



Graphic Equalisers

Had enough of 'bursts, blacks and other boring colours? No problem: graphic guitars, and affordable ones at that, are back in a big way. Here are just four current examples from the mainstream makers **by Simon Bradley**

Such is the vibe of electric guitars that daubing them in cool graphics is almost a no-brainer. Whether it's a simple sticker modestly affixed to your Strat's vibrato cavity cover, or a gorgeous photo-realistic image of your spouse painstakingly applied by an air-brush artist, this type of customisation can really help you stand out from the crowd.

Naturally, the whole hot-rodding concept has a certain general appeal, but it's the rock and metal fraternity who've taken custom livery to their dark hearts, and these days there's no need to shell out for

unique graphics when it's never been simpler to get hold of models from familiar names that have bespoke designs ready to go.

Fender's earliest years saw several of the brand's pioneers happily paint their names on brand new Stratocasters – Johnny Meeks from Gene Vincent's Blue Caps is a good example – and even Gretsch featured the classic G-brand design as early as 1955.

However, arguably the most revered and best-known one-off graphic guitar has got to be Eric Clapton's 'Fool' Gibson SG. In 1967 Slowhand

commissioned two Dutch artists, Simon Posthuma and Marijke Koger, to paint the guitar – it went on to raise \$150,000 at auction in 2000 for its then-owner Todd Rundgren.

It's not all about classic hand-painted and air-brushed designs, though. The clever application of a transfer, or decal as our US friends prefer, gives the appearance of an expensive paint job at a fraction of the cost and, back in the nineties, Fender even brought out the short-lived Foto Flame series, which saw a piece of photographic film shrink-wrapped around a guitar's top

to simulate the look of flamed maple – an innovative idea that worked very well indeed, though it failed to catch on.

Most guitarists will have visited the websites of the best known custom shops to look at and pore over the results of what months of design and artwork by those companies can produce, but if you were hoping to get hold of a genuine one-off for anything less than a five-figure sum, you'll be sorely disappointed. Just visit the gallery section of both Fender and ESP's custom shop sites for a real feast for the eyes, but we daren't even tell you how much the Fender 'Rack 'Em Up' Telecaster costs...

These four models on review, however, are all available for well under that sort of price, yet each offers eye-catching graphics as well as a decent spec and performance. A one-off design can take many months from you placing your order to you receiving your guitar. That's understandable, but these four are all available off the peg, right now. >



Dean Razorback Cemetery Gates

£999

The Cemetery Gates design that adorns this guitar – produced by Dean’s Tampa facility and applied to the standard Razorback body prior to the final finishing process – is a tribute to the Pantera song of the same name from their breakthrough *Cowboys From Hell* album. Up close, the chilling design works perfectly, and the faux granite outline, not to mention various Dimebag touches hidden within the picture itself, make this as classy as such an instrument is likely to get: the poignancy of the design isn’t lost on any DD fan either.

Pickups include Dimebag’s signature Seymour Duncan SH-13 in the bridge with Dean’s own HB-1 in the neck. The latter is, as you’d expect, swathed in black tape a la Dime’s original ML and the two volume pots bear the ingenious high-grip Traction knobs.

Admittedly, the numerous body points make any

Razorback a guitar to contend with, but we’re happy to report that the neck here bears the gorgeous soft ‘V’-profile akin to those lauded Deans of the late seventies: lovely.

Sounds

The bridge Duncan is among that company’s hottest humbuckers and, as well as providing biting rhythm tone, it also enables solos to really cut through with an almost unmatched level of aggression. The slightly more subtle HB-1 gives the guitar an increased level of versatility, but we assume that subsequent versions of the guitar will feature Dean’s DimeTime HB in the neck position.

The over-the-top cutaway gives perfect access to all frets and, although almost a dangerous weapon when played standing up, the Razorback is well balanced. Don’t turn around too quickly on-stage, though, as you could easily spear your bassist...

