

FIRST PLAY



MANSON META MBM-1
£569

WHAT IS IT? The latest, most affordable Matt Bellamy signature model, including two Manson humbuckers and a kill switch

Feelin' Good

If ruling the world's stadiums isn't enough, Muse's main-man Matt Bellamy now has his sights set on dominating the guitar world

Words Stuart Williams **Photography** Phil Barker

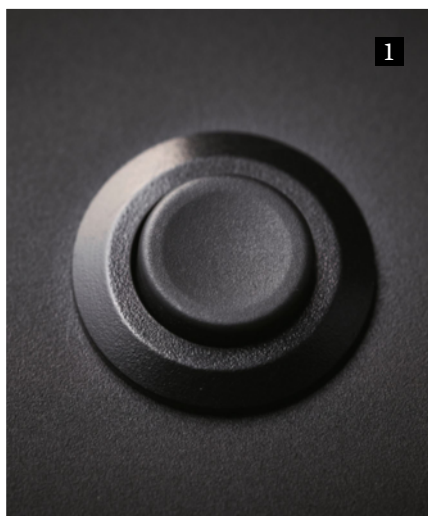
For decades, Hugh Manson's custom builds pushed what we expected from a hand-built guitar. Attention to detail and meticulous selection of woods, hardware and components all added up to some of the finest UK-made instruments to pass through *Guitarist* HQ. But there was one association in particular that put the Manson name on the tip of guitar players' tongues, and that was the long-standing relationship between Hugh, the brand and one Matthew Bellamy.

As an upstart on the scene back in the mid-to-late 90s, Bellamy frequented Mansons Guitar Shop in Exeter, acquiring his first custom-made Manson guitar after receiving his initial advance when Muse were signed. Usually, we'd say the rest is history, but as we've seen since this was simply the origin of strumm-etry...

Now, in a time where our credit cards live in fear of being wiped by the magnets of a period-correct PAF clone and where accidentally scraping the finish on our guitars simply makes them more 'vibe-y', Manson and Bellamy turned their attentions to making the guitar do things it shouldn't. "The guy that says, 'I want you to build me a Strat'. What is the point?" Hugh said in 2015. "I can sell you a perfectly good reissue of a Strat. How am I going to improve on however many million have been made already? Our challenges lie elsewhere."







1. You can't do the old 'one pickup off, one pickup on' trick with this guitar, but thankfully you can still stutter at your audience with this neatly fitted kill switch. It operates smoothly and without pops, too

2. Gone is the Cort logo in favour of a Manson one. Matt Bellamy's signature is on the headstock, too, but it's subtle enough not to be a divisive

3. One of the big differences between the MBC-1 and this Meta MBM-1 is the neck humbucker. It's beefy without being over-woolly and you can order the guitar with a coil-split direct from Manson if you like

Those challenges? How about fitting an X/Y MIDI controller into the body? Or perhaps you'd consider a ZVEX Fuzz Factory, a ribbon controller... maybe a Fernandes Sustainer and a kill switch? While we're at it, can we do lasers, too? Then we'll talk finishes...

The answer, of course, was 'yes' all round. But this level of outlandish mods and customisation doesn't lend itself to mass production, nor the kinds of price tags that put it within reach of those of us who play the pub round the corner from Wembley, rather than the stadium itself. Even Manson's limited runs of MB replicas cost more and likely feature better tech than a small run-around.

But this was finally remedied in 2015, when Manson announced a partnership with Cort guitars, known for its own superb, affordable instruments as well as being a not-so-secret OEM builder for a number of household names. The result of that partnership was the Cort/Manson MBC-1, one of the best sub-£500 guitars we saw that year, and – truth be told – for the couple following.

But that was five years ago and a lot has changed since. For one, Hugh Manson has retired, giving Matt Bellamy himself the opportunity to grab the baton as a majority shareholder in the brand, and with the help of Adrian Ashton, Tim Stark and the

Everything onboard the MBM-1 has a purpose: playability and convenience come first

Manson Guitar Works team, continue the quest for evolution.

The first playable example of this is a continuation of the Cort/Manson partnership: the MBM-1. "An Asian single-cut-ish body with a couple of humbuckers? Sounds like an evolution!" we hear you cry. Well, dig a little deeper and you'll find that this is far from a quick nudge to the bandsaw and a different logo: the Manson DNA runs thick through this one.

