



Washburn
SI61



Hamer XT SATQ

Group Test

Humbucker axes under £500

You don't need to cough up for a Gibson Les Paul to experience the creamy thrills of humbuckers. With £500 in our wallet and our Marshall stack rolling behind us, TG sets out to prove it...

WORDS **HENRY YATES**



Cort EVL-Z4



Flip the page to find out which one won our Group Test head-to-head

Spear Gladius SP

There's a time and a place for humbuckers. Specifically, it's when you're stood in the spotlight, cloaked in dry ice, legs apart, a rabid crowd baying your name as you tear into the riff from *Sweet Child O' Mine*. Singlecoils and P90s have their specialities, but for hard rock the humbucker is king.

Strange, then, that when Gibson technician Seth Lover invented the PAF humbucker in 1957, he wasn't thinking about any of that. In fact, Lover's brief was simply to design a pickup that eliminated the irritating hum of singlecoils, which he achieved by incorporating two magnetic coils with opposing windings and polarities (so 'bucking' the 'hum'). It was a happy side effect that the PAF was fatter and angrier than its rivals – qualities that the guitarists of the time were desperate to nail.

Half a century later, humbuckers built to Lover's guiding principles are

available on guitars at every price point, from the Gibson Les Paul Standard right to the bottom of the barrel. Inspired by the new Washburn Scott Ian SI61, we're pitching this Group Test somewhere in the middle, with a £500 price ceiling that means these four axes should deliver the goods without battering your wallet.

Humbucker heroes

Like we said, you can't move for humbucker-equipped guitars in the mid-price market, so TG could afford to be as fussy as a Stringfellows doorman and turn away any model that wasn't built by a reputable luthier, offered a mediocre spec or turned up in ripped jeans. With

ticks in all the right boxes and the endorsement of hair-free Anthrax hero Scott Ian, the Washburn SI61 (£349) practically chose itself, but if it thinks it can put its feet up and cruise to victory then it's got three nasty surprises.

First up is the Spear Gladius SP (£329), which belies its price tag with one of the longest spec sheets we've seen from a Vietnamese luthier. Next up, we've thrown the Satanists a bone with the Cort EVL-Z4 (£329), which we're hoping should sound as frightening as it looks. Finally, we've thrown a few more fivers into the mix to see what the Hamer XT SATQ can deliver in this Group Test for £499. Let battle commence...

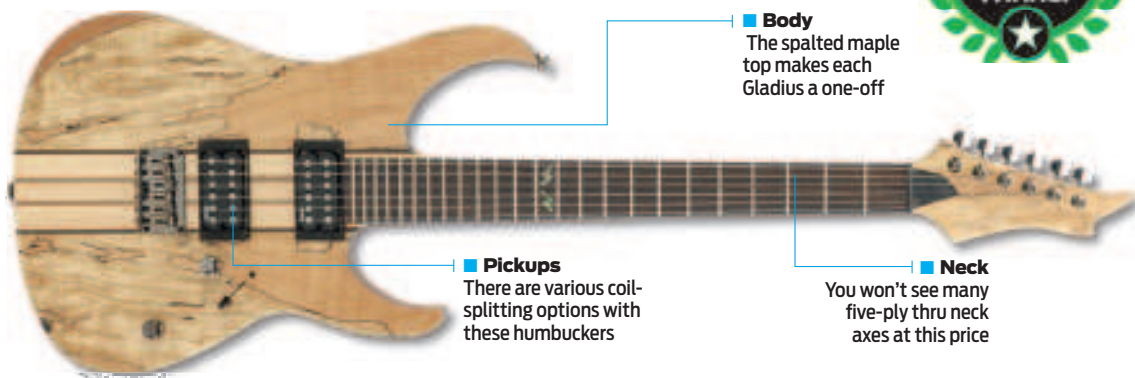
"YOU CAN'T MOVE FOR GUITARS WITH HUMBUCKERS IN THE MID-PRICE MARKET SO TG COULD AFFORD TO BE FUSSY"



Spear Gladius SP

£329

Is this Spear mint?



