



# All The Way From Memphis...

The past couple of years have seen the popularity of the semi rise and rise. We go back to the source with a quartet of decidedly old-looking new Gibson thinlines

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GIBSON ROUNDUP  
GIBSON MEMPHIS





# Gibson Memphis round-up

Gibson 1959 ES-330 **£2,699** 1964 ES-345 **£2,899**

50th Anniversary 1963 ES-335 **£2,899** ES-390 **£1,849**

**M**odern Gibson is split into three distinct divisions. The meat-and-potato electrics, which start at around £600, are the responsibility of Gibson USA. The higher-ticket historic and reissue solidbodies and occasional semis are handled by Gibson Custom, while the home of the contemporary semi is Gibson Memphis, and it's the latter we turn the spotlight on.

Our typical round-ups pitch four instruments or amps from different brands into a 'which is best?' shoot-out. This one is different. How would one of the classic Gibson semis, the ES-335

or ES345, stack up against the hollowbody thinline ES-330 or the ES-390?

With the exception of the new-design, downsized ES-390, our more historic instruments all feature Gibson's V.O.S. process – where the nitrocellulose finish is vintage-toned and de-glossed for a lower sheen; the hardware likewise. The ES-390 is full gloss with white, untuned

bindings, but even so, the dark 'burst finish is beautifully old-school, and while to some Gibson's finish might lack the precision and dipped-in-glass look of more contemporary makers, it's part of the vibe. The neck backs feel a little sticky, too, yet playability, set-up and sound are all what we'd expect from this premier brand: superb. Each instrument is subtly different in terms of

detail, which we've listed in our spec checks and dimensions chart. Neither humbucking guitar has the exact same pickup specification, nor the P-90 instruments. And while all have a strong basic family resemblance, the neck shapes vary quite considerably. So it's our intention not to describe every difference, but instead to illustrate our experience with these guitars, and our thoughts on their sound and practicality. Starting in chronological order...

## 1959 ES-330

Pulling this beauty from its hard case is as close as many of us will

Pulling this beauty from its case is as close as many of us will get to time travel. This is not a shiny new guitar





get to time travel. Gibson's V.O.S. treatment isn't reliving as such, but the slightly dulled finish and hardware certainly creates an old appearance: this is not a bright, shiny, new-looking glossed guitar. We're struck, too, by the light weight: compared to a Les Paul, it's like handling an old Italian violin.

Of course, the light weight is down to the fact we have no centre block, as on the ES-335. The other primary difference to that classic recipe is that the neck sits further into the body, joining at the 16th fret. Removing the neck pickup, you can see a wide maple block that stops just before the pickup cavity, into which the neck is fitted. We also see the kerfed spruce that is fitted to the contours of the top and back of an ES-335 so the actual rectangular section centre block connects snugly. Here, although there's no centre block, that spruce is retained, on the top

only, almost like a bracing down the centre of the guitar, which also provides a deeper thickness of wood to mount the pickups and the tune-o-matic bridge.

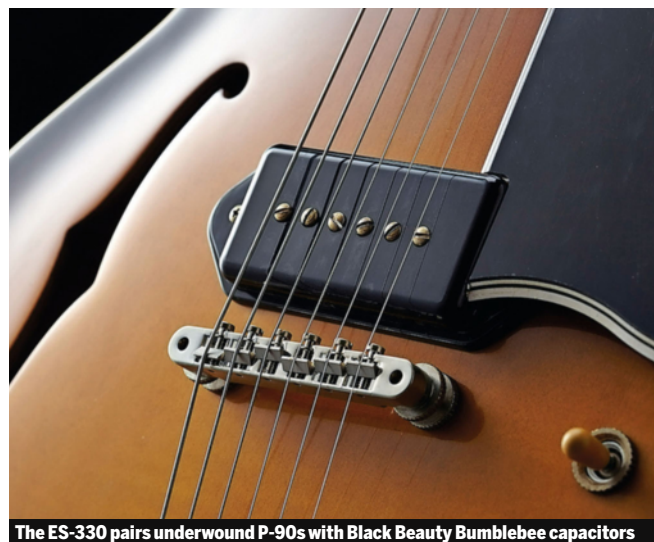
While the shorter, unsupported length of the neck — which in theory means it's stiffer than the longer neck of the ES-335 — certainly won't harm the sound, it's hard to get far past the 17th fret, which is also hampered by the chubbier 'Mickey Mouse' horns. It results in a guitar that's shorter and has a slightly different feel, as the first position is less of a reach — compared to the ES-335, the nut position of the ES-330 is just past midway between the 1st and 2nd frets; the position of the tune-o-matic is pretty much the same as the stud tailpiece on the ES-335, and consequently the ES-330's controls are closer to your right hand.

