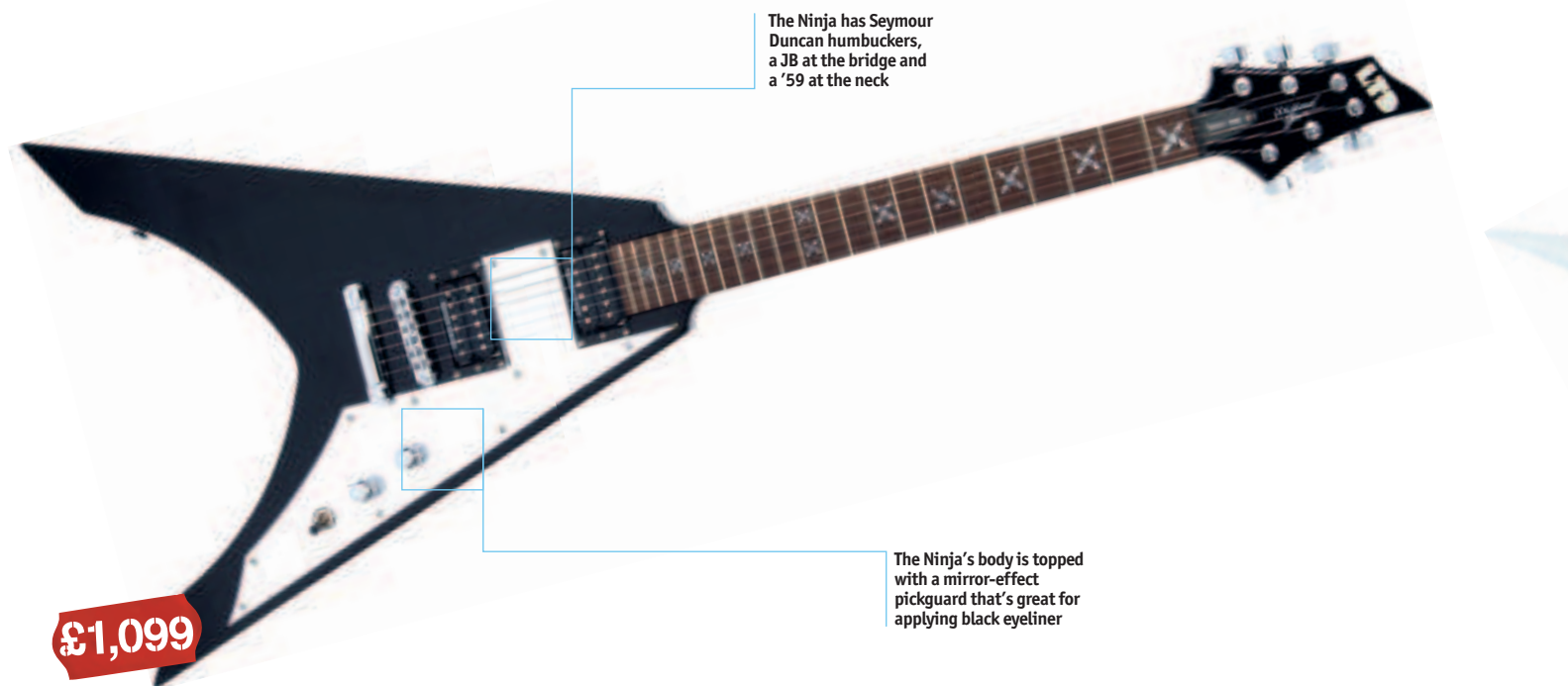


GEAR ESP LTD SIGNATURE MODELS



The Ninja has Seymour Duncan humbuckers, a JB at the bridge and a '59 at the neck

The Ninja's body is topped with a mirror-effect pickguard that's great for applying black eyeliner

£1,099

ESP LTD SIGNATURE MODELS

TG INDULGES OUR INNER DEATH METALLER WITH THE ESP LTD ALEXI LAIHO AND MICHAEL AMOTT SIGNATURE MODELS WORDS: HENRY YATES

Unless you've spent the last decade living in the penthouse apartment of an ivory tower, you'll be familiar with the concept of entry-level guitars. These days, whenever a company builds a new model for the bourgeoisie they also knock up a cheaper version for the masses. While these axes are often visually identical (therefore representing fantastic value), a glance at the spec makes it clear where the corners have been cut. Generic tonewoods are used instead of mahogany. Generic pickups are substituted for active EMG humbuckers. A clinical Korean CNC machine does the job of a passionate US luthier.