Body
The spalted maple top makes each Gladius a one-off

Pickups
There are various coil-splitting options with these humbuckers

Neck
You won't see many five-ply thru neck axes at this price

At a glance

Spear Gladius SP

BODY: Mahogany, with spalt maple top
NECK: Five-ply Canadian hard maple and mahogany, thru construction
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood
SCALE: 25.5"
PICKUPS: Spear M-PAF Monster Pole humbuckers
CONTROLS: 1x volume, 1x tone, 5-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Die-cast tuners, string-thru tailpiece
FINISH: Natural Open Pore
CONTACT: Black i
Distribution 01236 861261
WEB: www.blackie.eu

TG's spent recent months raving about Spear Guitar to anyone who'll listen, so when we heard the boys had launched a hard-tail Gladius SP, we crawled over broken glass with our flies undone to get one.

The sizzle: Established in 2005, Spear might not be a household name, but you're not Posh Spice so stop worrying about labels and feel the spec. Not so much a guitar as a tree with strings, the Gladius combines a solid



mahogany body with spalted maple top, throws in a five-ply maple and mahogany thru neck and stretches our grins even further with twin Monster Pole humbuckers whose coils can be split with a five-way selector.

We say: Anyone with eyes should already be hot for the Gladius SP, whose credible tonewoods and natural beauty convey the vibe of a high-end boutique instrument. But it's not until you retract your tongue that you realise this model has also been honed to perfection, with the expansive cutaways and speedy unfinished neck making it handle like a go-faster 24-fret Fender Stratocaster.

Handling is one thing and tone another, but here the Gladius scores again. As you'd imagine

from the eclectic timbers and thru-neck, there's huge sustain and tonal character on the table, and these benefits are complemented by the class of the PAFs. The option to split the coils is clever, but left TG them in one piece to deliver a tone that is fat, thick... and enough to bag Spear the Group Test title.

SUMMARY

For: One-of-a-kind looks, tone

Against: We're keeping quiet

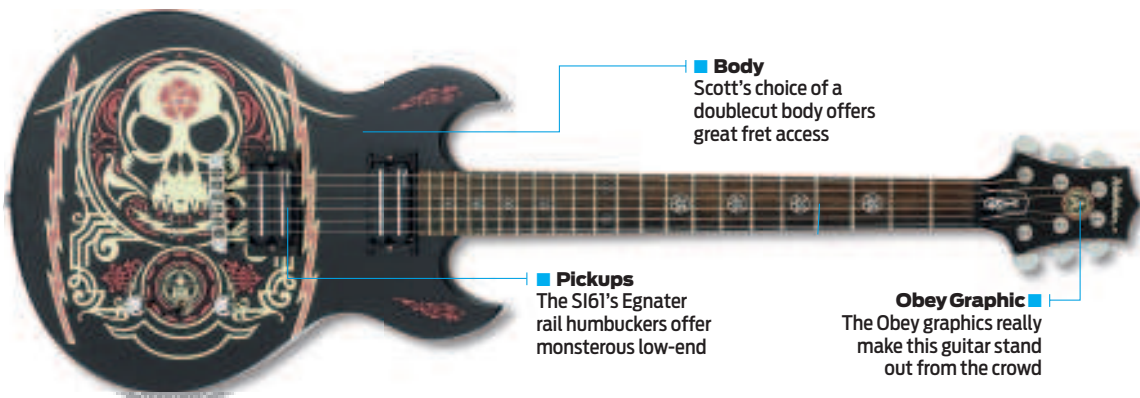


TG says: It'll give you wood

Washburn SI61

£349

Great Scott?



Body
Scott's choice of a doublecut body offers great fret access

Pickups
The SI61's Egnater rail humbuckers offer monstrous low-end

Obey Graphic
The Obey graphics really make this guitar stand out from the crowd

At a glance

Washburn SI61

BODY: Solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, bolt-on
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, with Anthragram inlays
SCALE: 25.5"
PICKUPS: 2x Egnater humbuckers
CONTROLS: 1x volume, 1x tone, 3-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Grover 18:1 tuners, tune-o-matic bridge, string-thru tailpiece
FINISH: Obey Graphic [pictured]
CONTACT: Sound Technology 01462 480000
WEB: www.washburn.com

Scott Ian can't get enough of his US Custom Shop SI81: "This guitar is exactly what I've been looking for – it's evil and it plays fuckin' awesome." Let's hope the cheaper SI61 rocks too...

