect performance and playability.

Our review quartet effectively reflects these significantly different approaches. The Hutchins is simply an adapted six-string, the Fender and Duesenberg models incorporate function specific features, while the Burns is firmly based on a purpose-built original design. Interestingly, the Hutchins and Duesenberg employ a traditional six-saddle bridge, while Burns and Fender favour Gotoh's clever and compact 12-saddle design, which has virtually become the industry standard component for providing individual intonation adjustment on all 12 strings. Reflecting their affordable ethos, all four instruments emanate from the Far East, spanning China, Japan and Korea, although the Duesenberg adds German assembly – a cachet that increases the cost quite considerably.



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Hutchins Memphis 12-string £549

From Hutchins' new Coronet series, the Memphis is an unusual 12-string electric, being a big-bodied, archtop acoustic that blends Gibson and Gretsch design influences.

Apparently echoing the shape of New York's Chrysler building, the radically flared headstock causes the uppermost strings to actually touch the posts of their lower neighbours in passing. The accompanying glued-in mahogany neck employs standard six-string dimensions, which means quarters are a bit cramped for comfortable 12-string work, detracting from nicely finished frets and a usefully low action. Finished in limited edition high gloss black, the large, spruce-topped mahogany body features a single shallow cutaway. A classy touch is provided by wooden control knobs and pickguard, although the latter is rather rough-edged.

A free-standing tune-o-matic-type bridge carries two strings on each of its six saddles, so individual intonation adjustments aren't possible. The large Art Deco-style tailpiece is borrowed from the

six-string Memphis and each slot accordingly anchors two ball-ends, which is far from ideal for easy string changes.

Twin humbuckers partner Gretsch-style circuitry comprising master volume plus pickup volumes and two three-way toggle switches: one for pickup selection, another offering three tonal options with decreasing treble content.

Sounds

Despite its large airy interior, the Memphis is surprisingly resistant to feedback. The big body delivers a good acoustic response, but the pickups lack top-end clarity, so all selections seem short on sparkle, while the tone switch makes things more muffled. That said, such sounds suit jazzier-style playing.

The Bottom Line

We like: Feedback resistant, semi vibe and looks

We dislike: Cramped string spacing; six-string tailpiece

Guitarist says: Made for mellower playing styles

Burns Double Six £599

The Double Six dates back to the sixties and was a firm favourite with numerous British groups, including The Shadows and Searchers. The latest incarnation originates from China and stays pretty faithful in terms of retro-flavoured features and quite quirky character.

Topped by a lengthy headstock, the wide but shallow bolt-on maple neck is more of a handful than most electric 12s, but the extra space between string pairs makes fingering much easier. This is helped by a beautifully cut brass nut, with playability further enhanced by a first-rate fret job and low-level action. The basswood body feels quite big, but contouring ensures adequate comfort and weight is well balanced. The impressive-looking, green 'burst polyester finish stays true to Burns tradition and contrasts a three-section scratchplate accurately recreated in black Traffolyte.

Three repro Tri-Sonic single-coils are arranged in angled formation, partnering a five-position selector plus master volume and two tone

controls, the second of which incorporates a push/pull switch that provides the other two pickup permutations – neck and bridge, and all three together. The Gotoh-made bridge improves on the original by enabling precise intonation for all of the strings via 12 adjustable saddles.

Sounds

The big neck and body equate to an equally ample acoustic response. This is matched by a powerful plugged-in performance that goes from deep and clangy to hard and twangy, with each selection blessed by plenty of clarity and an abundance of all-important 12-string chime. The only problem is deciding which sound suits you best, as all are impressively useful.

The Bottom Line

We like: Playability; sounds

We dislike: Neck and body could be too big for some

Guitarist says: An impressive, high value update of a sixties UK classic



Fender Strat XII £789

The Strat XII first appeared in 1988, as part of Fender Japan's Special Edition series. It originally employed 22 frets spread over a shorter 628mm-scale length, but this combination changed to a more conventional Fender configuration in 2005.

A slimline headstock sports a dozen vintage Kluson-type tuners, while the bolt-on maple neck feels much like a six-string Strat in terms of the shallow 'C'-profile and overall proportions. However, those proportions tend to restrict operating space on the rosewood fingerboard, so accurate technique and slim fingers come in handy to take full advantage of otherwise very easy playability.

The lightweight alder body is equally familiar, likewise the scratchplate carrying the customary three single-coils. Circuitry stays similarly traditional via the usual one volume, twin tone configuration, plus a selector switch providing the predictable five pickup permutations. Aged plastic parts add a vintage touch, contrasting the glassy Lake

Placid blue polyurethane paint job and brightly chromed metalwork. The latter includes Gotoh's compact 12-saddle bridge, which replaced the old-style Electric XII-type in 2005.

Sounds

A resonant acoustic character translates well to 12-string performance. However, the vintage-style single-coils are actually under-slung ceramic bar magnet types that tend to be a bit on the brash side. A pity therefore that Fender has stuck with standard Strat circuitry, rather than re-jigging it to provide a tone control that would help tame the very bright bridge pickup. The other selections are less up front, although all options are endowed with ample edgy attack and percussive pluck.

The Bottom Line

We like: Playability; sounds
We dislike: No bridge pickup tone control
Guitarist says: Familiar looks and feel with competent performance

Duesenberg Double Cat DDC-12 £1,239

Debuting in 2004, the Double Cat is obviously inspired by Rickenbacker's general styling. As with other Duesenbergs, construction combines Korean woodwork with German assembly and the brand's characteristic Art Deco-inspired design features.

