

STERLING BY MUSIC MAN AX40, SILO20 & JP50 £549, \$429 & £579
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP SOWELS



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Thought you couldn't afford a Music Man? Well, thanks to Sterling By Music Man, now you can! *by David Durban*

Without any doubt, Music Man produces some of the finest contemporary electric guitars that America has to offer. However, until recently these aspirational instruments have been the preserve of mainly pro-level players or lucky amateurs with deep pockets. Keen to address this for 2009, Music Man has released the brand new – and much more affordable – Sterling By Music Man range.

Along with three bass models, this new Sterling range offers four six-string designs, all under £600 and modelled on

Music Man's most famous guitars. So the AX Series (AX20 and AX40) is modelled on the Axis; the Silo Series (Silo20) apes Music Man's long-standing Silhouette and the JP Series (JP50) imitates John Petrucci's signature model. We're going to look at the AX40, Silo20 and JP50.

AX40

The AX40 sports a near-identical offset, small-scale single-cutaway body to the USA Axis and offers good access to

the upper frets, with player comfort taken care of with a well-positioned belly contour. The solid basswood body follows that of the Axis, albeit using lesser quality stock. That said, we do get a quilted maple veneer top and an aesthetically

striking transparent gold finish. This all contributes to a classic Music Man look that instantly exudes high-class rock 'n' roll attitude.

The colour-matched headstock is gloss-finished and boasts the usual Music Man four-plus-two arrangement, with Sterling pearloid-button tuners. Here we have the maple-necked version, but the AX20 model is also available with hardtail bridge and rosewood fretboard. As with the Silo20 and JP50, the neck is attached to the body in sturdy Music Man fashion, using five screws rather than four.

Both the AX40 and Silo20 also feature a two-piece maple neck with an asymmetrical neck carve – the treble side is

Music Man has made its most compelling mid-price offerings yet... They uphold the parent brand's values without cannibalising it

The Rivals

AX40

Fender's Telecaster '72 Deluxe (£729) is a popular seventies-inspired, twin-humbucker rocker.

Schecter's PT Fastback (£599) has classic single-cut looks but without the Floyd Rose-style vibrato. Despite it being a double-cut, **Fender's Standard HSS FR Strat** (£619) features a Floyd Rose and classic Fender looks.



The AX's Sterling locking vibrato enables some cool EVH-style dives



flattened off. “The unique neck offers a comfortable carve with the qualities of a thin neck, but with enough mass for good tone,” says Music Man. In the hand it’s like a blend between early fifties Telecaster and later fifties Les Paul neck shapes – not too clubby, but open-feeling for impressive access and speedy fretting.

Again much like the Axis, we have the same fingerboard radius of 10 inches and nut width of 41.5mm – the latter contributing to the AX40’s small and compact feel. It’s definitely in the Fender camp width-wise and may feel slightly narrow to those more used to a wider-necked Les Paul. Also, the compact body and equally compact headstock belie the full Fender-style 25.5-inch scale length.

Unfortunately, we don’t see the player-revered gunstock oil and special hand-rubbed wax neck finish on the Sterling range. However, on all Sterling models the gloss is cut back, leaving a smooth and fast-playing satin surface.

This version of the AX comes with a Sterling double-locking vibrato bridge and nut. It’s a non-floating system and comes set up for downward motion only (in the style of Mr Van Halen who, of course, popularised the Axis design with Music Man). The action is smooth and accurate, but a degree of care is needed, if only to reduce the audible ‘clunk’ when the arm is released.

Electrics almost mirror those of the Axis too: a three-way toggle switch, single master volume and a pair of Sterling’s own Zebra-coil PAF-style humbuckers mounted directly onto the body.

Sounds

Clean or dirty, the AX really gives the best of both worlds. The twin humbuckers have an individual voicing and, despite its lack of onboard tonal shaping, there’s no doubting the AX40’s rock credentials. With a healthy dose of gain and some rock riffs, the PAF-style pickups deliver a warm and direct tone, but with enough

The Silo’s asymmetrical neck sits comfortably, offering enough meat for bluesy bends and a platform for the more technically minded

presence and openness so they don’t mush out or lose detail; think of a resonant Telecaster colliding with some of a Les Paul’s girth. Heavier gains unveil a raspy and long-sustaining lead tone, great for big bends and vibratos and, not surprisingly, not a million miles away from Van Halen’s singing signature lead tone.

