

Rocked  
& Rusted



Cort Earth  
100.0B

LAG Winter  
GLA 400D

Group Test

# Acoustic dreadnoughts under £300

It's back to basics this month, as TG locks away the Marshall stack and throws four keenly priced acoustic dreadnoughts into the ring. But which one should you play around your campfire?

WORDS **HENRY YATES**

140 | **Guitar**



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

Walden  
Natura  
D710

Fresham  
FA205D

**A**n acoustic guitar isn't just something you play during a power cut. It's the ultimate symbol of freedom. While your Les Paul-toting mates worry about amps, FX pedals and plug sockets, all you need is two hands and one tree to sit beneath. It's precisely this 'play anywhere' vibe that has always been the acoustic trump card, combined with the universal songwriter consensus that the stripped sound is the best way to sort the classics from the turds.

Most fledgling players start with a breadline acoustic, selected on the basis that it has strings, makes a noise and their dad agrees to pay for it. This month's Group Test is about the next rung on the ladder. With a price ceiling of £300, we're not expecting a Martin D28 (the undisputed daddy of the genre), but we *do* want an investment that won't be shelved when you graduate from

bedroom to stage. We don't expect a soundhole rosette made of mermaid bone, but we *do* demand a tone that rules the campfire.

With that in mind, our first stipulation was that each competitor should have a 'solid' wood top (thus sweetening the tone over time), and our second, that they follow the dreadnought shape that has always been the most popular style on the market. Here's what we managed to come up with.

### Ready, dready, go!

We may be on the brink of an economic meltdown, but it seems the guitar world is overcrowded with affordable axes that are high on

value. TG was pleased to emerge from the upper entry-level bearpit with four genuine contenders, each with its own merits. This could be the toughest Group Test to date.

We're suckers for exotic tonewoods, and that explains why Cort's classy Earth 100 QB (£299) was first in the bag, but we also like a bargain, which justifies the inclusion of Walden's very competitive Natura D710 (£255). LAG's electrics have sailed mighty close to Group Test gold in recent months, and we hoped its Winter GLA 400D (£299) might go all the way, while Freshman's promise of an all-solid acoustic in the form of the FA250D (£299) was too good to resist. On with the test... ■

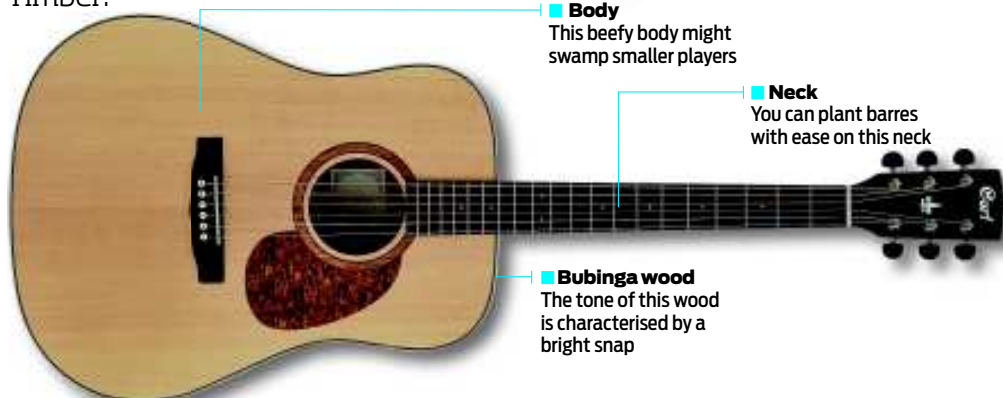
**"WE WANT AN ACOUSTIC INVESTMENT THAT WON'T BE SHELVED WHEN YOU GRADUATE FROM BEDROOM TO STAGE"**



"THE FRESHMAN FA250D NEVER MAKES YOU SWEAT OVER BARRE CHORDS OR SINGLE-NOTE RUNS"

## Cort Earth 100 QB £299

Timber!