Jackson DK2T Skulls

£649

This particular design, unsurprisingly dubbed ‘Pile O’Skulls’, is among the most popular Jackson’s Custom Shop has ever produced. Designed and applied to thousands of orders by genial air-brush artist Dan Lawrence – a Jackson alumnus since 1984, who has plied his sprays for many of the big names of US guitar manufacture – the image is pure hard rock kitsch.

Of all four models present here, this DK2 is the only one that features genuine air-brush work. The main image – the skulls, trees and grass stems – are courtesy of a body-wide decal, but the myriad highlighting that’s present along the branches and inside the skulls’ nasal cavities looks to have been carried out by hand: not bad for a guitar at this price point.

The two-piece maple neck has that wondrous custom feel, its high, square edges working perfectly with a wide and flat

profile. The Dinky body shape, ‘snowdrift’ inlays and, of course, 24 massive frets, are Jackson trademarks, and the duo of Seymour Duncan humbuckers – a TB-4 JB Trembucker unit in the bridge and an SH-2N Jazz in the neck – are controlled by single volume and tone controls, plus a three-way lever selector.

Sounds

Although a hard-tail, the provision of a Trembucker does slightly increase the pickup’s magnetic field, thus giving a more even pull to the strings and a more balanced sound. In practical terms, the basic hard rock tone is as close to perfect as you get at this price point. There’s plenty of bite here, without chords becoming too harsh, and the sheer expanse of warmth is impressive.

Gorgeous to play, this guitar genuinely possesses a Custom Shop vibe without the wallet-busting asking price: good news in these cash-strapped times.



Schecter C-1 Propaganda £549

The 100 examples of this eye-popping C-1 made available in the US have already sold out, so you'll need to act quick if you want one of the even fewer UK models. It's certainly distinctive, with its black, cream and blood red graphics courtesy of artist Bryan Wickman.

Applied by decal, the images of soldiers in gas masks, ruined buildings and a hand in the 'stop' position are certainly thought-provoking, and even though the image is a little rough and ready around its outline, the guitar looks amazing. The vibe is continued up the rosewood 'board via a series of red and black split-crown inlays, to a headstock adorned with two baleful eyes.

The neck itself, the maple of which has been stained a vintage honey, is suitably wide and thin, and boasts 24 extra-jumbo frets for maximum playing freedom. With a pretty decent set-up out of the box and some cool body contouring

both on the front and rear faces, the C-1 is a doddle to play – a rather dry-looking fingerboard notwithstanding.

Electrics include two passive EMG-HZ H4 humbuckers, each controlled by a separate volume pot, master tone and a three-way toggle.

Sounds

Although a passive EMG set, there's still that classic active-style cut on all pickup settings. Of course, the fact that each pickup possesses a dedicated volume control makes this a versatile axe, and setting the neck pickup cleanly – even with a gain-soaked amp the tone is just fine – does give more potential for adding dynamics to songs and phrases even when away from your amp switcher...

The three controls are quite close together, which does make grappling for the bridge pickup's volume, sited centrally in the trio, very tricky at times.

Washburn SI-61 £399

This Washburn is among the least costly official signature models we've ever come across. It's one of a number of models that bear the scrawl of Anthrax thrasher-in-chief Scott Ian, and it's not dissimilar to his previous Jackson JJ models and has something of the Gibson SG about it. Indeed, its fairly small double cutaways wouldn't look out of place on a vintage SG and its hefty mahogany body, although reassuringly weighty, makes it perfectly feasible to run about the stage like a mad thing with it.

The Obey graphic is a full-body decal and features the unmistakable visage of legendary wrestler André The Giant (from artist Shepard Fairey's equally legendary sticker campaign from the mid 1980s) alongside a skull that also bears the modern Anthragram logo. The latter symbol is dotted as neck inlays and the work here has been carried out acceptably.

Impressively at this price, the guitar features the Buzz Feiten Tuning System and the neck is wide, thin and comfortable to play. The fretwork is a little on the rough side at times and the finishing a tad untidy, but we can live with it.

