

DUESENBERG D-CASTER & D-BASS 5 £849 & £1,149
ELECTRICS/BASS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON LEES



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A duo from Deutschland! Duesenberg unleashes its latest, and very hip, guitar and bass *by Chris Vinnicombe & Roger Newell*

Retro designs have become an important part of the guitar and bass market. In most cases they're aimed at the lower end – Danelectro, Italia and Eastwood are prime examples – but Duesenberg does things a little differently. The instruments are designed in Germany, then the parts are made in Korea and returned to Germany where a substantial amount of finishing and assembly is done. Load on custom hardware, excellent sounding pickups and a classy 'vintage original' design sense and the brand is rightly attracting some serious players. Just ask Ronnie Wood, Mike Campbell or The Kooks' Hugh Harris. Let's take a look at the new D duo...

D-Caster

Our first impression of the Duesenberg D-Caster is that it's a very cute looking instrument. The compact double-cutaway body is svelte thanks to nicely chamfered rear edges and a light arch on its bound top. A set maple neck joins the mahogany body at the 16th fret, and while it's not the neatest, tightest join in the world (and there's a slight lip where the upper treble side of the fingerboard meets the body) upper fret access is very good.

In addition, the less-than-perfect neck fitting hasn't adversely impacted the guitar's natural sustain and resonance –

the D-Caster has a sprangy, lively acoustic voice with plenty of sustain that promises good amplified performance. The maple neck itself is finished in satin with an amber tint that ties in with the instrument's retro stylings. A scarf joint that begins at the first and ends at the fourth fret means that while two pieces of maple form the basis of the neck, there are no ugly joins on the back or sides of the back-angled three-a-side headstock.

Perhaps the most obvious quirk amidst the D-Caster's spec is the wiring configuration. In addition to a standard three-way blade

pickup selector and volume and speed tone pots, a pair of Jaguar-style slide switches govern a 'swell pot'. This is essentially a spring lever that controls a potentiometer that can be assigned via the slider switches to control either a volume swell effect, or a 'tone effect' – essentially a wah-like tone filter. You can also turn it off completely in songs where it isn't required, or if you're concerned about accidentally disturbing the lever while playing.

As ever with Duesenberg you are buying into an aesthetic as much as anything else, and from the chrome 'D' logos to the

stepped keys on the guitar's 'Z-Tuners', there's an individuality that sets these instruments apart from more generic competition.

Sounds

We've encountered Duesenberg's DP90 single-coils before. As the name might suggest, while there's

The Rivals

D-Caster

Fender's Classic Player Baja Telecaster (£499) is one of the best value guitars in this field and S-1 switching means you get more sonic versatility, too.

Italia's Maranello '61 (£399) has a pair of 'buckers and a vibrato, but it has a similar aesthetic flavour to the Duesenberg. For the true retro experience, **Rickenbacker's 330** is one of the coolest guitars ever to grace the stage, you should be able to pick one up for less than £1,200.



The D-Caster's 'swell pot' has some interesting volume swell and tone filter effects





plenty of sparkle and spank available, there's no shortage of grit on tap either. While not our first choice for extreme gain, there's more than enough power from these pickups to flip to our test valve head's drive channel and throw down some classic rock

The Rivals

D-Bass

For something more traditional, the obvious choice is **Fender's American Deluxe Series J-Bass V** (£1,299), with loads of options and those all important Jazz Bass pickups. The almost-as-classic and definitely-more-active **Music Man StingRay 5** (£1,480) offers a three-band EQ and pickup switching options. If you're seeking that German pedigree the **Clover Bass** we reviewed in issue 298 has a five-string version and could be well worth considering.

lead licks and more modern alt-rock riffs.

Backing off the gain, we realise for the umpteenth time why P-90 style single-coils are perhaps the best all-rounders in the pickup spectrum. Snappy country bends, mellow jazz, brash indie chime – all your clean needs can be met with a flick of the three-way pickup selector and a touch of amplifier EQ adjustment.

If this set of sounds was all that the D-Caster had to offer, we'd be happy enough, but the swell pot promises additional flexibility. With the volume setting selected, it's clear that the small sweep means you can't achieve the same kind of subtle swells that you can with the volume pot or a volume pedal. What you can do rather effectively though, is simulate

a kill-switch or staccato tremolo effect, and the lever feels robust enough to take some pretty heavy abuse in this respect.

Flip to the tone effect mode and, again, the sweep isn't broad. Think subtle tonal shifts for emphasis rather than full-on chk-a-chk-a percussive wah effects. While both tone and volume functions are more mildly diverting than must-have features, they are certainly fun, and their presence in the circuit doesn't seem to have any sonically detrimental consequences.

D-Bass 5

In the bass world Duesenberg is more distinctive. The design style can polarise opinion, but in a market where most instruments show allegiance to fifties classics

it stands out as a true original. This new D-Bass is available in the regular four-string format but this five-string beauty immediately grabbed our attention.

