

GEAR

GROUP TEST
ELECTROS UNDER £300



Words Stuart Williams

ELECTRO-ACOUSTICS UNDER £300

Like all musicians, acoustic guitarists just want to be heard. Find out if these four electro-acoustics are as easy on the ear as they are on the wallet

THE classic use of electro-acoustics in rock music occurs as follows: the singer, a sensitive soul, wants to take things down a notch mid set. The drummer buggers off for a smoke, and the glow of Zippos lights an arena awash with hormones.

That's if you're Bon Jovi circa 1988. These days, you can't smoke in a venue and phones are used in place of a lighter. Still, the fact remains that it's likely you'll want to use an electro-acoustic at some point – even if you're not a purveyor of power ballads.

Budget electros used to mean passable woods, passive electronics and rudimentary controls.

The four guitars lined up for this test show exactly how much more you get for your money in 2011. Inflation? We'll take the active pre-amps, digital tuners and real EQ circuits over the dogs of yore any day. The trouble is, these features are no longer groundbreaking at this price point. We're spoiled, and we know it, but gratitude isn't enough to win this test. We've selected four 'rock friendly' electros under the £300 mark. Ibanez and LTD serve up the metal edge, while TG Group Test favourites Lag and Washburn bring amplified acoustics down from the stadium to the skittle alley.

WASHBURN WD 10SCE £210

FOR years, Washburn's D series was an upper-entry-level staple, and it's recently been rejigged as the WD Series. The WD10SCE here follows its predecessors' dreadnought shape, while acoustic staples such as the solid spruce top and mahogany back and sides (we're talking laminated at this price) meet with a Fishman Isys+ preamp.

Our review model has a high gloss black finish, which is spectacular in the showroom, but collects fingerprints like a forensics expert. The first few strums confirm it's loud with a low-end punch that remains controlled when you give it some welly, and there's a nice sheen to the top end. Plug in, though, and the bass doesn't quite transfer. What you get instead is more focused towards the bottom of the midrange, which will help to seat this guitar in the mix. The preamp's two-band EQ, phase switch and tuner might not offer everything you want for tonal control, but they're certainly all you need.

The WD 10SCE sets the bar high from the off. With its great sound quality and solid features, it continues Washburn's track record of producing fine acoustics at even finer prices. Had it not been for some minor blemishes around the edge of the soundhole and the slight fatiguing after barring chords, it might have swayed us from the start.

AT A GLANCE

BODY: Solid spruce top, mahogany back and sides (laminated)
NECK: Mahogany
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
SCALE: 648mm
ELECTRONICS: Fishman Isys+
HARDWARE: Chrome
LEFT-HANDED: Yes
FINISH: Black (pictured), Natural
CONTACT: Sound Technology
 01462 490800 washburn.com

SUMMARY	FEATURES	■	■	■	■
	SOUND QUALITY	■	■	■	■
	VALUE FOR MONEY	■	■	■	■
	BUILD QUALITY	■	■	■	■
	PLAYABILITY	■	■	■	■
OVERALL RATING		★★★★★			



LTD XTONE AC-10E £275

HOLD on to your EMGs, folks – LTD has started breakin' hearts as well as breaking skulls. Yup, this is the company's first proper foray into acoustic guitars, branded under LTD's existing XTone range.

Familiar features such as the XJ frets and thin neck profile will grab the attention of electric players. The concert-sized AC-10E has the smallest and shallowest body in the group, which means two things. First, the resulting acoustic tone has less bass and volume, but the upshot of this is that there's less to muddy up. Second, that bowel-rattling feedback you get on the confines of a smaller stage is less prevalent.

Through the amp, you get an immediately hard pick attack, showing that LTD hasn't lost its edge when it comes to cutting through the backline. It's when you

belt it that things really come to life, adding a zing to the top-end that's missing from the softer dynamics.

LTD has fitted its own ESP preamp to the AC-10E. The preamp controls sit flush, but are sprung to pop up when pressed. It's a simple detail, yet it means that once you're finished tweaking, you can

press the controls back in so that you don't accidentally change things mid-song.

The LTD doesn't have the widest sound range, but don't take that to mean it's bad. If you're playing rock/metal and you want to switch to an acoustic for short bursts in your set, the AC-10E offers minimum interruption to your technique and you'll still cut through.