Sounds

Pickups comprise the Randall Ultra set that's become the standard fixture for many of Washburn's rockier guitars, and they do provide a huge output designed for extreme rock and metal styles.

Controlled by a single volume, tone and three-way toggle, a classic metal rhythm crunch is huge indeed, with a very efficient cut due, in part, to the proximity of the bridge 'bucker to the bridge itself.

The tone has a real edge to it, more so than even the Dean, and the neck pickup here could just as easily be roped in for genuine rhythm sections rather than for a smoother tone prior to the main riff.



The rivals

ESP's LTD Screaming Skull

(£1,099) is part of the new Graphic Series that includes the awesome Clockwork Zombie guitars and this eye-popping beauty is what mainstream custom guitars are about. With a perfectly applied decal, a single EMG-81 and an obscenely playable neck it's pure joy. The **Vintage VS6MRF 'Fool'** (£799) is an affordable tribute to Clapton's famous Gibson SG from Trev Wilkinson and Co. As well as matching the original's Apple Boutique mural, plenty of mahogany and two Wilkinson 'buckers provide some great tones. Take two stunning designs from Swiss artist HR Geiger, apply them to an Ibanez Iceman and you have a diamond of a guitar – the **Ibanez ICHRG2 Geiger** (£749). Although limited, we've found a few still for sale. We're sorely tempted... One of a growing number of KK models, the **BC Rich Kerry King Wartribe One** (£380) features super-hot red and black Wartribe graphics on a basswood Warlock body alongside a Kahler Hybrid double-locking vibrato and a pair of equally toasty BDSM humbuckers. Be afraid...

Epiphone's 'Emily The Strange' G-310 (£280) brings the spooky cartoon girl to your axe and the dark imagery of her world is perfectly suited to a graphic guitar. She can also transform into a cat, apparently, so there's a feline vibe to the livery, which makes for a guitar both you and your little sister will appreciate. The **Squier Obey Graphic Telecaster's** (£269) faux aged hardware, pays affordable homage to a £7,899 Custom Shop model. Bedecked with unique Shepard Fairey graphics it's proof – again – that the Tele is the coolest guitar ever made. A pair of Duncan Designed humbuckers and the traditional switching options give plenty of tonal versatility too.

Final Thoughts

They've been rocked, they've been rolled, but do these decal'd doom-bringers really provide the tone to back up their outré looks?

As this modest collection surely proves, there are some wonderful guitars with graphics out there that don't have to cost the earth. A decal may not have the uniqueness of a hand-painted or air-brushed guitar, but the detail this type of application provides is pin-sharp.

By far the most complex of the designs here is Dean's Cemetery Gates. Covering the whole expanse of the body's front face and chock full of subtle elements and hidden signs, it doesn't just say metal but screams it from the rooftops. The guitar has a massive yet strident tone that's more versatile than we'd assumed before plugging in, and that soft 'V'-profile neck will always have a firm place in our hearts.



The application of Jackson's Pile O'Skulls design to a classic Dinky body is unique here for also including genuine swishes of air-brush and echoes of a true Custom Shop design, right down to the playability of the two-piece bound maple neck. The brace of Duncan pickups ensure it's perfectly suited to virtually all styles, although you might need more bite for ultra-metal shenanigans.

A limited edition Schecter C-1 may seem like a contradiction, but with it being restricted to just 100 pieces in the US and even fewer in the UK, this Propaganda version will have players reaching for their credit cards at an RRP of under £600. The passive EMG pickups still give that polarising abrasion to rhythm and solo sections and



separate volume pots certainly up the versatility stakes.

We were very impressed by the Washburn. Not only does it offer a truly terrifying crunch from both Randall humbuckers, but it plays well too, thanks to its compact shape. And although it bears visual accoutrements from Scott Ian – it's his signature model after all – they're subtle enough not to put anyone off. If you're in need of an eye-catching spare guitar for your metal gigs, you could do a great deal worse...