The bound alder body features a stylishly contoured top with a practical rear body scoop, a slightly extended upper horn and trademark stepped headstock with those unusual guitar-sized tuners. Although compact, these sealed units work beautifully, as does the separate bridge and tailpiece that feature prominently on the body. The Toaster pickups sit within their own oval surrounding plate that nestles within the larger scratchplate echoing the stepped design to good effect. As the jack socket is edge-mounted this plate holds just the three controls and that distinctive Duesenberg 'D' logo that makes the whole thing cohesive and neat.

The simple looking solid brass bridge is a very efficient unit with tough saddles and good adjustability. There is enough movement to allow optimisation of the speaking length of the strings with the low B reaching almost 876mm (34.5-inches).

The maple neck is satin smooth with a flattened profile and the rosewood 'board has slightly rolled edges, pearl dots and pretty big frets with a more than acceptable string spacing. We should also mention the nut, which on this D-Bass is beautifully shaped and smoothly rounded at the edges.

The smaller headstock and downsized tuners assist in better instrument balance and reduce overall weight – what's not to like?

Sounds

With a robust sound and one of the most powerful bottom Bs we've encountered, the D-Bass seems intent on leaving its sonic

With a robust sound and one of the most powerful bottom Bs we've encountered, the D-Bass 5 leaves a big sonic mark



The D-Bass has split-coil Toaster pickups that are mounted on a stylish oval plate

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The 'stepped' design on the headstock is echoed in various aspects of both models

mark. The combination of tone and mid-range controls gives an inherent sound that is as individual as the looks. The split Toaster pickup and unusual circuit supply a bottom end that is both big and full with a good definition throughout, but with the added advantage of series or parallel wiring we also get a brighter, more focused delivery when switched from series to parallel. There's not, of course, the scope of sound you'd expect from a modern active bass but there's plenty of variation on hand to make this a great all-rounder with a bigger voice than you might imagine – and that B-string will appeal even to metal monsters.

Verdict

For almost £850, there's a lot of competition out there, but the D-Caster's individuality will certainly appeal to players wanting something more leftfield than Gibson and Fender offerings at this price point. Other than the slightly untidy neck fitting – which seems to be no more than a cosmetic irritation – there's very little to complain about here. The guitar looks and sounds very cool indeed and will certainly turn more heads than most. As the first full-scale Duesenberg bass, the D-Bass joins the range in quite dramatic style. Yes, Duesies are all about visual style but it's nothing without tonal substance and the D-Bass delivers in both the playability and tone

stakes. The low B really is excellent on this model and the pickup and circuitry provide some classic, yet unique tones that make the D-Bass work both as an excellent main bass, or an ideal choice if you need a different sound and style. Whichever way you spin it, Duesenberg proves with this duo, there's plenty of scope for great-looking retro designs without just plundering the pages of The Ultimate Guitar Book! We can't wait for the next ones...🔊

The bottom line

Duesenberg D-Caster

We like: A quirky, fun and individual guitar with a solid, versatile set of sounds
We dislike: The neck join should be much neater
Guitarist says: A cool six-stringer with plenty of personality... but are you cool enough to play it?

Duesenberg D-Bass 5

We like: Unique original retro looks; individual sound quality
We dislike: Of course, not every one will like the style...
Guitarist says: If you want something a little different this is a great place to start: a serious five-string without a whiff of muso.



Duesenberg D-Caster

PRICE: £849
ORIGIN: Germany/Korea
TYPE: Double cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Maple, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid dot inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Steel-saddle tune-o-matic-style bridge sealed gear Duesenberg Z-Tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: Two Duesenberg DP90 single coil pickups, master volume, speed tone pot, three-way blade pickup selector, swell pot with slider switches for volume, tone effect and defeat
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/7.9
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: The single-cutaway 49er has a bridge humbucker and starts at £870. The Starplayer Special kicks off the range at £669
LEFT-HANDERS: Not on this model. Lefty versions are available of the Starplayer TV, the V-Caster, the Starplayer Special and the Carl Carlton (£POA)
FINISHES: Black (as reviewed), Lake Placid blue, vintage white
Westside Distribution 0141 248 4812
www.duesenberg.de

Test results

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



Duesenberg D-Bass 5

PRICE: £1,149
ORIGIN: Germany/Korea
TYPE: Double cutaway solid body five-string
BODY: Alder, bound edge
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 864mm (34-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid dot inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Fully adjustable brass bridge and tailpiece (nickel-plated) guitar-sized, sealed gear Z-tuners with three-step buttons
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 17.75mm average (centres)
ELECTRICS: Duesenberg 'Toaster' split-coil style bass humbucker, volume, mid-shape, tone with series/parallel switching
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.5/9.9
OPTIONS: The four-string D-Bass costs £1,099
RANGE OPTIONS: The other Duesenberg basses are the Star Bass and Violin Bass (both £949) – both have 775mm (30.31-inch) scale length
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Black gloss (as reviewed), Lake Placid blue and Sonoma red

Test results

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