





## GIBSON J-45 VINTAGE & HUMMINGBIRD VINTAGE

Two models from Gibson's acoustic range have enjoyed a makeover for 2016 – and age is everything!

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### What You Need To Know

- 1 So, what's cookin'?**  
The current trend of heat treating guitar tops – commonly known as torrefaction – is aimed at reproducing the effects of ageing. Drying the wood in this way is thought to make it more resonant, improving tone, projection and volume.
- 2 New for 2016?**  
Gibson has revamped many of the models in its range – both acoustics and electrics – specially for 2016. The acoustics include radius'd tops and improved bracing, all built in the company's specialised facility in Bozeman, Montana.
- 3 Natty Dreads?**  
These two are great examples of the two prime differences in dreadnought design. The Hummingbird is a square-shouldered dread, while its stablemate is a round-shoulder model – look at the pictures and you'll see from where this nomenclature is derived!

Gibson's dedicated acoustic facility lies tucked away amidst the mountains of Montana in a place called Bozeman – in fact, its address is very appropriately Orville Way, Bozeman. Here, a small team of expert luthiers oversees production of the company's acoustic range, and they've got a few tricks up their sleeves for 2016. Gibson's success in the field of making guitars is, of course, legendary, but perhaps more of a focus tends to be placed on its electric guitars rather than the arguably more humble acoustics. And yet, players as diverse as James Taylor, Jimmy Page, Donovan and John Lennon have all been seen sporting the odd J-45 or Hummingbird in their time, the distinctive Gibson timbres ringing out in hit after hit over the past few decades.

Generally speaking, you can tell a good instrument by the levels of interest it's given when it finds its way into the *Guitarist* offices and, in the instance of this pair of Gibsons, we played a game of pass the parcel, everybody throwing a few superlatives into the pot as they took their turn. Yes, they really are that good. But before we cut to the final opinions, let's take a look at what's new with these two established dreadnoughts.

To begin with, each model now sports a baked top. Gibson claims that cooking the wood to remove moisture allows it to replicate the ageing process to produce that highly sought after vintage tone. The

company has also installed period-correct tuners, softened the fingerboard edges for a more comfortable playing experience, combined Plek technology with an enhanced level of hand finishing and used special oil on bridges and fingerboards to maximise the wood's natural vibrancy. This all sounds good to us, but we're sure that there's more going on under the hood, too, as we've heard tales of bracing changes and the use of radius'd tops for better projection and volume.

All well and good, of course, but first of all, we'll take a brief look at the constituent parts of both instruments in order to see what kind of recipe has been used in cooking up these guitars.

Both acoustics feature spruce tops, the J-45 bearing Adirondack red spruce and the Hummingbird the equally desirable Sitka variety. In either case, the backs and sides are fashioned from mahogany, the Hummingbird measuring up at a very slightly deeper rim depth, according to the office measuring device – although, to look at them, you'd swear they were just about the same size. Necks, too, are mahogany, with rosewood fingerboards and bone saddles and nuts. As far as headstocks are concerned, the J-45 bears the older Gibson logo with the historically accurate scroll beneath – after all, the J-45 is the older model in the range, having an 18-year-head start over the Hummingbird, which didn't see the light of day until the dawn of the





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generally wield a Les Paul, it's safe to say that you'll feel immediately at home.

Of course, the most outstanding difference between this pair is the variation in dreadnought style, the Hummingbird having the squared shoulders and the J-45 the more rounded variety. It's pretty much down to taste as to which you'd prefer, although you might notice a difference in general feel between the two, especially when playing sitting down. Opinions around the office were split down the middle as far as which one you'd choose for your Desert Island guitar, but in general, the decision seemed to be based around the overall aesthetics of each guitar as much as it was the slight variation in tone between the two.

One thing we did all agree on, however – and it was usually the first sentence out of everyone's mouth when they picked either guitar up – was how light the instruments are. Saying that they weigh around three-point-something pounds each is fairly meaningless on paper, but when you actually hold one in your hands, you're likely to agree that these are some of the lightest acoustics on the market.

What does 'light' mean from the point of view of construction? Well, thinner woods and lighter bracing, perhaps, but as we all know, the important factor is what they sound like, and, in a word, both guitars sound simply amazing.

1960s. Tuner buttons are different between the two models; both bear a set of aged Kluson-style with darkened buttons, but the J-45 has the smaller, earlier type and the Hummingbird has the more 50s/60s versions that wouldn't look at all out of place on a Gibson electric.

Looking more closely, the neck dimensions are all but identical in both cases and when they do differ, it's really

not by *that* much. As an example of this, the J-45's neck thickness at the 1st fret is 20.4mm, whereas the Hummingbird comes in at 20.7mm and so we'd be very surprised if anyone could detect much of a difference while playing. Both have Gibson's traditional shorter scale length of 628.6mm and so, if your tastes in electric guitars centre upon Fender's catalogue, you may notice a slight change of gear, but if you





1. Baked to perfection for a sound that is pure vintage chic!

2. The string spacing on the J-45 makes it very fingerstyle friendly

3. Gibson's older style headstock logo, complete with age-correct scroll

4. Both guitars had a perfect playing action fresh out of the box

5. The Hummingbird's beautiful pickguard is one of the guitar's major cosmetic features





**THE RIVALS****MARTIN RETRO DREADNOUGHTS £2,749**

Martin's Retro range is getting some very good reports – remember the little 00 we looked at recently? Check out the D-35E Retro or the HD-28E Retro with street prices that clock in around £2,749 for either.