The headstock is just such an example, but here it's slotted, with Kluson open tuners fitted on back and sides, emulating Rickenbacker's innovative idea. This configuration keeps things compact, but it can be confusing and re-stringing isn't speedy. The glued-in maple neck features a chunky but comfortable 'C'-profile, while the wider-than-average dimensions are finger friendly, as are all 22 smoothly finished frets and an excellently executed nut.

The semi-solid slab body reflects Rickenbacker styling ideas, but the shape is slimmer and less curvy. A single 'slash' soundhole partners a small scratchplate carrying volume and tone controls plus a three-way pickup selector. These govern a Duesenberg DP-90 single-coil paired with a Grand Vintage humbucker.

Contrasting the originality elsewhere, the bridge is a standard tune-o-matic-type, with each of the six saddles cut to carry two strings. This is adequate rather than ideal, as it doesn't offer individual intonation adjustments.

Sounds

The Double Cat 12 doesn't lack resonant sustain and the chosen pickups keep things clean and clear. The DP-90 is punchy, and although 'buckers aren't always ideal for 12-string chores, Duesenberg's design is crisp and Ricky-like.

All of the options deliver plenty of desirable ringing chime and clang, including an unofficial fourth position found on the switch, while usefully gradual pots further extend aural versatility.

The Bottom Line

We like: Playability; sounds
We dislike: Tuner confusing; six-saddle bridge
Guitarist says: A less-expensive Ricky equivalent with bags of character

The Verdict

The review examples offer four distinct variations on the 12-string electric theme and each should appeal to equally differing players.

The Rivals

Rickenbacker's 360/12 semi (£2,100) still rules the 12-string roost. The **Italia Rimini-12** (approx £590) displays similar design ideas. **Vintage's VSA535-12** (£429) is influenced by Gibson's 335-a-like 12-string, while **Eastwood's Nashville 12** (£599) is influenced by the Epiphone equivalent.

The Hutchins Memphis is unique, being the only big-bodied archtop acoustic version currently available. Size and styling ensure it isn't the obvious option for normal 12-string duties, but it could find favour with an adventurous jazzier. It's a lot of guitar for the money, but build quality and performance are let down by one or two design deficiencies. Sounds seem somewhat subdued by normal 12-string standards, although they suit the instrument's image and application.

Back in the sixties the Burns Double Six was one of the best 12-stringers and this reissue retains that reputation, combining classic retro

character with improved components. The wide neck might initially be a bit daunting, but it's actually more finger-friendly than most. The sizeable body could deter some, but this classy guitar sounds as big as it looks and demonstrates the performance benefits of a purpose-built design.

In contrast, the Strat XII adopts a play safe approach, relying on Fender's most famous six-string for familiar looks and feel, while Japanese manufacture means build quality is well up to scratch. The standard Stratocaster pickup and control count ensures that sounds are much as expected. These prove quite effective for 12-string work, but

more thought on the circuitry side would've made this model even better at its job.

Duesenberg's Double Cat may be Rickenbacker-influenced, but it packs plenty of individual character thanks to more brand-specific hardware than any rival. The tuner layout may not be to everyone's taste, likewise the abundant Art Deco design features, but build quality is undoubtedly impressive. An ideally proportioned neck ensures this semi is one of the best playing 12-strings around and it's similarly no slouch sound-wise. These attributes don't come cheap, but this feline is still far cheaper than its obvious inspiration. **G**



Hutchins Memphis 12-string

PRICE: £549 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Spruce top, mahogany back and sides
NECK: Mahogany, glued-in, 630mm scale, 42mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 22-fret bound rosewood
HARDWARE: Six-saddle bridge, trapeze tailpiece, die-cast tuners
ELECTRICS: Two humbucking pickups, three-way pickup selector switch, master volume, two volumes, three-way tone switch
OPTIONS: None
FINISHES: Black only
Creative Music Imports
01903 875977
www.hutchinsguitars.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Burns Double Six

PRICE: £599 (inc case)
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Basswood
NECK: Maple, bolt-on, 648mm scale, 49mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 21-fret rosewood
HARDWARE: Gotoh 12-saddle bridge, die-cast tuners
ELECTRICS: Three Tri-Sonic single-coil pickups, five-way pickup selector switch, master volume, two tones (one with push/pull pickup switch)
OPTIONS: None
FINISHES: Redburst or greenburst (as reviewed)
Sutherland Trading
02920 887333
www.sutherlandtrading.com



Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender Strat XII

PRICE: £789
ORIGIN: Japan
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on, 648mm scale, 42mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 21-fret rosewood
HARDWARE: Gotoh 12-saddle bridge, vintage-style tuners
ELECTRICS: Three single-coil pickups, five-way pickup selector switch, master volume, two tones
OPTIONS: None
FINISHES: Sunburst, burgundy mist or Lake Placid blue (as reviewed)
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.fender.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Duesenberg Double Cat DDC-12

PRICE: £1,239 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Korea/Germany
BODY: Semi-solid alder with maple veneer front
NECK: Maple, glued-in, 648mm scale, 45.5mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 22-fret bound rosewood
HARDWARE: Six-saddle bridge, stud tailpiece, vintage-style tuners
ELECTRICS: Duesenberg DP-90 single-coil & Grand Vintage humbucking pickups, three-way pickup selector switch, master volume & tone
OPTIONS: None
FINISHES: Black or fireburst (as reviewed)
Westside Distribution
0141 248 4812
www.westsidedistribution.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★