### 1963 ES-335

While the original 1958 dot-

inlaid unbound fingerboard ES-335 is ultimate vintage spec, this one aims to recreate the equally short-lived second variation — from 1962-64. It adds small block inlays (fingerboard binding was added in late-1958) and the narrower horns which, in combination

with the 19th-fret neck-to-body join, add up to the ultimate player, especially if you want to explore the full range of the 'board's 22 frets. Our sample is a shade lighter than the ES-345; those less showy small block inlays and nickel hardware impart a less decorative



The ES-330 pairs underwound P-90s with Black Beauty Bumblebee capacitors



The split parallelogram inlays of the ES-345 give a different visual vibe from the ES-335

appearance. Obviously, the ES-335, like the ES-345, is a very different instrument to the ES-330 with its different neck geometry, dual humbuckers and additional weight (thanks to the maple centre block).

### 1964 ES-345

Back in 1959, the ES-345's primary differences from the ES-335 were its stereo output, Varitone circuitry, bound fingerboard with double parallelogram inlays and gold-plated hardware. The slightly narrower horns put our sample post-62, the shorter pickguard from early-61, while the gold Varitone legend plate changed from black in late-59. Probably sensibly, Gibson has moved this 2014 recreation from stereo to standard mono, though there are plenty of details to keep the vintage buffs happy, not least the double-ring Kluson tuners and the additional purfling inside the nicotine-toned binding on the top edge only. Once again, the V.O.S. treatment hits the spot: the gold plating is nicely toned down and much more classy-looking.

This ES-345 is the heaviest guitar here – no deal breaker, but we'd advise you trying a few. It also illustrates the upper level of the late-50s/early-60s Gibson

thinline range, which was topped by the ES-355: the ES-330 – with its 'dog ear' single coils, white button tuners and top-only sunburst (our ES-345 and ES-335 have beautiful 'bursteds backs and fronts) – was more like a Les Paul Junior or Special compared to a Les Paul Standard, and priced as such.

### ES-390

In such large-bodied company, this contemporary ES-390

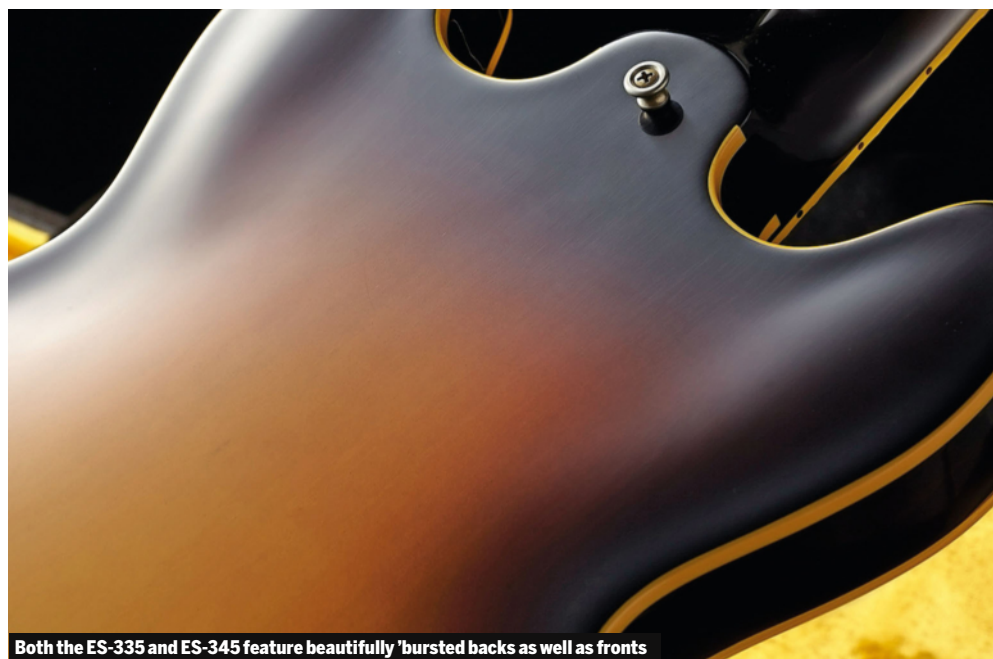
looks like a toy. Downsized it may be with its 355x420mm size body, compared to the ES-335's 405x485mm bulk, but for many players it might well be an extremely valid musical tool. First off, without the V.O.S. treatment, just a standard glossed nitrocellulose finish with shiny nickel-plated hardware, Gibson somehow manages to trim nearly £1,000 off its retail price. That's a considerable sum for most of us. The scale length remains