**Body**  
This beefy body might swamp smaller players

**Neck**  
You can plant barres with ease on this neck

**Bubinga wood**  
The tone of this wood is characterised by a bright snap

### At a glance

#### Cort Earth 100 QB

**BODY:** Solid sitka spruce top, quilted bubinga body  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with dot inlays  
**FRETS:** 20  
**SCALE:** 643mm (25")  
**HARDWARE:** Die-cast  
**FINISH:** Natural gloss [pictured]  
**CONTACT:** HC Distribution 003 535 991 34268  
**WEB:** www.cort-guitars.co.uk

**T**ree-huggers would be advised to look away now, because with the Earth Series, Cort has taken a chainsaw to some of the sexiest timbers in the forest. In this case, the 'QB' stands for quilted bubinga.

**The sizzle:** Cort flags up the 100 QB's solid sitka spruce top and a 'scooped bridge' that promises greater strumming comfort, but at a price point where acoustic bodies tend to be laminate mahogany, it's no



surprise the big talk is reserved for the bubinga. Cort reckons this Cental American hard and heavy timber is both "beautiful" and offers "tonal qualities very close to Indian rosewood". And there's no disputing the former.

**We say:** Let's forget the bubinga for a moment. The first thing that strikes you is the girth of this bruiser. Dreads are hefty by nature, but the Earth's 121mm rim depth and 400mm width make this feel like peering over a wardrobe. Good thing that Cort's comfort claims ring true, with barre chords ringing out without the usual agony, and a generous string spacing leaving plenty of room for fingerpickers.

As you'd hope, the Earth's mighty size translates into some serious welly, but tonally the

bubinga doesn't have as much impact as the spruce. Hitting this baby with a pick results in serious brightness and jangle; we actually think it sounds better when you apply fleshy fingertips and dig out a darker, less biting tonality. It's more than worthy of consideration, but we won't be blowing our wad just yet.

### SUMMARY

**For:** Mighty volume and ringing tone

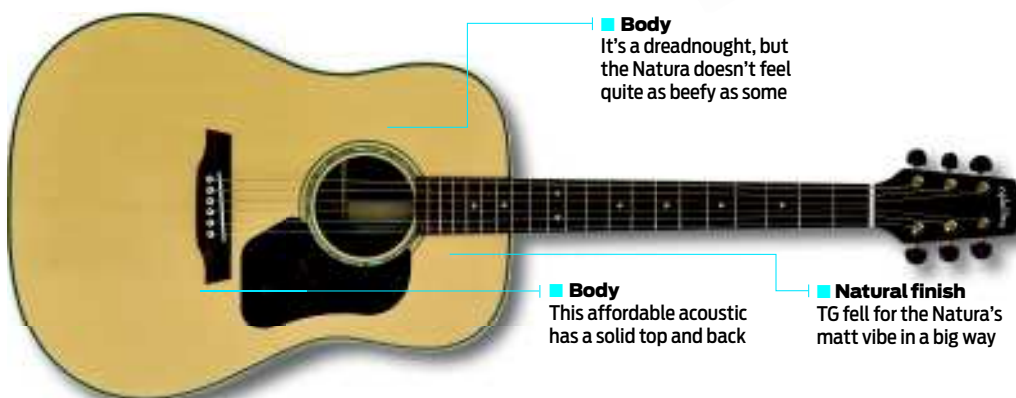
**Against:** Very big and quite biting

★★★★☆

**TG says:** The earth *almost* moved

## Walden Natura D710 £255

The call of Natura



**Body**  
It's a dreadnought, but the Natura doesn't feel quite as beefy as some

**Body**  
This affordable acoustic has a solid top and back

**Natural finish**  
TG fell for the Natura's matt vibe in a big way

### At a glance

#### Walden Natura D710

**BODY:** Solid Engelmann spruce top, solid Indian rosewood back, rosewood sides  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with dot inlays  
**FRETS:** 20  
**SCALE:** 643mm (25")  
**HARDWARE:** Gold  
**FINISH:** Natural [pictured]  
**CONTACT:** FCN Music 01892 603733  
**WEB:** www.waldenguitars.com

**L**ike a school playground, the acoustic market is ruled by the old boys, making it even more impressive that Walden has planted a firm foothold since it started trading in 1996.

