

ESP LTD SNAKEBYTE ~~£1,199~~
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL GODWIN



ESP LTD SnakeByte £1,199

The latest James Hetfield signature reaffirms his love of radical designs and ferocious tones *by Simon Bradley*

Over the years, Guitarist has been fortunate to get its mitts on many of the ESP James Hetfield signature guitars that have been made, often in limited numbers, for the metal-loving public. Although we missed out on the JH-1 – a Flying V with pinstriped neon flames – we were successful in securing the magnificent JH-2, an Explorer topped with steel diamond plate, as well as the Les Paul-flavoured JH-3, Truckster and Iron Cross. We even got to grips with The Grynych – a monstrous baritone model resplendent in neon green flames.

The vibe and design of all these guitars reflect Hetfield's passion for sleek hotrods and customised hogs, and the SnakeByte is a brand new body design for ESP that's equal parts Ibanez Destroyer, Ibanez Iceman and Gibson Explorer. Best of all, as well as featuring in the full Japanese-made ESP catalogue, it's also being made under the LTD banner with no reported restrictions on production numbers.

Available in this snow white or a gloss black finish, the body is mahogany and features some subtle contouring, not least a slight forearm taper and some minimal sanding inside the lower cutaway and on the upper horn. The curved back edge echoes the serpentine theme – also a concept Hetfield came up with – and, as a whole, the guitar is well turned out.

Pickups comprise Hetfield's usual active EMG humbuckers – an 81 in the bridge and a 60 in the neck (the JH Set – see boxout – wasn't quite ready to roll when the SnakeByte went into full production) – and a TonePros bridge and tailpiece plus Sperzel tuners keep everything secure and in tune.

The neck is lovely to get to grips with: a flat-backed 'U'-shape that boasts a slippery ebony 'board loaded with 22 perfectly finished frets and an eye-catching pearloid inlay. A bone nut, sleek headstock and brand new logo tops off what is a very nice instrument indeed.

Sounds

Of course, after plugging in any signature model the first thing you always do is see how close you can get to the tone of the player in question, if only to see if its recreation is even practical in the real world. Hetfield has used Mesa/Boogie amps for the majority of his career and the bite of the active EMG 81 bridge pickup hitting a Boogie's high-gain mode takes you straight to the tonal ballpark.

Hetfield tends to use his custom SnakeByte for the modern songs in the band's live set, but there's more to the Metallica rhythm tone than

The bite of the bridge EMG 81 hitting a Boogie's high-gain mode takes you straight to the Hetfield ballpark



Functions as a peghead, looks like a velociraptor, feels a bit GTI

The Rivals

The legendary **Gibson Explorer** (approx £1,099) remains as cool as ever – it's the original ugly duckling that turned into a hard rockin' swan. **Hamer's XT Standard** (£440) is one of many Explorer-alikes, and offers a good value-for-money option. The **Dean** signature of Hetfield's former bandmate Dave Mustaine, the **Zero** (£999), is another modern spec take on the Explorer that's perfect for metal.

simply setting the amp drive to full and reducing the mids, as the saturating gain is nothing without clarity and bottom end. The SnakeByte's big mahogany body gives the oomph, with the 81 providing the high-end cut and, together with the Boogie's 6L6-loaded power stage, the tone is truly crushing yet perfectly distinct.

Although revered as one of rock's greatest ever rhythm players, Hetfield's no slouch up the dusty end either, and lead



The rather serpentine 12th-fret inlay

EMG JH Set £264.95

CONTACT: Selectron
PHONE: 01795 419460
WEB: www.emgpickups.com

James Hetfield first began working with EMG on his signature humbuckers in 2009. They differ in looks from Hetfield's long-standing 81/60 combination in that they each boast a row of visible polepieces – ceramic for the neck pickup and steel for the bridge – and also ultra-smart black nickel covers. Hetfield specified a 'stealth' vibe, a brief that has clearly been met.

The boxed set comes with all the necessary leads and components required for EMG's convenient solderless installation system, and if you already have modern incarnations of EMG pickups installed on your guitar, snapping the JH Set into place takes about 10 minutes or so.

Sounds

Although there is a discernible tonal difference, the JH Set doesn't necessarily sound better or worse: it's a decision for the player. The bridge unit is certainly exceedingly hot, but the rhythm tone is tighter and rounder than the 81, allowing single-note runs on the lower

strings to be clearer. The neck humbucker is a higher output than the 60 and the proud ceramic-loaded coils give more of an edge to both driven and clean tones. But it can become a little harsh with too much treble EQ and, if we're honest, we'd swap out the bridge 81 for a JH-B, but leave the neck-mounted 60 in situ.

Verdict

It's a shame that ESP and EMG didn't arrange their production schedules more closely in order to equip the SnakeByte right out of the box but, to get even closer to Hetfield's contemporary roar, the EMG JH set is a must-buy. For us, though, the additional cost is a lot to swallow.

We like: Cool, stealthy look; ease of installation

We dislike: The extra cost required to fit them to your nice new LTD SnakeByte

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

lines sear and cut with clarity and ferocity.

The neck-loaded 60, although still a high-output pickup, is better balanced, so you get the warmth of, say, a Les Paul but with plenty of cut in the high mid-range that gives clean passages just the right sound. Adding more gain simply increases the girth and, even with Metallica levels of amp gain, it never mashes up.

We also had the chance to test the guitar through a Roland JC-120, a combo that Metallica use to obtain their iconic recorded clean tone live, and the neck pickup is perfect in this application. Almost acoustic in nature, the trick is to have as little chorus dialled in as possible while retaining the sonic spread – the pickup does the rest.

For more subdued gain settings, the mahogany continues to temper the sharp treble edge inherent of the active pickups. If you actually wanted to play blues on the SnakeByte, the neck pickup is the one that gives the best mix of natural body and treble – the 81 is just too hot for traditional old school tones.

Verdict

The SnakeByte isn't going to win any versatility awards, but it is an attractive mix of a great neck, sleek looks and massive metal tones. The association with Hetfield won't do its appeal any harm either. Some guitars can realistically be used in all manner of situations, but that's not the case with the SnakeByte. It's a sleek machine of metal and doesn't care who knows it, and the albatross-like associations inherent with owning any signature model notwithstanding, this is an excellent modern guitar at a more than reasonable price. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Build; decent price; playability; crushing yet clear metal tones

We dislike: No choice of Hetfield signature pickups

Guitarist says: A pure metal beast, this brings Hetfield's axe closer to the masses

**Guitarist
CHOICE**



ESP LTD SnakeByte

PRICE: £1,199
ORIGIN: Korea
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, set
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Ebony, 12-14-inch compound radius
FRETS: 22 extra jumbo
HARDWARE: TonePros locking tune-o-matic bridge and stop tail, Sperzel locking tuners – all black
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: EMG 81 (bridge) and 60 (neck), with volume pot for each and three-way toggle
WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 3.81/8.4
OPTIONS: ESP SnakeByte (£2,099)
RANGE OPTIONS: ESP Truckster (£1,985), LTD Truckster (£1,099), ESP KH-2 SE (£3,299), ESP LX (£1,615), LTD EX-401FM (£849), LTD EX-360 (£699), LTD EX-50 (£299)
FINISHES: Snow white (as reviewed), gloss black
Selectron
01795 419460
www.espguitars.co.uk

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★