[www.martinguitar.com](http://www.martinguitar.com)

**ATKIN AGED SERIES FROM £2,649**

If you're thinking of going bespoke, then Kent-based builder Alister Atkin will build you a guitar that reflects your own tastes in that aged look – everything from VOS to seriously roadworn, with a starting price of around £2,649.

[www.atkinguitars.com](http://www.atkinguitars.com)

**BOURGEOIS AGED TONE POA**

Based in the US, Dana Bourgeois has been building guitars for 40 years and part of his range includes the fully torrefied Aged Tone dreadnoughts. Slightly harder to track down than Gibsons or Martins, but we say it's well worth the effort. The prices vary, depending on woods.

[www.bourgeoisguitars.net](http://www.bourgeoisguitars.net)

**TAYLOR 610E £3,018**

Taylor has been warming up the ovens to roast its tops for a while now, and offers a number of dreadnoughts to suit. Our choice from the company's range is the maple 610e above, which Taylor says exudes an authentic aged tone, right from the very first strum.

[www.taylorguitars.com](http://www.taylorguitars.com)



6

Both the J-45 and the Hummingbird certainly have an air of greatness about them

**Sounds**

We've mentioned before that acoustic guitars are incredibly difficult to describe in terms of tone. A solidbody guitar is virtually neuter until it's plugged through an amplifier – and a lot depends on exactly which type of amplifier you choose. And don't even begin to think about all the sound-altering pedals on the market. But acoustics sound bad, good, very good or great *au naturel* and both the J-45 and the Hummingbird certainly have an air of greatness about them. The consensus was that their main attribute was clarity and separation. Play a chord and you get an almost three dimensional effect, where every note has its individual place in space without any tendency at all to descend into a mush at any point.

A little James Taylor-esque fingerstyle sounds absolutely superb on both guitars, with the overall clarity and definition being at a premium here, too. Accompanying these regal degrees of tone is volume. Neither guitar could be called excessively loud, but there really is an admirable dynamic range on display in both instances. It's balanced, too; on a graph, there'd be virtually a straight line between trebles and basses, because each end of



7



8

The changes made, from baking the tops to the bracing, have resulted in improvements that it's possible to hear and feel

6. The vintage Cherry Sunburst on the Hummingbird has a superb VOS finish

7. The J-45's tuners have that authentic early 1940s Gibson look to them...

8. ...while the Hummingbird features the later style of button

the tonal spectrum seems to have its own proportionate, correct weight.

### Verdict

Orville Gibson worked by the creed that everything that goes into a guitar that bears his name is there in the name of tone and performance, and this was uppermost in the minds of the team in Montana when they were considering tweaks to two of the company's most established – and desirable – instruments. The changes made, from the baking of the tops to the changes in bracing, top-radiusing and so on, have resulted in improvements that it's possible to hear and feel. The crew at Bozeman can be justly proud that they have taken their company founder's aspirations another step forward. Finally, it has to be said that any guitar – electric or acoustic – that brings the office to an absolute standstill while its incumbents drool and swoon over it, is going to find itself among the high hitters in these pages! **G**



### GIBSON J-45 VINTAGE

**PRICE:** £2,899

**ORIGIN:** Montana USA

**TYPE:** Round-shoulder dreadnought

**TOP:** Adirondack Red spruce

**BACK/SIDES:** Mahogany

**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 115mm (4.52")

**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 450mm (17.71")

**NECK:** Mahogany

**SCALE LENGTH:** 628.65mm (24.75")

**TUNERS:** Vintage nickel

**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/ 43.8mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood

**FRETS:** 20

**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Rosewood, Bone / 55mm

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1.65/3.63

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The J-45

Standard costs £1,599 with the J-45 Historic on the market for £1,315.

The Custom model will set you back around £1,999 whereas the 2016 J-45 Acacia is just a tad more at £2,299.

If you yearn for something extra, there's the J-45 Progressive (£2,199) with a G Force tuning system and an active PZM bridgeplate pickup

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISH:** Nitrocellulose

**Gibson**

**00800 444 27661**

**[www.gibson.com](http://www.gibson.com)**



9/10

**PROS** Blues, fingerstyle, chords, arpeggios – all sound great on this new version of Gibson's workhorse

**CONS** If your ideal dreadnought has 'Martin' on the headstock you might have issues, but apart from that...



### GIBSON HUMMINGBIRD VINTAGE

**PRICE:** £3,099

**ORIGIN:** Montana USA

**TYPE:** Square-shoulder dreadnought

**TOP:** AA Grade Sitka spruce

**BACK/SIDES:** Mahogany

**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 117mm (4.60")

**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 451mm (17.75")

**NECK:** Mahogany

**SCALE LENGTH:** 628.65mm (24.75")

**TUNERS:** Gotoh

**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/43.8mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood

**FRETS:** 20

**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Rosewood, Bone / 55mm

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1.7/3.75

**RANGE OPTIONS:** There's a whole slew of different Hummingbird models available from Gibson beginning with the Epiphone Eclub Ebony that sells for around £199 (with the Gibson equivalent coming in at considerably more), right up to the Hummingbird Modern Classic that sits in the range at around £2,199, and the more rarified Hummingbird Custom Koa at around £4,299. See the website for details on the full 2016 range

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISH:** Nitrocellulose



9/10

**PROS** Great levels of tone and playability, not to mention the heritage on offer here

**CONS** The whole question of artificial ageing is not to everyone's taste