AT A GLANCE

BODY: Spruce top, mahogany back and sides (laminated)
NECK: Mahogany
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
SCALE: 648mm
ELECTRONICS: ESP preamp
HARDWARE: Chrome
LEFT-HANDED: No
FINISH: Pearl White, Black, Tobacco Sunburst (pictured)
CONTACT: Selectron UK
 01795 419460 esp guitars.com

SUMMARY	FEATURES	■	■	■	■
	SOUND QUALITY	■	■	■	■
	VALUE FOR MONEY	■	■	■	■
	BUILD QUALITY	■	■	■	■
	PLAYABILITY	■	■	■	■
OVERALL RATING		★★★★★			

LAG TRAMONTANE T66DCE £265

LAG has romped home victorious in some of TG's past Group Tests. Its seemingly relentless desire to squeeze as much tone and playability into a guitar as possible raises a cocky middle finger to its price tag. The T66DCE is the entry-level model in the Tramontane series, and forgoes the solid top of its more expensive siblings.

It's finished in a natural High Gloss, with Honey Mahogany sides, back, and neck. The headstock looks quite orange, but black hardware, plus black and ivory binding, offset it to achieve a contemporary look.

The electronics come in the form of a Shadow-built DirectLag preamp and NanoFlex piezo pickup. It's the only preamp in this group that doesn't have a tuner built in, offering Treble and Bass controls, as well as a Dynamics slider for shaping your midrange. There are also Phase and Mute switches.

Acoustically, the T66DCE comes out with its fists up. You get that elusive sparkly resonance at the top end, with a full-bodied sound across the rest of the spectrum. Put it through the amp and you'll realise how useful the Dynamics slider can be. It takes you from a tidy, controlled scoop to accented pick attack. The satin neck is a joy to play too. The T66DCE is hard to fault, a textbook example of acoustic sound-over-spec sheet. It doesn't quite win, but joins the Washburn in a photo finish for second place.

AT A GLANCE

BODY: Spruce top, mahogany back and sides
NECK: Mahogany
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
SCALE: 648mm
ELECTRONICS: DirectLag by Shadow
HARDWARE: Black
LEFT-HANDED: No
FINISH: High Gloss Natural (pictured)
CONTACT: Barnes and Mullins
 01691 652449 lagguitars.co.uk

IBANEZ AW250-ECE LG £289

YOU might not expect a company with a tradition steeped so heavily in hard rock and metal to do the business with an electro-acoustic. You'd be wrong, as the AW250-ECE proves.

Solid cedar is the choice for the top, with laminated mahogany on the back and sides. The low gloss satin finish, sparse appointments and wooden rosette make this guitar look like it's been plucked from the you-can't-afford-it section of your local guitar shop.

As well as having the most well-stocked preamp here (a Fishman Sonicore with three-band EQ, Shape control, Phase switch and Tuner), you can choose between its jack or XLR output.

The preamp is mounted towards the waist pinch, which seems like an odd placement until you start to play. Then you find your

picking arm's natural playing position forms a pleasant arch away from the controls.

It offers the most balanced tone in the group: lively and vibrant trebles, a solid yet controlled midrange, and just the right amount of bass to sound powerful but not overbearing. It's consistent across the dynamic range too, so even when you're picking softly, it maintains character.

With a bracket of £79 difference between the four, this is a tight test, but there's an easy way to get the measure of a great acoustic guitar – it's the one that you keep coming back to. The Ibanez makes sure you do with its classy finish, stellar feature set and, ultimately, the best sound quality in the group.



AT A GLANCE

BODY: Solid cedar top, mahogany back and sides (laminated)
NECK: Mahogany
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
SCALE: 648mm
ELECTRONICS: Fishman Sonicore
HARDWARE: Chrome
LEFT-HANDED: No
FINISH: Natural Low Gloss (pictured), Rustic Brown
CONTACT: Headstock Distribution 0121 508666



SUMMARY	FEATURES	■	■	■	■	■
	SOUND QUALITY	■	■	■	■	■
	VALUE FOR MONEY	■	■	■	■	■
	BUILD QUALITY	■	■	■	■	■
	PLAYABILITY	■	■	■	■	■
	OVERALL RATING	★★★★★				

SUMMARY	FEATURES	■	■	■	■	■
	SOUND QUALITY	■	■	■	■	■
	VALUE FOR MONEY	■	■	■	■	■
	BUILD QUALITY	■	■	■	■	■
	PLAYABILITY	■	■	■	■	■
	OVERALL RATING	★★★★★				