



Semi-hollow round-up £399-£699

Inspired by the classic Gibson ES-335 and Fender Thinline Telecaster, we round-up four affordable and original takes on the semi... **by Dave Durban**

An electric guitar with air in it is by no means a new concept. After all, attaching pickups to an archtop was how this whole electric-Spanish escapade – that's non-Hawaiian electric guitars to you and me – kicked off in the first place. As the 1950s rolled around solid guitars were the new innovation, but by 1958, and with traditionalist players still wanting a taste of the old, Gibson came up with the design that would define the electric-meets-acoustic guitar until this day: the ES-335. The result was a traditional-looking guitar that, crucially, proved more stable and resistant to feedback in the brave new electric world.

Gibson's ES-335 is still the industry standard in the

contemporary semi-hollow arena with its hollow wings and solid centre-block. It has an arched top and back (pressed laminates, not hand-carved

The rivals

For ES-335-style alternatives check **Tokai's ES60** (£360) and **Epiphone's Dot** (approx £350). For more solidbody 'semis' **Fender's Classic Player Telecaster Thinline Deluxe** (£779) combines the old Deluxe with the semi-solid Tele Thinline. **Rickenbacker's Model 330** (from around £1,499) is another classic 'semi' guitar; more affordable is **Vintage's AVH2** (£439)

from solid wood) and separate sides joined, like a traditional acoustic, with small linings. The centre-block firms up the design, giving a solid platform for the pickups and bridge, but also restricting the movement of the top and back, reducing that pesky feedback.

On the other hand, Fender's semi-solid Telecaster Thinline, for example, was introduced a little further down the evolutionary line and played an integral role in the development of the 'semi' guitar concept: a design born out of necessity for

weight reduction. Here the solid Telecaster body was routed out from the rear leaving a wide solid centre section; an f-hole was then added on the bass-side and the body was sealed with an additional back. It reduced the weight of the solidbody Telecaster by nearly a half and, as ever, created a different tonality.

These two contrasting construction methods are still apparent today. PRS's Hollowbody, for example, starts with a solid lump of mahogany that's routed out to leave sides, back and a small block under the bridge. It's then capped with either a solid spruce or maple top. Taylor's T3 takes a similar path. Collings' City Limits is also constructed in a similar way from solid woods – it may look like an ES-335-style guitar, but it's made in a very different way. All of which are mega money, of course, so over the next few pages we're looking at four affordable guitars, each with its own take on the semi theme.

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ESP Xtone Paramount PS-2 £399

ESP's Xtone Paramount series is a small range of Korean-made, single- and double-cut electric semis. Like the PRS Custom Semi-Hollow, the PS-2's body isn't a normal hollowbody; a solid mahogany treble side is married with a large bass-side chamber.

Our sample is neatly finished in tobacco sunburst over a plain maple-veneered top. The binding around the f-hole is a little rough but, let's not forget, it's the least expensive on test.

Size-wise it sits somewhere between our other guitars: longer and deeper than the PRS, but not as broad feeling as the Vintage or Ibanez. It balances more like a solidbody on a strap – but at 3.9kg it's no lightweight.

The thin 'U'-shape neck is typical ESP, it fills the back of the palm with plenty of wood to still give enough of an old-school vibe without compromising speed or playability. The 22 huge frets are smartly finished and rounded, and the guitar plays extremely well.

Equipped with two ESP LH-150 humbuckers controlled by a three-way pickup selector switch and a tone and volume for each pickup, it's very

Gibson, including the tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece.

Sounds

Weighty with a solidbody-like feel, the bridge and neck pickups are nicely balanced with an emphasis on tight mids and a sprightly top-end. The bridge pickup has plenty of bite and with gain possesses quite a heavy rock tonality. You can achieve Southern rock charms or modern rock romps with relative ease. The neck pickup is thicker and soupier in true old-school Gibson fashion. Under varying gains, even with overdrive and heavy distortion pedals, the amount of resonant feedback is minimal and the Xtone sounds like a girthsome solidbody.

The bottom line

We like: Playability; classic and original semi-hollow looks; all-round rock tones

We dislike: Lack of true 'semi' character

Guitarist says: A simple, no-nonsense rock machine with semi-hollow looks and great playability

PRS SE Custom Semi-Hollow £699

Like the ESP, this Korean SE is not a traditional semi. Its back and sides are solid mahogany, the treble side is solid (with the exception of the control cavity) and the bass side chambered with a soundhole, although the centre-block stops below the bridge adding more air in the base of the body. It's topped with a solid maple slab, with 'slash' soundhole, that's then faced with a figured maple veneer and hallmark natural edge 'binding' giving it that luxurious PRS look that matches its higher price.

With its PRS Custom outline, unbound 22-fret rosewood fingerboard and wide-fat mahogany neck it's the most compact, solidbody-like guitar on review in terms of feel.