**The sizzle:** Below a certain price you'll get lumbered with laminates, so it's great to find the Natura's £44 advantage over its rivals doesn't come at the cost of the all-important solid Engelmann spruce top.



"Like ageing a fine wine," reckons Walden, "the more you play a Natura, the better it sounds. The tone improves as the natural wood fibres resonate and respond to your musical style."

**We say:** Offering a matt finish where its rivals are lacquered to the nuts, and built with attention to detail, the Natura never feels like a compromise. It's classic dreadnought territory, but the D710 is more compact than the Cort, and pint-size players should find themselves cruising on a smooth and manageable neck. You'll work to get fingerstyle to ring out, but it's worth it.

With its tight, crisp tone of the spruce fusing with the dark muscle of the rosewood, and a

bit more mid-range punch than the Cort, TG feels the Natura delivers at most styles from acoustic blues to smooth jazz. It's great for crashing through open chords, but also offers a lush, fluid sustain that implies a more expensive instrument. A belter, but not quite the best.

### SUMMARY

**For:** Price, cool vibe, quality tone

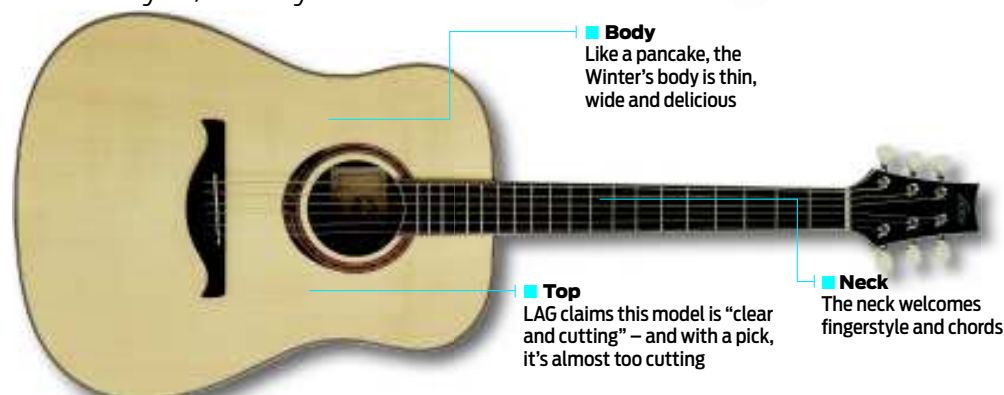
**Against:** You can't quibble at £255

★★★★☆

**TG says:** Great value sounds

## LAG Winter GLA 400D £299

Ice to see you, to see you ice



### At a glance

#### LAG Winter GLA 400D

**BODY:** Solid spruce top, Indian rosewood back and sides  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**FINGERBOARD:** Indian rosewood  
**FRETS:** 20  
**SCALE:** 643mm (25")  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome  
**FINISH:** Natural satin [pictured]  
**CONTACT:** Barnes & Mullins 01691 652449  
**WEB:** www.lagguitars.co.uk

**R**ecent tests have confirmed the French luthier knows its onions when it comes to electrics, but TG was intrigued by the seasonal theme of LAG's acoustics. Seeing as we're miserable sods, we chose Winter.

**The sizzle:** LAG is sticking with the seasonal metaphor. "Winter is crisp, clear and cutting," trumpets the website. "The highest quality solid spruce tops and Indian rosewood bodies give a tone that is bright, precise



and sharp... The Winter models will grow in tonal quality and playability for years to come."