With a clean-ish amp setting, however, the AX40 surprised us by producing a sweet and snappy country-esque voicing with a chewy PAF low-end that masks its glassy nature. It’s a no fuss, quality rocker that offers surprising versatility.

Silo20

The Silo20 is based closely on Music Man’s long-standing Silhouette, although here we

get a basswood – as opposed to alder – body with its very recognisable smaller, Strat-inspired double-cutaway shape. With its ergonomic contouring and deeper cutaways, this makes for a comfortable and well-balanced guitar to hold and play.

Again, the Silo20 is only offered in one finish – gloss black – although we’re pretty sure we’ll see more options as the range gets established. That niggle aside, the overall vibe, including the teardrop-shaped pearloid pickguard, is of an instrument that radiates sophistication it really is a cool design.

Like the AX40, the Silo20 features a two-piece maple neck, but with its nut width – its non-locking this time –



The HSH layout of the Silo20 offers a whole lot of rock versatility

The Rivals

SILO20

Vintage’s VP6 Series (£189) offers Trev Wilkinson-designed appointments and good value for money. The ever-versatile Yamaha Pacifica 112V (£249) is one of our favourite budget solidbody electrics and ESP’s LTD PB-401 (£779), though substantially more costly, features those highly versatile Seymour Duncan P-Rails, along with pro-spec Tone Pros hardware.



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The JP50's body has a sculpted forearm contour to increase playing comfort

increased by 0.5mm. We also have two extra frets to play with. The asymmetrical neck again sits comfortably in the palm, offering enough meat for bluesy bends or metal chugging, and a platform for the more technically minded. A good point here is that the set-up and fretwork on all three of our review models was impressive straight out of the box – no tweaking was necessary and there were no sharp or protruding fret edges.

The Silo20's electrics are also a little more involved. This classic Music Man design has two open-coil Sterling humbuckers in the bridge and neck positions and a middle single-coil. It's all controlled, Strat-style, by a five-way lever switch and conventional master volume and tone controls.

Hardware-wise the Silo20 only comes with a Music Man-designed vintage hardtail bridge, with through-the-body stringing used to increase the vibration and overall resonance. Unfortunately, there's no vibrato option.

Sounds

The Silo offers an altogether different experience to the AX. With some mild gain dialled-in, there's an unmistakable Fullerton twang with full-throttled chords, not unlike a typical crystalline 'fat Strat' sound. Adding more distortion produces a particularly accurate Iron Maiden-esque tonality: big fat power chords mixed with a Fender chime and smooth string definition.

Set clean, both the middle and fourth parallel mix positions offer an accessible blend between traditional Fender spank and Gibson's throaty nature – superb for rocking blues licks or a cleaner funk-style approach. Meanwhile, the dark sustain given by the classically voiced neck humbucker is more than adequate for flutey hard rock lead playing. There are a lot of sounds in this guitar.

JP50

The JP50 is inspired by Music Man's John Petrucci signature, the JP6, and for a fraction of the

money it has to be said the JP50 looks to offer excellent bang-for-your-buck.

Under Petrucci's flip-flop pearl red burst finish we again have a lightweight basswood body (as with the USA model) with the signature scooped forearm cutaway giving greater player comfort, especially on a strap. Alongside this, the JP50's offset horns offer good hand and fret reach, with those stylised SG-like edge chamfers and recessed treble-side cutaway adding to the player comfort factor.

In contrast to the AX and Silo, the JP50's neck has a markedly slimmer and flatter feel, which like the American-made JP6 will certainly offer the more technically minded player a faster, more modern metal feel than either the AX or Silo.