The sizzle: Washburn treats mid-price punters well, so while realists won't be surprised to find the SI81's graded timbers and premium hardware missing in action, they'll be satisfied with the features the SI61 retains.



Visually, there's actually more of Ian's influence here, with an Obey graphic and Anthragram fret inlays giving off a meaner vibe than the US model's po-faced maple top and parallelograms.

We say: Look past the Obey graphic and you'll realise the SI61 follows familiar contours, costing it points in the originality stakes, but clawing them back if you love the classic doublecut vibe. It's easy to hit the top frets and to fret notes with speed and precision, which will suit Anthrax fans looking to mimic Ian's percussive down-picking. We'd concur with the man himself – it plays frickin' awesome.

Following a rail format, the SI61's twin Egnater humbuckers

stand out in this group, offering a bone-crunching bottom-end that's perfect for *Among The Living* speed-riffing, but that's less convincing for more melodic styles. Still, if you're considering this axe it's because you want to nail Ian's vibe, and if that's the criteria, mission accomplished.

SUMMARY

For: Perfect for Ian-style riffing

Against: Not for non-Anthrax fans



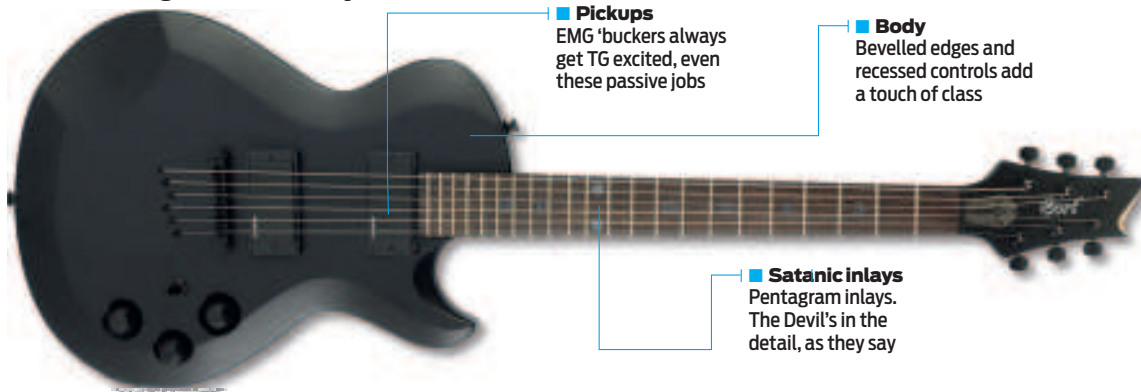
TG says: Scott of the anarchic

"THE NATURAL BEAUTY OF THE GLADIUS SP CONVEYS THE VIBE OF A BOUTIQUE INSTRUMENT"

HUMBUCKER AXES UNDER £500 **★ GROUP TEST**

Cort EVL-Z4 £329

Something EVL this way comes...



■ **Pickups**
EMG 'buckers always get TG excited, even these passive jobs

■ **Body**
Bevelled edges and recessed controls add a touch of class

■ **Satanic inlays**
Pentagram inlays. The Devil's in the detail, as they say

For all you aspirant rockers on a budget, it's only a matter of time before the sales assistants suggest a Cort. And if you're wearing Mortis makeup, a crucifix and biker boots, they'll probably show you this one.

The sizzle: Don't be fooled by novelty trimmings like the coffin truss rod cover and pentagon inlays – Cort's EVL-Z4 is backed up by one of the most serious specs in the group. A solid mahogany body and a bolted



maple neck are always good to see, but the main event is undoubtedly the twin EMGs. It's time to wake the dead...

We say: The body shape is clichéd fare, but Cort's judicious

use of contours and bevels for your beer belly and picking arm mean the Z4 model is the most accommodating of the four axes in this Group Test. As a playing experience, it feels tight and compact, offering a comparable pocket-rocket vibe to a Les Paul Junior but with zipper play due to the C-profile of the neck. It's a shame the fret access isn't quite on the par of the doublecuts it's up against though.