As members of ESP's entry-level LTD range you would fully expect the new Alexi 600 and Ninja 600 to follow this pattern. And they do, up to a point. Both models were built in Korea (as opposed to ESP's custom shops in Japan and America), and both were put together on a production line. The interesting thing is that despite their relatively low prices these models feature exactly the same tonewoods, hardware and electronics as their ESP equivalents, which means you might be looking at the bargain of the bloody century...

ALEXI 600

In case you don't read *Metal Hammer*, we'd better introduce Alexi Laiho. He's the frontman of Children Of Bodom, a black-metal outfit from Finland whose doomy albums have apparently sold in sufficient quantities for their leader to be chalked up for the signature model treatment. If you were Alexi himself (and receiving royalties from such family favourites as *Taste Of My*

Scythe), you would probably go for the ESP Custom Shop version at £3,299. For everyone else, the LTD Alexi 600 is the logical choice.

It's unthinkable that anyone would use the Alexi 600 for anything other than metal.

"Both models feature the same tonewoods/hardware as their ESP equivalents, which means they could be the bargain of the century"

From the off-centre 'V' of the body and EMG humbucker, through the Floyd Rose tremolo unit to the ferocious shape and angle of the headstock, everything about this guitar seeks to polarise its audience. You'll either love it or point it out to your mates as the embodiment of the most risible qualities of the metal genre.

The Alexi's body is made of alder. Well, sort of. This guitar actually features a

neck-thru-body construction, meaning that the three-piece maple neck also forms the central column of the body. This not only implies we should get increased sustain and brightness, but also means the alder (which is only used as the material for the 'wings')

should make less of a tonal impact than we had initially thought.

As we mentioned, the Alexi's woods and hardware echo those of the ESP version. Alongside the alder body and maple neck you get an ebony fingerboard with 24 frets of 'extra jumbo' proportions, a set of black Grover tuners and one master volume control. Inevitably, this guitar's shape also means the strap pin is round the back,

INFORMATION

ORIGIN: Korea
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, three-piece, thru-body
FRETBOARD: Ebony, with saw teeth inlays
FRETS: 24
PICKUPS: 1 x EMG-HZ H-4 humbucker (bridge)
SCALE: 25.5"
HARDWARE: Grover tuners, Floyd Rose tremolo
CONTROLS: 1 x master volume
COLOURS: White with black pinstripe (pictured), black with yellow pinstripe
LEFT-HANDERS: No
CASE: No
CONTACT: Selectron UK 01795 419460
WEB: www.espguitars.com



Both of these signature guitars have awesome fingerboard inlays

The Alexi's locking tremolo makes it a natural choice for shredders, combining well with the 24 frets

The EMG-HZ is a bruiser of a humbucker that underlines this guitar's metal credentials

£1,049

meaning that you'll probably want a locking strap to stop it falling off. Trust us, with a headstock angle as savage as this one you don't want that to happen.

At this point we should stress that the solitary EMG-HZ H-4 humbucker in the bridge position isn't active (it's not powered by a battery). Nope, according to the EMG website this is the passive equivalent of the (active) 81 item and supplies a similar balls to the wall tone with plenty of 'punch and clarity'. Let's hope so, because there are no other options if it doesn't.

In some ways, the Alexi is quite a limited guitar. You can't use it for seated practice (it slides off). You can't put it in a guitar stand (it falls out). You can't use it for any genre except metal (it'd look ridiculous) and you can't change what it sounds like (it doesn't have a neck pickup or tone control).

Fortunately, there is one area in which the Alexi 600 excels: virtuosity. As a playing experience this guitar is the ultimate platform on which to exhibit the incendiary technique you've spent the last decade perfecting in your room. It gobbles up legato and alternate picking, lets you widdle all over two octaves and turns virtually every note you play into a pinched harmonic.