Hardware options also differ here, with the JP50 utilising a Music Man-designed, modern Strat-like two-post floating vibrato that closely follows the Fender-look, only with a flatter, more ergonomic shape. The vibrato offers a fair amount of

The Rivals

JP50

PRS's SE Custom 24 comes in at a very similar price to the JP50, and sports dual humbuckers, 24-frets and vibrato. Schecter's C-1 FR (£549) comes with a Floyd Rose vibrato and is now the company's classic double-cut shape. For something even more classic, how about the Fender Highway One HSS Strat (£739)? It features 22 frets, satin nitro finish and a very big sound.

excursion: offering you downward bend to near slack, or more subtle semi-tone up pulls.

Sounds

Cranking up the gain to approximate a more Dream Theater-ish sound, you're served with a loud and thick crash of tone. There's nothing subtle about the hot bridge pickup – it'll make all but the very highest headroom preamps squash. With lots of presence, there's lashings of singing sustain, enabling it to bludgeon through the mix and fire pinched harmonics at will: this kind of articulation is essential for technical, high-gain styles.

Compared with the bridge, the neck pickup offers a marginally more traditional low-down and dirty sound, albeit retaining a stinging fuzz around the edges and more strident attack to bring out picking dynamics. High-output pickups aren't exactly sweet, making for a modern-edged, precise tone, especially when clean. Vintage buffs will call it sterile, but that's what you need >



for mega-gain shredding, to keep those notes separated.

Verdict

With the Sterling instruments, Music Man has made its most compelling mid-price offerings yet, after the rudimentary, Far Eastern OLP models, and the not-quite-cheap-enough American-made SUB guitars. They uphold much of the parent brand's values without being in danger of cannibalising it.

For overall build quality, playability and vibe, they sit on a par with the best Epiphones and Fender's Mexican ranges, and as a more individual, niche brand, offer a credible, non-mainstream alternative to either. We hope to see more finish options in time, but this is an auspicious start for Sterling by Music Man. **G**



Sterling By Music Man AX40

PRICE: £579 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Offset single-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: Basswood with quilted maple veneer, top binding and belly contour
NECK: Maple with asymmetrical profile, wheel truss rod adjuster and five-bolt neck plate
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/41.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, 254mm (10-inch) radius and black dot inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Sterling double-locking vibrato with non-locking chrome-plated tuners w/pearloid-buttons
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Two Sterling A5 Zebra humbuckers; three-way pickup selector switch; master volume control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.5/7.7
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The AX20 (£529) comes with a Sterling hardtail bridge, single volume and tone controls and transparent orange finish
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Transparent gold (as reviewed)

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Sterling By Music Man Silo20

PRICE: £429 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: Basswood
NECK: Maple with asymmetrical profile, wheel truss rod adjuster and five-bolt neck plate
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, 254mm (10-inch) radius and black dot inlays
FRETS: 24, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Music Man-designed vintage hardtail bridge, Sterling chrome-plated locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53.5mm
ELECTRICS: Two Sterling humbuckers, one Sterling single-coil, five-way pickup selector switch with master volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3/6.6
OPTIONS: None
LEFT-HANDERS: None
FINISHES: Black (as reviewed)

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Sterling By Music Man JP50

PRICE: £579 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway, solidbody electric
BODY: Basswood
NECK: Maple, wheel truss rod adjuster and five-bolt neck plate
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 254mm (10-inch) radius and black inlays
FRETS: 24, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Sterling Modern vibrato and Sterling non-locking tuners – all chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Two Sterling high-output humbuckers, five-way pickup selector switch with master volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.5/7.7
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None
LEFT-HANDERS: None
FINISHES: Pearl red burst (as reviewed)

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

The Bottom Line

AX40

We like: General fit and finish; excellent playability; old-school, stripped-down Axis vibe
We dislike: Locking vibrato needs an accurate hand
Guitarist says: A very straightforward, no-nonsense rocker that provides modern and classic rock sounds

Silo20

We like: Finish and set-up; hotrod Fender-ish tones; comfortable neck
We dislike: If anything it lacks some tonal identity
Guitarist says: The most versatile of the three models here, offering hot Strat-type tones with a sweet, Les Paul-like neck voice

JP50

We like: Slimmer neck for fast shred runs; build quality; player comfort
We dislike: Slightly sterile with clean amp tones
Guitarist says: Ideal for the technically minded player on a budget. Singing high-gain tones and excellent player comfort reflect the John Petrucci vibe