



Words Ed Mitchell / Photography Neil Godwin

BIGSBY-LOADED RETRO ROCKERS

The Bigsby True Vibrato is the ultimate in vintage cool. Meet four guitars playing host to the iconic whammy bar...



It might be a pensioner but, like Rolling Stone Mick Jagger, the Bigsby True Vibrato is still doing the business, and using its wiggle stick to devastating effect. The first truly functional vibrato unit, the Bigsby was the brain child of Paul A Bigsby, inventor, motorcycle racer and guitar tweaking genius. Bigsby began perfecting his vibrato in the mid to late 40s and by the following decade his design was a feature on Fender Telecasters and numerous Gibson and Epiphone guitars. That said, the True Vibrato's most iconic partnership was with the Gretsch catalogue

where it was offered as an upgrade on Duo Jets and G6120 Chet Atkins models.

These days, a Bigsby is an easy way for manufacturers to give their wares some authentic vintage cool. Which brings us to the guitars in this group test. The Yamaha Revstar RS720B, Gretsch Electromatic G5420T, Italia Modena Challenge and Höfner Verythin Bigsby Mod – all of which are packing Licensed Bigsby units. Each one of these guitars benefit from the tone and sustain boost you expect from a Bigsby, not to mention that famous aesthetic beauty. The question is, which of these modern classics wears its historic hardware best?



YAMAHA REVSTAR RS720B

Carry that weight... **£976**

First impressions?

The RS720B is the undisputed heavyweight champion in this line-up. Your plucky Gretsch, Italia and Höfner contenders average a little under 3.6kg (8lbs) apiece. That's in the same ballpark as an alder-bodied Fender Telecaster. The Yamaha tips the scales at a heftier 4.1kg (9.1lbs). You'd expect those sort of numbers from a Gibson Les Paul Standard.

Why would I want a heavier guitar?

Well, the extra beef doesn't hurt when you're talking about tone.



Add in the RS720B's solid mahogany and flame maple tonewoods, set-neck construction and the chunky Licensed Bigsby B50 vibrato anchoring the strings and you wind up with a guitar brandishing some incredible sustain.

The pickups have a real Gretsch vibe...

Yeah, the humbuckers have slotted covers to echo the eye candy of a classic Gretsch Filter'Tron. What's really interesting is how these pickups are voiced. They could have chiselled in any old set of 'buckers. Instead, Yamaha has under-wound these things to get as much vintage-style warmth and clarity as possible.

AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Double cutaway solid mahogany body w/ maple top and flame maple veneer, three-piece mahogany neck, 349mm radius rosewood fingerboard, 22 jumbo frets, 609mm scale, 2x low output Alnico V humbuckers, volume, tone with push/pull 'Dry Switch' coil split, three-way pickup selector blade switch, brushed steel tune-a-matic bridge Bigsby B50 True Vibrato
FINISH: Vintage Japanese Denim, Ash Gray, Wall Fade, Shop Black
CONTACT: uk.yamaha.com



GRETSCH ELECTROMATIC G5420T

Dirty deeds done reasonably cheap **£669**

Pretty guitar. Shame I don't play rockabilly stuff, really...

Countless guitar nerds miss out on the joy of a Gretsch because they typecast stuff like the G5420T as rockabilly machines. Lest ye forget, Malcolm Young of AC/DC plied his trade on Gretsch Jet and White Falcon guitars. Pete Townshend of The Who also played a big-bodied Gretsch G6120 on the band's *Who's Next* and *Quadrophenia* albums. Those guys didn't play rockabilly.

Is this based on a particular vintage model?

Yes, indeed it is. The G5420T is a tribute to the iconic G6120, the



guitar that was beloved by Stray Cat maestro Brian Setzer, doomed rocker Eddie Cochran and Nashville shredder Chet Atkins. Like its ancestor this guitar has the maple-ply hollow body, oversized f-holes and, of course, a Bigsby, in this instance a Licensed B60 model.

So, is it possible for me to get a decent rock tone out of those pickups?

Hell, yes! The Blacktop Filter'Tron humbuckers on offer here combine that classic Gretsch twang with some modern tonal girth. They'll go from rockabilly to AC/DC without breaking a sweat.

AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Single cutaway laminated maple hollow body, set maple neck, 304mm radius rosewood fingerboard, 624mm scale, 2 x Black Top Filter'Tron humbuckers, Bigsby B60, 2 x volume, master volume, master tone, three-way pickup selector toggle switch
FINISH: Fairlane Blue, Orange Stain, Aspen Green, Candy Apple Red
CONTACT: gretschguitars.com



HÖFNER VERYTHIN BIGSBY MOD

Mod grooves in delirious ways

£649

I get it. This is the perfect guitar for Brexit voters...

Maybe, but this Höfner's model designation isn't just a clever name. The RAF roundel concealing much of this Verythin guitar's top is designed to attract the Mod crowd. It evokes memories of pimped Lambretta scooters.

So, what's the skinny on the actual guitar beneath the marketing bumpf?

Skinny couldn't be more apt. Born in the swinging 60s, the Verythin was German brand Höfner's answer to the Gibson ES-335. Like its



illustrious US inspiration, the Verythin has a semi-acoustic body with a solid centre-block. The big difference is that the Höfner looks like it's been on a low-carb diet. It's sides are just 32mm deep.

Is it built in Germany?

Not at this price point. Höfner do produce stuff in Deutschland, specifically the handcrafted 500/1 Violin bass made famous by former Beatle Paul McCartney. The Bigsby Mod is made in China to a very decent standard. Oh, and you get an additional set of gold 'hat box' control knobs, just in case you're not feeling the stock black 'speed' jobs.

AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Twin cutaway semi-acoustic body with laminated spruce top and laminated maple back and sides, one-piece set maple neck, 304mm radius rosewood fingerboard, 22 medium jumbo frets, 627mm scale, 2x Höfner humbuckers with nickel covers, 2x volume, 2x tone, Bigsby B6, vintage tuners with pearloid buttons, replacement gold control knob set
FINISH: Mod target only
CONTACT: hofner.com



ITALIA MODENA CHALLENGE

Is there an Eko in here?

£799

I didn't know that Austin Powers designed guitars...

Actually, British guitar guru Trev Wilkinson is the bloke behind the Italia brand. The groovy Modena Challenge references the bonkers offset body creations set loose by Eko in Italy and Teisco in Japan back in the 1960s. We should also say that Italia build quality is significantly higher than the old school curios that have inspired them.

All show and no go then?

Nope. The Modena Challenge is high spec with its German-carved



Korina body, bolt-on maple neck and rosewood 'board. As for the metal bits, you get three mini humbuckers, an anchored tune-a-matic bridge with roller saddles and a set of locking tuners. Of course, the Challenge wouldn't be on these pages if it wasn't for its Licensed Bigsby B50 vibrato.

What's this 'German-carved' business?

Look closer and you'll see that the edges of the body are bevelled. This sculpting echoes the German carving on 60s Mosrite and high-end Rickenbacker 381 model guitars. What's the point? It looks cool. End of.

AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Offset solid korina body, bolt-on hard rock maple neck, rosewood fingerboard, 22 medium jumbo frets, 647mm scale, 3x Italia mini humbuckers, volume, tone, five-way pickup selector blade switch, anchored tune-a-matic bridge, Bigsby B50, E-Z Lock tuners, padded gigbag
FINISH: Metallic Gold Burst, Metallic Turquoise
CONTACT: jhs.co.uk



HEAD TO HEAD

Which Bigsby loaded retro rocker is a modern wonder?

In spite of the very different shadows that they cast, these four guitars actually feel quite similar. Each has a slim C profile, chunky frets and remarkably low action. Now, you might have heard that Bigsby vibratos don't stay in tune for love nor money. That's not our experience. The locking heads on our Yamaha and Italia guitars are without doubt a nice touch but we found the tuning stability just as agreeable on the non-locking Gretsch and Höfner.

For the unenlightened, it's worth nothing that a Bigsby doesn't offer anywhere near the range of a string-dumping Floyd Rose. The effect is much more subtle. Plus, the sheer chunkiness of the thing adds to the tonal depth and sustain. You can hear that in the clean tones of all four guitars. The Höfner and Gretsch guitars deliver oodles of jangle in the bridge position and bluesy warmth at the neck. The Italia has more of a fat Strat voice across its three pickups.

THE HÖFNER AND GRETSCHE DELIVER OODLES OF JANGLE IN THE BRIDGE POSITION

What about the Revstar? It's in a league of its own here. The low-output pickups reveal a sweet woody tone that's just as addictive on clean and overdriven settings. It's worth remembering that Jimi Hendrix produced most of his work via some of the lowest output pickups Fender ever produced. On the RS720B that restraint in the pickup windings means that no matter how high you crank the filth you can still hear the body and the strings. Splitting the coils makes that transparency even more, well, apparent.

While the Höfner offers familiar Gibson-like humbucker grunt, the Gretsch Filter'Tron sound is something that every guitarist should experience in their lifetime. It's like a classic humbucker only in high definition. As Malcolm Young discovered, you get a big rock sound without the wooliness inherent in some humbuckers. Bottom line... the G5420T's Black Tops are never shrill but they will punch their way out of any mix.



The build quality of the Italia Modena is higher than the 1960s curios that inspired it



Höfner's mod-styled retro rocker also comes with a spare set of 'hat box' gold knobs

FINAL VERDICT

Which retro rocker is the right one for you?

It's bloody marvellous just what you can get for under a grand these days. In fact, it's getting harder to find a true dud in the sub-£1,000 market. So, yeah, no dogs here then but we do have our pick of the litter.

There's no getting away from it. The Yamaha Revstar RS720B is a truly astonishing guitar. In what promises to be a barrage of superlatives, we have to tell you that the build quality is superb, the playability outstanding and those pickups are exceptional. It was

such a smart move for Yamaha to, er, buck the trend for overwound 'buckers and instead concentrate on lower output in exchange for increased warmth and clarity. The result is a guitar that excels at blues and classic rock tones. The Bigsby just sweetens the pot.

While we like its powerful humbucker sounds and approachable body dimensions, the Mod-friendly looks of the Höfner Verythin are obviously – pardon the pun – targeting a very specific audience. The 60s pawnshop prize style of the Italia might

divide opinion, too, yet we love the tone and playability on tap. It really is a good alternative to the ubiquitous Strat and its countless variants. And then there's the Gretsch. These Korean-made models are so good it's getting harder to tell them apart from the much more expensive Japanese Professional Series models. Of course, history tells us that a Bigsby is never happier than when it's bolted to a Gretsch but as all the contenders here can testify, this old timer can take any great guitar and make it even better.

YAMAHA REVSTAR RS720B

GRETSCH ELECTROMATIC G5420T

HÖFNER VERYTHIN BIGSBY MOD

ITALIA MODENA CHALLENGE



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

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	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

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	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★