We've thoroughly enjoyed getting to grips with each guitar we've featured here and they all have their own merits, with very little for us to moan about. Is beauty the sole domain of the beholder? Take a closer look at these great guitars, then you decide...



The bottom line

Dean Razorback Cemetery Gates

We liked: The gorgeous soft 'V' neck profile; killer sounds; looks great
We disliked: Not much. It might be just too spiky...
Guitarist says: The Razorback is already a classic design in metal circles and the quality Cemetery Gates graphic just adds more appeal



Dean Razorback Cemetery Gates

PRICE: £999 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Korea
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, set, 629mm scale, 43mm locking nut
FINGERBOARD: 22-fret rosewood
HARDWARE: Licensed Floyd Rose double-locking vibrato, Grover tuners, all black chrome
ELECTRICS: Seymour Duncan Dimebucker SH-13 (bridge) and Dean HB-1 (neck), two volumes, one tone, three-way toggle
OPTIONS: The range starts with the Razorback DB at £449. USA Razorbacks with graphic finishes start at around £3,759
FINISHES: The Razorback is available in many different standard and custom finishes, see website for details
Bill Lewington
01268 413366
www.deanguitars.uk.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Jackson DK2T Skulls

We liked: A great guitar with near-classic graphic
We disliked: The Duncans could possibly be too subdued for full-on metal styles
Guitarist says: An extremely competitively priced guitar that offers a real Custom Shop vibe. The graphic also offers genuine air-brush work – impressive at the price



Jackson DK2T Skulls

PRICE: £649 (inc case)
ORIGIN: Japan
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on, 648mm scale, 43mm nut
FINGERBOARD: 24-fret rosewood
HARDWARE: Jackson JT390 tune-o-matic-style bridge
ELECTRICS: Seymour Duncan TB-4 JB Trembucker (bridge) and SH-2N Jazz (neck), volume, tone, three way blade selector
OPTIONS: JS20 Dinky (£299) up to USA Select DK1 graphic (£2,479.99)
FINISHES: The Dinky is available in many different standard and custom finishes. See website for details
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.jacksonguitars.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Schecter C-1 Propaganda

We liked: Admirable sonic performance; unusual and very cool graphic
We disliked: Cramped controls and dry fingerboard
Guitarist says: The C-1 range is among Schecter's most sought-after and this limited edition will prove very popular. Good marks for not hiking the price too far



Schecter C-1 Propaganda

PRICE: £549
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Maple, bolt-on, 648mm scale, GraphTech Tusq nut
FINGERBOARD: 24-fret rosewood
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic-style bridge, Schecter logo'd tuners, all black
ELECTRICS: EMG-HZ H4 (bridge) and H4A (neck), two volume, tone, three-way toggle
OPTIONS: The standard C-1 is £499, with the seven-string version costing £549. The Devil Spine, boasting genuinely disturbing graphics, is £649
FINISHES: Propaganda graphic only. The C-1 range is available in many different standard finishes. See website for details
Westside
0141 248 4812
www.schecterguitars.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Washburn SI-61

We liked: Huge dirty tone; compact body and fret access; cool graphic
We disliked: A couple of rough frets; no additional volume pot
Guitarist says: Great value and with a huge tone that's just the thing for hard rock and metal, this Washburn is the surprise of the bunch – even if you don't like Anthrax



Washburn SI-61

PRICE: £399 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, bolt-on, 629mm scale, 42mm nut
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic-style bridge, Grover tuners, all chrome
ELECTRICS: Randall Ultra XL (bridge) and UL humbuckers (neck), volume, tone, three-way toggle
OPTIONS: The blood-soaked Custom Shop WV540ASI costs £2,299, while the more modest US SI-70 Standard is £1,199. The silver SI-75 Pro is £1,999, while the SI-60 in Murder Weapon red is £369
FINISHES: Black with Obey graphic decal only
Sound Technology
01462 480000
www.washburn.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★