**We say:** First impression is the LAG's distinctive shape, with a 100mm depth and 402mm

diameter making this both the slimmest *and* the widest in the group. This works pretty well though, getting us close to the fretboard without compromising the ferocious natural volume that is a dreadnought's calling card. It's a fluid, unfussy performer, and works particularly well with hybrid picking and fingerstyle.

But LAG wasn't kidding when it promised us "crisp, clear and cutting". Mellow this model is not, with the use of a pick delivering a tone that is arrestingly twangy and thrillingly

biting for bluesgrass, but maybe lacking a little warmth for lazy strumming. For live use, LAG also produces a cutaway version with a piezo so you can fatten the tone via an amp, which just adds to the many things we love about this acoustic. Maybe we should chill out. Overall, the Winter is one cool customer.

### SUMMARY

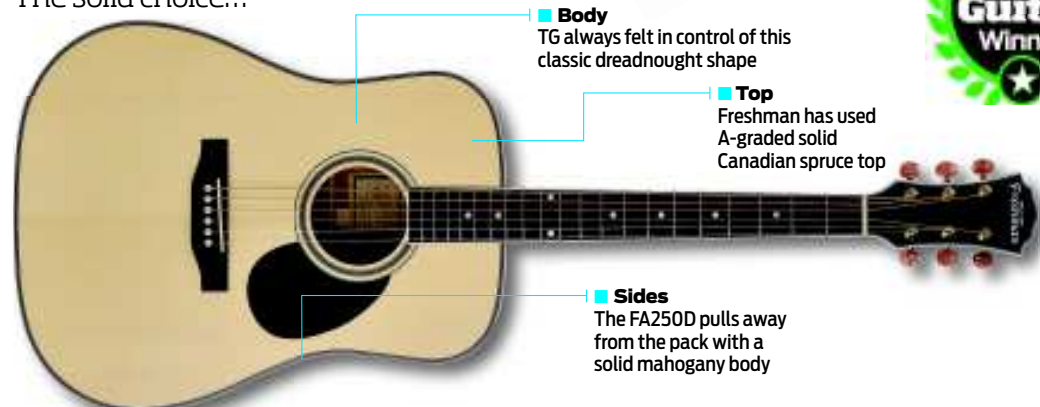
**For:** Manageable and tonally crisp  
**Against:** More warmth might be nice

★★★★☆

**TG says:** It's a belter: snow joke

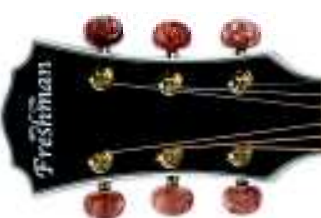
## Freshman FA250D £299

The solid choice...



**G**lasgow luthier Freshman puts its success since 2002 down to "listening to what our customers want". Of course, what everyone *really* wants is an all-solid acoustic, and that's why they created the FA250D.

**The sizzle:** Freshman founder Sean Kelly reckons the FA250D has "a bit more meat on the bone than your average acoustic" and cites the all-solid graded tonewoods in evidence. We've



got an attractive soundboard of solid A-grade Canadian spruce, backed by select mahogany, cut into a textbook dreadnought shape and furnished with minimal bells and whistles.

**We say:** Freshman's involvement at every stage of the process explains the tidy execution and watertight performance. On the lap, it's deep enough to satisfy purists, but that neck is no baseball bat, and never makes you sweat over barre chords or more complex single-note runs.

Solid woods take time to 'bed in', but the FA250D already sounds sweet to these ears. This model reminds you why spruce and mahogany is a classic partnership, combining a warm

old-school 'boom' with a keen top end that ensures you never descend into campfire slush. Strum a chord and you hear individual notes ring out; pick one note and you hear the character.

We started this Group Test looking for an acoustic that'd grow with us. This is the one.

### SUMMARY

**For:** Tidy execution, balanced tone  
**Against:** It doesn't leap off the shelf

★★★★★

**TG says:** It's fresh, man