identical to its bigger brothers; we have the 19th-fret neck join, too, and the small block inlays of the ES-335, single-ring Kluson tuners, a locking Tone Pros tune-o-matic, trapeze tailpiece like the ES-330, and dual P-90-style pickups. These are the Memphis Historic Spec (MHS) with standard ceramic tone caps, as opposed to the historic larger 'bumble bee' caps of the other guitars. Nut material is more contemporary Corian rather than the nylon of the others; nylon is used for the bridge saddles on the humbucking guitars, while the two P-90 guitars have metal saddles. Apart from being much more manageable, another upside of the downsized body, in theory at least, it should mean a higher feedback threshold. We'll see...

### Feel & Sounds

As the definitive thinline semi, the ES-335 seems the place to start our sound test.

Acoustically, it sounds a little plinky and honky, but with it old, and very 'Gibson'. The neck is that beautiful full C that fills out in a really good way as you move up. Starting clean and moving through the sounds, that polite acoustic tone is transformed into some bright-edged throat from the bridge pickup. It's one of the most



Both the ES-335 and ES-345 feature beautifully 'bursteds backs as well as fronts





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The ES-335 features a Burstbucker 1 at neck and Burstbucker 2 at bridge



Gold 'Top Hat' knobs with gold inserts and dial pointers on the ES-335

soulful mixed-pickup tones you'll hear, and the neck pickup has clarity in the high end and a superbly velvet texture that, in higher positions, has a soft-nosed, yet not dull, bell-like clarity. It doesn't have the closed focus of a Les Paul – almost as if we've stretched the frequency range, high and low, and opened out the midrange. There's plenty of semi-like 'cloud' in the lower mids, but it's all part of the character.

You want smooth? The neck pickup, with a little volume and tone roll-off, has it in heaps; but kick in a little crunch, wind the controls up and you're in classic Clapton/Cream mode with musical feedback under easy control. It's this stylistic versatility that's key to the 335's longevity: Burrell-like bluesy-jazz, Britpop strummage and old-style snappy blues. Aside from Fender-like single-coil bite, there's barely a sound you can't get. But having said that, by pulling down the volume on the bridge pickup and kicking in a level boost... well, you wouldn't get kicked out of Nashville. There are superb dynamics, too; it's a wonderfully touch-sensitive guitar right across its considerable range. It's an absolutely stunning instrument in every respect.

It's a wonderfully touch-sensitive guitar right across its range. It's a stunning instrument in every respect

The ES-345 is a subtly different proposition, and that's with the Varitone bypassed (position 1). We don't quite have the high-end clarity and detail of the ES-335 – it has different pickups for one, and there's the weight difference, too. It's slightly less dynamic, with a little less resonance perhaps – a little more solid-sounding? But plenty of those things could

work in your favour. There are certainly stellar tones to be found, especially if you lean to the rockier side. The Varitone won't be for everyone, with its range of filtered sounds that, certainly in stereo, back in the day, must have sounded quite otherworldly. Each one provides considerable volume reduction, too, and different frequencies/resonances of quite

honky, almost out-of-phase-like filtering. Of course, with a pretty clean amp tone there's classic BB King-style blues aplenty here, some great Chuck Berry-like rhythm, a little Rickenbacker in there with volume reduction... We have to say it'd make a great tracking guitar in the studio, where you may need a host of different colours. With gain, some altogether nastier sounds emerge, while with clean tones, and an outboard phase effect, old-school funk oozes from its pores. If the ES-335 is for the 'purist', this ES-345 may well appeal to those players who like to mix it up a bit.