For £329, it goes without saying that these are passive EMGs, but that didn't matter

– we still dug out a superb response across the board, with the bridge turning in monster tone for solos and the neck taking care of crunching overdriven rhythm parts. There are no silver medals in the TG Group Test, but if there were we'd be hanging it round the EVL-Z4's neck.

SUMMARY

For: Spooky metal vibe, EMG kudos
Against: Fret access could be better

★★★★★

TG says: It's a scream!

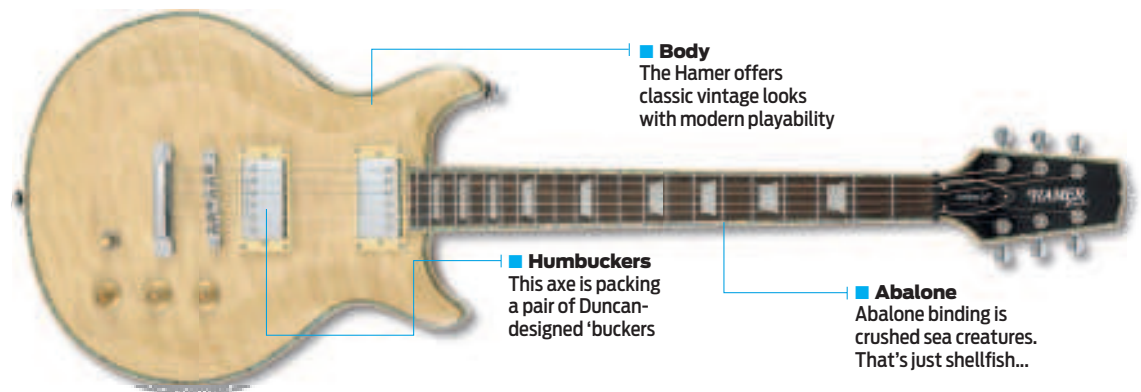
At a glance

Cort EVL-Z4

BODY: Solid mahogany
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, with Pentagon inlays
SCALE: 24"
PICKUPS: 2x EMG-HZ H4 humbuckers (neck and bridge)
CONTROLS: 2x volume, 1x tone, 3-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Die-cast tuners, TonePros locking bridge, string-thru tailpiece
FINISH: Black Satin
CONTACT: HC Distribution sales@hcdistribution.com
WEB: www.cort-guitars.co.uk

Hamer XT SATQ £499

Hamer of the Gods...



■ **Body**
The Hamer offers classic vintage looks with modern playability

■ **Humbuckers**
This axe is packing a pair of Duncan-designed 'buckers

■ **Abalone**
Abalone binding is crushed sea creatures. That's just shellfish...

Don't get all shirty about the price. Instead, take a look at the headstock, remind yourself that this is a Hamer and count your lucky stars you're able to get within sniffing distance of this legendary brand.

The sizzle: Hamer reckons the SATQ could cause you a headache, albeit a nice one. "You'll have trouble deciding if you prefer the great looks or incredible sound!" spouts the



website. True, this instrument is a triumph of form and function, combining eye candy like the quilted top and abalone inlays with serious artillery like the twin Duncan humbuckers.

We say: In contrast to the moshier styling of the SI61 and Z4, the SATQ drips class. The build is luxurious and impeccably tidy, from the bound fingerboard to the natural maple cap, while the physical performance evokes a lost collector's item, letting you slide through a volley of vibrato-heavy blues licks like it's the most natural thing in the world.

It's always good to see Duncan humbuckers, and in the SATQ's case it's even better to hear them. Buttery at the neck

and purposeful at the bridge, these units should delight older players who are still fuming that they couldn't afford a Les Paul, but they might not be mental enough for younger and harder players to make the financial stretch. You know who you are, so act accordingly.

SUMMARY

For: All-round class and kudos
Against: It doesn't like Slipknot riffs

★★★★★

TG says: You get what you pay for

At a glance

Hamer XT SATQ

BODY: Mahogany, with arched maple cap
NECK: Mahogany, set
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
SCALE: 24"
PICKUPS: 2x Duncan-designed humbuckers
CONTROLS: 2x volume, 1x tone, 3-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic bridge, stop tailpiece
FINISH: Natural [pictured], Honeyburst, Trans Black, Tobacco Sunburst
CONTACT: Go To Guitars 01925 576205
WEB: www.hamerguitars.com