Starting with that body, it's cut from lightweight basswood into the classic Matt Bellamy part-T-style/part-LP outline. There's a simultaneous slabby and sleek feel to it, with the belly carve to make it comfortable. Visually, it's a smart-looking contemporary guitar, set off by the utilitarian one volume/one tone control layout and matt black finish (itself undergoing a lot of research from Hugh during the development of the MBC-1) and plenty of space. Almost like it was designed to be a blank canvas for further modding, eh?



One of the biggest changes on this model comes from the neck pickup. The MBC-1 featured a single coil in the neck position, but here it's replaced with a second Manson humbucker to offer a "fuller neck voicing to more closely match the raw and powerful sounding bridge humbucker pickup". There's the usual three-way switching, too. So far, so standard.

But this is a Matt Bellamy model. Where's the rocket launcher? We'll start by reminding you of the £569 retail price, so don't expect to take control of your keyboard player's rig just yet. That said, we'll assume you've already spotted that little button on the upper horn. That's the kill switch, one of the most simple yet addictive ways of introducing on-body effects to a guitar.

Moving on, you'll find the Canadian hard maple neck and Indian laurel fingerboard. Once again, it's an economical, minimal design without front-facing fret markers (there are dots on the side), but it is a compound 305 to 406mm (12 to 16-inch) radius, making it ideal if you make your money playing chords then blow the lot at the other end of the neck. The matching headstock completes the look, with a Manson logo – rather than the Cort logo of the MBC-1 – and on the back you'll find a set of Cort-branded locking tuners.

There are two cavities on the back of the MBM-1: one on the upper horn for



the kill switch, and one for the rest of the electronics. Intrigued to see just how those stuttering effects are implemented, we opened up both for a quick delve. The kill switch is wired in the standard way, sending the signal to ground, creating the momentary cut-out when pressed. Follow the wire back to the control cavity and you'll notice that there's plenty of space for additional batteries and wiring in there, and that those humbuckers are four-conductor, so if you wanted to split them at a later stage, you can.

4. You don't get many satin necks that also feature a compound radius and play as comfortably as this one in this price range. It's a 'soft V' profile, yet another step away from the same old standards

5. The MBM-1's chrome-finished hardware, including this tune-o-matic style bridge, contributes to its sleek, utilitarian aesthetic





TAKING CONTROL

We catch up with Manson's new Mr Big, Matt Bellamy

First up, how did your involvement on the business side of Manson Guitar Works come about?

"It really all started from Hugh retiring and him passing it on to me to keep it going. It's run by Adrian [Ashton, Manson CEO] and there's about four or five employees there. It was good timing, too, because at the time the band was finishing a tour [in 2019] and it seemed like a good time to put some focus into this. It's close to my heart because it's a small company based in Devon, where I'm from. The factory is just down the road from where I went to school. So it's nice to be part of a small business in Devon; that's my homeland."

How important is it to you to be able to offer affordable guitars via Manson?

"Over the years we had a lot of enquiries from people who just can't afford to pay the £1,800 to £2,000 for a handmade Manson. The Meta series don't always have all the electronics built in, but I'm hoping that if our collaboration with Cort goes deeper, we might be able to get some guitars with some of the more special effects stuff built in."

"We've been working with Cort – the majority of the guitars that we do are handmade in Devon – but since I've come onboard we've done a deal with Cort for a higher volume of guitars at a lower price. We design them, they manufacture them and

send them to us, then we put the electronics in, verify the guitar and send them out. So our Meta series is really our first foray into real low-priced guitars that are Manson-branded and everything."

What's next for Manson Guitar Works?

"I have lots of ideas about how to try to develop the company further, expanding it with other guitar lines. Different styles of guitars – maybe even other signature models and that kind of stuff. I always felt the company has been aimed towards metal and hard rock styles, so I'd like to expand the range to encompass vintage-style guitars, classic-style as well as modern guitars."

"We might also start doing a really high-end, precise exact replica of one of my first Manson guitars that I had made. There are two guitars that I regard as the two most special guitars that I've had, and they were made around about 20 years ago. There's the DeLorean – the one that I used on the first few tours with the band – and it has that metal, aluminium look like the DeLorean from *Back To The Future*. The other one I just used to call the 'Black Manson', but Hugh has another name for it, 007 or something. That was the first one to have all the electronics in. It had the proximity wah-wah, the phaser, it also had a ribbon control in it. I've used that guitar on pretty much every album that Muse has ever

recorded: it's like my go-to recording guitar. So we're thinking this year or next year to do a limited-edition replica as a celebration."

Will you continue to experiment with the electronics onboard?