Moving to the hollowbody P-90 guitars is a very different proposition. The ES-330's neck is slightly clubbier, and its acoustic volume is a lot louder, more archtop-like with a punchier attack and shorter decay. Plugged in, the sounds aren't as different as we'd imagined, especially played clean: compared to the ES-335, it's simply more hollowbody-sounding; older, if you like. The pickups work a little differently with the volume controls, too, softening and thinning out relatively quickly.

The much lower feedback threshold means that the



Both tune-o-matic bridges on the ES-335 and ES-345 feature nylon saddles



higher-gain sounds that make the ES-335 soar aren't always possible, but that depends on your stage environment. In lower-volume settings, there's a character that isn't in the ES-335 or ES-345; it sounds on the one hand much jazzier – Grant Green is a great reference – yet the use of guitars such as this, and Epiphone's Casino – are key to the first and second waves of Britpop. There's a spiky and hard-hitting percussion to the bridge pickup, through to the mellower but funky-edged rhythm tones of the mix and the open, woodier, but still biting, almost marimba-like voice of the neck pickup. Add some crunch and things get very swampy: ideal for dirtier lo-fi slide sounds or alt-rock. It's a beguiling fellow.

The surprise is the ES-390. Strapped on or seated, it's hugely comfortable, a lovely lightweight, balanced guitar that is slightly more generic and direct-sounding than the ES-330 but has easier playability in the upper positions. There's a little more 'push' to the sound, but it covers all the bases of the ES-330, albeit with less old-school charm; it's more contemporary. The smaller body chamber means, acoustically, it's not



With a more contemporary look, the ES-390 gets black 'Top Hat' knobs with silver inserts

quite as bass-y or voluminous. We're rather in love with this, and would love to hear it with the slightly more open, detailed pickups of the ES-330 – adding gain, this guitar's pickups are also slightly microphonic.

### Verdict

The most obvious 'winner' of this roundup is the ES-335. It's the best contemporary example we've ever played. If your style and taste is less 'vanilla', the ES-345 would work well with a host of sounds, and a studio guitarist or someone wanting to

stretch the sonic boundaries a little should try it. The ES-390 wins on sheer value: if you're not obsessed with the physical size of the originals, this packs an awful lot of characterful sound, playability and manageability into a very tidy package. Which leaves the ES-330, with its slightly compromised higher-position playability and susceptibility to feedback. But its light weight, acoustic and plugged-in sounds and sheer character make it, for any player whose reference point lies in the late-50s and 60s

– be it jazz, blues, rock 'n' roll, soul or pop – an immense draw.

New guitars that feel and look old aren't a new thing, but few do it better than Gibson Memphis, whose guitars not only seem to get more vintage-accurate by the day, but also seem to supply that elusive 'mojo' of real vintage pieces without the high cost or worries about authenticity or wear. We can't all afford these prices, but if you can, we doubt you'll be disappointed – choosing which one to buy might be your biggest dilemma. **G**

### Gibson Memphis dimensions



**1959 ES-330**



**1963 ES-335**



**1964 ES-345**



**ES-390**

	1959 ES-330	1963 ES-335	1964 ES-345	ES-390
<b>Nut width (mm)</b>	44.04	44.05	43.72	42.99
<b>12th width (mm)</b>	53.23	53.22	52.44	52.13
<b>1st depth (mm)</b>	22.8	20.06	21	21.6
<b>12th depth (mm)</b>	25.5	25.1	25.4	24.6
<b>Weight (kg/lb)</b>	3.13/6.9	3.55/7.8	3.87/8.52	2.57/5.63
<b>Bridge string spacing (mm)</b>	51	51	51.5	52
<b>Bridge PU DC resistance (ohms)</b>	6.9k	7.9k	8.61k	9.85k
<b>Neck PU DC resistance (ohms)</b>	6.96k	7.39k	7.38k	6.96k