Although there should be more sonic versatility on a guitar of this price, that EMG bridge humbucker copes pretty well on its own, supplying a seething tone that can be softened slightly by turning down the guitar volume and turning up the amp. The natural tendency towards the treble side of things means it really picks up on subtle precision play; a factor that underlines this guitar's status as a great choice for technicians, but perhaps a slightly foolish one for beginners.

FOR: *Virtuosi will love the playing experience*
AGAINST: *It's a slightly limited format*

TG RATING:



NINJA 600

Bloody typical. You wait all year for one signature model designed by a Scandinavian death-metaller to turn up, then two arrive in the same review. The LTD Ninja 600 has been put together with the input of Michael Amott from Arch Enemy. If you have ever heard his band, you should have a fair idea of what to expect from his guitar. Ferocious technique, cartilage-melting speed and the unsettling 'death grunts' of frontwoman Angela Gossow are the calling cards of this Swedish black-metal outfit, and Amott has tailored the Ninja 600 to help you replicate them. Apart from the grunts, obviously.

At just over a grand, this is by far the cheapest Ninja on the market. And as we've already mentioned, there isn't actually any difference between this model and the ESP version in terms of materials. The base of this Ninja is a solid slab of mahogany fashioned into a shape that we would describe as a slightly feminised Flying-V, topped with a mirror pick guard that allows your right hand to admire itself as it shreds. It's a far less extreme shape than the Alexi, and felt slightly more comfortable around our neck, too.

The neck format is pretty traditional: a three-piece mahogany item set deep into the body and topped with a rosewood fretboard that features shuriken-shaped fret inlays (a tip of the hat to the ninjitsu theme, we suppose). At one end of it you have a headstock furnished with six Sperzel locking tuners. At the other end there's a Tone Pros locking bridge and stop tailpiece. The overall impression is of a less overtly 'metal' guitar than the Alexi 600. You still couldn't gig with it at a bluegrass festival, but it won't be automatically dismissed by softer rockers and indie kids.

This sense of adaptability continues when you check out the Ninja's pickup

configuration. They might look the same, but those two humbuckers play very different roles. The Seymour Duncan '59 in the neck position is based on the famous PAF humbucker from 1959, and in our experience tends to combine well with mahogany instruments for smooth distortion. The Seymour Duncan JB in the bridge, meanwhile, is your ticket to blazing lead licks and biting distortion. Both are genuine US items that feature in various other respected guitars, which bodes well for the Ninja 600.

Unless there's a damn good reason why not, TG is of the opinion that an electric guitar should always have at least two pickups. After playing these two LTD models back-to-back, we stand by that particular theory more than ever. Plug in the Ninja straight after testing the Alexi and you will be hit by the oomph of the '59 neck humbucker, which brings a decent beefy quality to the tone that just isn't feasible when you're stuck at the bridge. It makes this guitar a decent rhythm player, and meant TG was equally happy peeling off reverb-clad blues licks as shredding on the gain channel. But we were left wondering what the hell LTD has got against tone dials?

We've played the Seymour Duncan JB in various different guitars over the years and it never fails to impress with its gorgeous bite and sustain. It's a pretty adaptable humbucker that deals with most genres you care to throw at it, and sounds equally convincing under a dollop of distortion as under a pinch. It also confirmed our theory that the Ninja is the metal guitar 'normal' rockers will like. We dug its tone, build and styling, and we think you will, too.

FOR: *Great looks and adaptable tone*
AGAINST: *It's a pretty traditional package*

TG RATING:



INFORMATION

ORIGIN: Korea
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, three-piece, set
FRETBOARD: Rosewood, with custom 'X' inlays
FRETS: 22, extra jumbo
PICKUPS: Seymour Duncan JB (bridge) and '59 (neck)
SCALE: 24.75"
HARDWARE: Sperzel locking tuners, Tone Pros locking bridge with stop tailpiece
CONTROLS: 2x volume controls, with 3-way pickup selector
COLOURS: Black (pictured)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
CASE: No
CONTACT: Selectron UK 01795 419460
WEB: www.espguitars.com