It features beautiful, pro-level build-quality – not a line out of place or hint of finish bleed – and is superbly set up. Our sample is finished in blue matte – a now discontinued colour, but there are some still available in the UK – paired with a dark back and sides,.

Sounds

It's light and very nimble feeling in hand: a convincing semi with plenty of spring in its

step. Even with a mild overdrive tone you can really hear the extra resonance of the chamber coming through.

In any setting the Custom Semi-Hollow's SE Treble bridge pickup has an open, expressive tone that begs for dynamic chords that meet with ringing sustain. The neck SE Bass 'bucker, by comparison, is juicy and ideal for bluesy soloing. For those with jazzier tastes, the middle pickup position provides an almost acoustic, articulate and delicate tone that feels touch sensitive even with minimal gain. It can be edged into feedback at loud volumes and with more overdrive, but it's easy to control and highly usable in certain rock-fuelled scenarios.

The bottom line

We like: Great build; semi-hollow tones; posh-rock looks

We dislike: Very little. RRP is high, but check street prices

Guitarist says: Another cool model from PRS's SE range that delivers boutique tone, feel and build quality for a snip under £700



Vintage Advance AV3H £479

Originally reviewed in issue 282, the AV3H takes its inspiration from the original ES-335, but with a unique twist thanks to its down-sized, offset double-cutaway design. It's certainly one of Vintage's more boutique-looking models and its reduced bulk gives a more nimble feeling on a strap. As designer Trev Wilkinson says, "I can't make a better ES-335, but I can make it smaller and more manageable." Fair play.

What we have here is a three-piece mahogany back that's chambered, leaving just a centre-block. The solid maple top is carved inside and out and then topped with a tight flame maple veneer. The mahogany neck is full and familiar feeling, a 'C' shape that's the perfect middle ground between Gibson's slim sixties and fatter fifties profiles.

Fit and finish is a little hurried in places; there's the odd cherry bleed onto the binding and the Wilkinson tuners could feel a little more stable, but these very minor niggles are reflected in its modest price tag.

A neat feature is the 'roll control', which enables both Wilkinson humbuckers to have

a gradual transition from full humbucker to single-coil.

Sounds

The AV3H's big bass character is paired with plenty of snap and bite, which creates impressive versatility. To this end, you can produce full-on dirty, rock-fuelled humbucker sounds to a clean, country-twang with a tweak of the roll control. The AVH3 lets you go from Cream to clean as easily as it lets you go from open and dynamic jazz to biting punk.

This ability to tailor your tone lends itself to sculpting rock and R&B sounds and, like an ES-335, it deals with most other tones with a touch of class too, albeit at a much more palatable price.

The bottom line

We like: Versatile; great neck profile; comfortable 'tweaked classic' shape

We dislike: Slightly rushed finish in places

Guitarist says: An original take on the classic ES-335 that offers playability, tone to burn and genuine value

Ibanez Artcore AS93 £449

As with the Vintage, Ibanez's AS93 is inspired by the ES-335. It's a solid centre-block design but with laminated, flamed sycamore back, top and sides. The back and top has a subtle dishing where the neck pickup and heel join, revealing the neck heel and giving a lovely arch-top look.

The smartly bound neck isn't the usual Ibanez affair but the violin 'burst backed, three-piece mahogany/maple neck lends itself to many styles.

All the hardware is gold-plated, Ibanez logo'd tuners straddle the classic Ibanez headstock and fit in perfectly with the overall posh look. Control-wise we have the classic two-volume/two-tone layout, with a three-way toggle to switch the two Artcore ceramic-loaded humbuckers.

The AS93's forward strap button is located into the heel (like an ES-335) and, for those new to the semi-hollow arena, will provide a very different balance to a solidbody.

Sounds

The AS93 is lightweight and less bulky feeling than an ES-335 and it retains a bright acoustic resonance.

With a clean tone the medium output bridge pickup displays a clean edge right from the off – it's certainly less dense than a contemporary ES-335. Though bright, there's a nasally core that's key to the semi-hollow vibe and prevents things from getting too clinical or glassy. It's a perfect platform for anything from John Scofield's angular fusion to modern pop and indie.

With more gain, it's easy to launch into those classic sixties riffs and here the AS93 provides the perfect, if a little tight, tone to do so, while offering a more focused chord response. The neck and middle selections offer a more rounded response, with the neck offering a dynamic response for finger picking and soulful blues licks.

The bottom line

We like: Build; light weight; value; old-school semi voicing

We dislike: Fancy looks aren't for everyone

Guitarist says: The AS93 is a serious guitar that pitches its own voice and style into the semi-hollow arena. It's a real treat for under £500



Verdict

So then, four guitars that can all be classed as semis, but each with its own distinct character in terms of construction, feel, sound and playability.