### Gibson 1959 ES-330 TD

**PRICE:** £2,699 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, thinline hollowbody electric  
**BODY:** Maple/poplar/maple laminate  
**NECK:** Mahogany, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 624mm (24.6-inch)  
**NUT:** Vintage-style nylon  
**FINGERBOARD:** Single-bound rosewood, pearl dot inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, standard  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic (ABR-1) bridge and trapeze-style aluminium tailpiece. TonePros Kluson with white button tuners – nickel plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Gibson underwound P-90 Dog Ear (Alnico II), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls (500k Audio Taper with Sprague Black Beauty Bumblebee tone caps)  
**OPTIONS:** Bigsby vibrato (Vintage Cherry version only)  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** ES-390, as reviewed  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Vintage Burst (as reviewed), Vintage Natural and Vintage Cherry – V.O.S. nitrocellulose  
**Gibson**  
[www2.gibson.com](http://www2.gibson.com)



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

**Guitarist says:** Arguably not as versatile as the ES-335 due to its hollow body, but its lightweight feel and hugely evocative sound are exceptional



### Gibson 50th Anniversary 1963 ES-335

**PRICE:** £2,899 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, thinline semi-hollow electric  
**BODY:** Maple/poplar/maple laminate with ample centre block  
**NECK:** Mahogany, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 624mm (24.6-inch)  
**NUT:** Vintage-style nylon  
**FINGERBOARD:** Single-bound rosewood, pearl block inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, standard  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic (ABR-1) bridge with nylon inserts and stud tailpiece. Kluson single-line double-ring tulip button tuners – nickel plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Gibson Burstbucker 2 (Alnico 2) at bridge, Burstbucker 1 (Alnico 2) at neck, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls (500k Audio Taper with Sprague Black Beauty Bumblebee tone caps)  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** 1959 ES-335 (£4,399), ES-335 Studio £1,199  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Historic Burst (as reviewed), 60s Cherry – V.O.S. nitrocellulose



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

**Guitarist says:** If you've ever wondered what the fuss is about, track down one of these guitars: the ultimate genre and style-spanning tone machine



### Gibson 1964 ES-345 TD

**PRICE:** £2,899 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, thinline semi-hollow electric  
**BODY:** Maple/poplar/maple laminate with maple centre block  
**NECK:** Mahogany, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 624mm (24.6-inch)  
**NUT:** Vintage-style nylon  
**FINGERBOARD:** Single-bound rosewood, celluloid split parallelogram inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, standard  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic (ABR-1) bridge with nylon inserts and stud tailpiece. Kluson single-line double-ring tulip button tuners – gold-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Gibson MHS humbuckers, Alnico III at bridge, Alnico II at neck, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls (500k Audio Taper with Sprague Black Beauty Bumblebee tone caps), plus 6-position Varitone rotary switch  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See ES-335  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Historic Burst (as reviewed), 60s Cherry – V.O.S. nitrocellulose

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

**Guitarist says:** It doesn't quite capture the tonal excellence of the ES-335, but it's close, plus the Varitone offers a wealth of sonic options



### Gibson ES-390

**PRICE:** £1,849 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, thinline hollowbody electric  
**BODY:** Maple/basswood/maple laminate  
**NECK:** Mahogany, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 624mm (24.6-inch)  
**NUT:** Corian  
**FINGERBOARD:** Single-bound rosewood, pearl dot inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, standard  
**HARDWARE:** Tone Pro AVR-2 Locking Bridge and trapeze-style aluminium tailpiece. Kluson single-ring with tulip button tuners – nickel-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Gibson MHS P-90s (Memphis Historic Spec), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls (500k Audio Taper with ceramic tone caps)  
**OPTIONS:** Bigsby vibrato (Vintage Cherry version only)  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See ES-330, plus other downsized thinlines include the centre-blocked ES-339 (£1,849) and ES-339 Studio (£1,199)  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Vintage Dark Burst (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose

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

**Guitarist says:** If you don't want the bulk of the ES-330, but still hanker after those hollowbody P-90 sounds, this is for you. It's great value, too