"I've got lots of ideas around integrating technology into guitars and we keep trying to find ways to make that more cost-effective. The main thing I'm focusing on right now – my favourite effect to have built-into a guitar – is the Whammy pedal. I have all the components of that built into the guitar itself, and then I also have the Kaoss Pad as well. So, essentially, instead of having the whammy bar, I've got the X/Y controller and I can set it to anything from a divebomb to just going up or down a tone, or entire octaves. At the moment that's very expensive, but we're hoping to do a collaboration with DigiTech where we can maybe launch a guitar that has that built in."

"Up until now we've had the XY pad as a MIDI controller, and obviously you can control anything with MIDI. But some people buy the guitar thinking that they can just get effects straight out of the box; they don't realise that you actually have to plug it into something like a synth or effects unit. So what I'm keen to do is a guitar that can do something quite impressive using the XY controller straight out of the box and something like a Whammy/pitch shifter built into the guitar."



The neck plate of this bolt-on model provides a subtle reminder of the successful Cort/Manson partnership

Feel & Sounds

The MBM-1 immediately feels comfortable in our lap. The body shape and weight is agile, with everything in reach – and with so little to get in the way, it's straight to playing. The maple neck comes with an increasingly popular satin finish, and combined with the 'soft V' profile and low-action setup of our review model, this design is clearly built for comfort *and* speed. The neck leans toward the modern side, and the 'soft' part of that description is accurate. While it's noticeable, it's not a pronounced ridge like you'd find on a 50s Strat, nor is it lollipop-thin like a modern shred machine.

We tried the MBM-1 on a number of different Bellamy-inspired settings. Played clean, we're rewarded with warm but not woolly rhythm sounds. It's here that we miss that neck single coil the most, but there is still some snap and depth to the sound, at least. It's under some generous Diezel-powered gain from our UAD emulation that the bridge 'bucker really springs to life. The sound is big, thick and full of harmonics, and



Simple, considered design points don't fit at this price bracket, but they're here on this guitar, from the placement of the switches, to the future-proof control cavity, and easy tweaking of the truss rod

tuning to drop D really hits the sweet spot with our review model. Even with a fairly large amount of gain, there's still separation between the notes and it maintains its core sound. Jumping back and forth between the pickups confirms that Cort/Manson has indeed struck a great balance: the tones change, but the volume doesn't.

Not everyone is going to use this guitar on zero or 60, though, and there are some versatile tones to be found in the middle, too. While the svelte and sleek overall aesthetic doesn't conjure smoky blues tones or 'vintage mojo', it's perfectly feasible that the MBM-1 can cover you for the humbucker tones in your set.

Verdict

This price point is a savage arena. Just look at what's available from the likes of PRS, Gretsch, Fender and more for under £600 and you'll find some serious contenders vying for the mid-priced crown. There are a lot of parallels between the ideas and designs that have stemmed from Bellamy

and Manson's minds, and the ones that Eddie Van Halen implemented with his own EVH brand.

The overriding impression we got from playing the MBM-1 is that everything onboard has a purpose: playability and convenience come first, from simple time-saving features such as the exposed truss rod wheel, to the fact that the control cavity is begging to have some more electronics installed. Of course, the elephant that used to be in the room is that neck humbucker. A coil-split would make this an absolute all-rounder, but the good news is that it is still a mod you can do yourself (or Manson will oblige for an extra £55).

For Bellamy and Muse fans, this is just what they've been looking for. For those who don't necessarily like the band but still want an affordable, highly playable and great-sounding rock machine, the MBM-1 represents an open book with minimal signature association. Once we're allowed back outside, we expect to be seeing a lot of these on stages everywhere. **G**



MANSON META MBM-1

PRICE: £569

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Single-cut bolt on solidbody electric

NECK: Canadian hard maple, satin finish

SCALE LENGTH: 650mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Plastic/42mm

FINGERBOARD: Indian laurel, 305-406mm (12-16") radius

FRETS: 22

HARDWARE: Cort/Manson tuneomatic-style bridge and stopbar, Cort locking tuners – chrome-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Manson humbuckers, volume, tone, 3-position switch, kill switch

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/7.9

RANGE OPTIONS: Available via Manson Guitar Works: Manson aluminium control knob (£25), coil-split mod (£55), Sustainiac Sustainer upgrade (£369), Manson Mother Superior quad-rail pickup upgrade (£189), Manson gigbag (£45)

LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently

FINISHES: Satin Black (as reviewed), Starlight Silver

Manson Guitar Works

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www.mansonguitarworks.com

Guitarist CHOICE

9/10

PROS Slick, playable, versatile and affordable; kill switch; primed for modding but equally great as is

CONS Some would lose the kill switch in favour of a single coil or coil-split as standard