The Xtone PS-2 is impressive in terms of its good build, more solidbody feel and overall playability. Of the four, it's the one more likely to appeal to those with heavy rock tastes who want to acquire the classic look of the semi-hollow, but still rock hard. [As we went to press we heard that for 2010 the range has been re-jigged and

will now bear the ESP LTD logo, but the 2009 models are still widely available in the UK – Gear Reviews Ed.]

PRS's SE Custom Semi-Hollow instantly gives you classy PRS looks with masses of vibe and fabulous build quality, all in a compact package that's a sniff under £700 and much cheaper on the street. Here's a guitar that might feel like a solidbody but really works like a good semi. This isn't an easy feat to achieve, but it's proof that PRS's SE line is about more than just building affordable

versions of its USA guitars – this one is unique.

Vintage's AV3H might not be in the same league as the PRS in terms of fit and finish but it's one of our favourite models in the brand's 'Advance' line. It could almost be the perfect semi/solid hybrid – it's nimble, the neck is ideal and it offers almost every variant of semi-hollow tones possible. Even with its minor finishing issues, the AV3H could be a mainstay in anyone's collection.

Finally, there's the Ibanez AS93, which is the most

mature-feeling of our quartet, with its posh, ES-335-inspired stylings. It takes less risks with the hallowed semi formula and offers a brighter tonal palette, an arch-top-meets-semi feel and good value for money. It'd suit anyone from rebellious rock'n'roll cats to aspiring funky fusioners with its bling-meets-sing vibe.

If you don't already have a semi in your collection, it might be time to wise-up and add some air to your sound. No clear winner here – just four great places to start your journey. **G**



ESP Xtone PS-2 Paramount

PRICE: £399

ORIGIN: Korea

BODY: Double-cutaway semi-hollow mahogany with maple top

NECK: Maple, set-neck with slim 'U' neck contour, 628mm (24.75-inch) scale length

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood with block inlays, 22 extra jumbo frets, 12-inch radius

HARDWARE: Chrome tune-o-matic-style bridge and stud tailpiece, ESP tuners

ELECTRICS: ESP LH-150 (bridge and neck), three-way pickup selector switch, two master volume and tone controls

OPTIONS: The single-cut PS-1 costs £399. A new range for 2010 includes the up-spec PC guitars, single- and double-cut, with Bigsby from £1,079

FINISHES: Two-tone sunburst (as reviewed), metallic gold, black

Selectron UK Ltd
01795 419460

www.espguitars.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



PRS SE Custom Semi-Hollow

PRICE: £699

ORIGIN: Korea

BODY: Double-cutaway semi-hollow mahogany with maple top and flame maple veneer

NECK: Mahogany, set-neck, wide-fat profile

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays, 635mm (25-inch) scale length

HARDWARE: Chrome PRS designed Stop-Tail bridge, PRS logo'd tuners

ELECTRICS: PRS designed Treble and Bass humbuckers, master volume and tone with three-way pickup selector

OPTIONS: None

FINISHES: Blue matteo (as reviewed) black, natural, tobacco sunburst

Headline Music

01223 874301

www.headlinemusic.co.uk

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Vintage Advance AV3H

PRICE: £479

ORIGIN: China

BODY: Double-cutaway semi-hollow mahogany with solid carved maple top and single ply binding

NECK: Mahogany, set-neck

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood with dot inlays, 22 frets, 628mm (24.75-inch) scale length

HARDWARE: Chrome tune-o-matic style bridge and stop-tail piece, Wilkinson WJ44

ELECTRICS: Wilkinson WVCN (N) and WVCB (B) humbuckers, master volume and tone controls, 'roll control' (humbucker to single-coil)

OPTIONS: The AV3P (£499) features three P-90-style single-coils

FINISHES: Cherry red flame maple (as reviewed) and natural flame maple

JHS Ltd

01132 865381

www.jhs.co.uk

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Ibanez Artcore AS93

PRICE: £449

ORIGIN: China

BODY: Double-cutaway semi-hollow, sycamore with flame sycamore top and double-ply pinstripe binding

NECK: Three-piece mahogany/maple neck, set-neck

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood with abalone block inlays, 22 medium, frets 24.75-inch scale length and 12-inch radius

HARDWARE: Gold tune-o-matic-style bridge and Quick Change tailpiece, gold tuners

ELECTRICS: Artcore 1 and 2 humbucking pickups, two tone, two volume and three-way pickup selector switch

OPTIONS: The AS73B (£349) is a lower budget version of the AS93 and is only available in matt black; the AS73 (£348) comes in brown sunburst or ivory and features edge binding and Artcore humbuckers

FINISHES: Violin sunburst (as reviewed)

Headstock Distribution

0121 508 6666

www.headstockdistribution.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★