

Words Ed Mitchell Photography Jesse Wild

# MID-PRICED METAL MACHINES!

If you're looking for a killer shred machine, and have 500 quid smouldering in your pocket, here are four guitars that prove you've never had it so good...

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Once upon a time, if you wanted to play metal you had to pick from what was available. Heavy merchants such as Tony Iommi of Black Sabbath and Eddie Van Halen made their bones on old Gibson SGs and ES-335s. It wasn't long until they started noticing the limitations of their gear and the tweaking began. Iommi spec'd a 24-fret guitar. Eddie ripped the humbucker from his old Gibson and chiselled it into a Strat body. By the 80s, the humbucker-loaded, 24-fret, Floyd Rose vibrato-equipped electric was all the go. Three of the four guitars in our group test are direct descendants of those 80s 'SuperStrats'. The Jackson X Series Soloist, LTD F-200FR and BC Rich Mockingbird – the latter a pimped 70s design – feature basswood bodies, powerful 'buckers and your classic double-looking Floyd Rose. The fourth guitar, the Fret-King Esprit V, is more like the old-school metal planks – in particular the Gibson Explorer – first employed by the original 70s hairies. Not everyone wants a Floyd, so we've included the Esprit to show the range of metal machinery available. Shredding is our business... and business is good! It's time to unleash the beasts... ➔





## JACKSON X SERIES SOLOIST

£600

Ageless 80s classic that still stuns...

### This thing has a real 'hair metal' vibe...

Indeed. The Soloist is one of the most iconic shred machines of the 80s – an era when spandex wasn't just for cyclists, but also when we witnessed some great leaps forward in guitar development. This is exemplified by our Soloist's ultra-thin compound radius neck, 24 fat frets, active EMG humbuckers and double-locking Floyd Rose.

### The neck is a lollipop stick, huh?

Thin as the walls in a new-build flat. Jackson call this its 'speed neck'. A real shredder's delight, it's reinforced with graphite rods to



add stability. Add in the Floyd vibrato's locking shenanigans and you won't knock this thing out of tune without dropping it off a block of flats...

### But does it sound as good as it feels?

The iconic EMG 81/85 pickup pairing may come across as bland on a clean setting, but crank up the gain and they'll blow your bleeding' brains out. Every note and harmonic pops with supreme clarity in all positions, and bottom-string riffs sound huge and razor-sharp. This is pretty much metal perfection.

## FRET-KING ESPRIT V

£579

Old-school cool

### Looks kinda familiar...

Fret-King – brainchild of UK guitar guru Trevor Wilkinson – takes 'inspiration' from classic designs, smashing them together to create something different, and the Esprit V is clearly a DNA splice of an Explorer and Firebird. The headstock has a 60s Epiphone vibe, too...

### It's very different from the other guitars here...

Yeah, it's our wild card for sure, but you don't need a wafer-thin neck and a Floyd to make eardrums bleed. The Esprit V has a chubby neck with a rosewood fingerboard and 22 fat frets. The 'board's



rounded edges give it a vintage 'played in' feel that we reckon many players will love.

### What's the skinny on the tone?

It ain't skinny. Physically, this is a much heavier guitar than the others here, and that extra lumber is evident in the huge sustain and deep bottom-end that spills out from the Esprit V. You can lighten the tonal load with the Vari-coil, which dials the humbuckers down into single-coil mode for cleaner tones, making this a versatile beast. Even metalheads turn off the filth sometimes. Don't they?

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### AT A GLANCE

**KEY FEATURES:** Basswood body, 1-piece maple thru-neck, 12" to 16" (305mm to 406mm) compound radius, Floyd Rose vibrato, rosewood 'board, 24 jumbo frets, EMG 81 (bridge) and EMG 85 (neck)  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Candy Metallic Blue (as reviewed), White Pearl Metallic, Copper Pearl, Black, Satin Black  
**CONTACT:** Fender GBI 01342 331700 www.jacksonguitars.com



### AT A GLANCE

**KEY FEATURES:** Agathis body, set maple neck, rosewood fingerboard with 22 medium jumbo frets, Wilkinson tune-o-matic bridge/stop tailpiece, 2x Fret-King WHHB humbuckers, Vari-coil control  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Gloss Black (as reviewed), Tobacco Burst  
**CONTACT:** John Hornby Skewes 01132 865 381 www.jhs.co.uk

## LTD F-200FR

Behold a metal battle axe that's primed for war...

£429

### Somebody's been nibbling that guitar!

It's an acquired taste for sure. We reckon the F-200FR's basswood body looks like a flint axe fashioned by some ancient Norseman to terrify and conquer. That sums up the job of a metal guitar for us!

### Basswood seems to be the go-to wood choice for metal guitars these days...

Some people assume basswood is used 'cause it's cheap. Nope. Virtuoso tone freaks like Guthrie Govan and Steve Vai swear by basswood and spec it in their high-end Charvel and Ibanez guitars,



respectively. It's lightweight, offers excellent sustain and doesn't overpower the tonal voice of the guitar's pickups.

### You don't get fancy EMGs with this guitar then?

No, they're high-output passive in-house humbuckers. They sound reasonably sweet clean, but they're at their happiest digesting large amounts of distortion. We like the bright response of the bridge unit – it cuts through a mix like a machete – while the neck pickup has more thickness than a reality TV star. Back off the filth a bit and you get a perfectly usable blues tone from this fearsome-looking beast.

### AT A GLANCE

**KEY FEATURES:** Basswood body, bolt-on maple neck, rosewood fingerboard, 24 extra jumbo frets, licensed Floyd Rose double-locking vibrato, 2x ESP Designed humbuckers  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Charcoal Metallic  
**CONTACT:** Selectron UK 01795 419460 [www.espguitars.com](http://www.espguitars.com)

## BC RICH MK3 MOCKINGBIRD

Is the 'bird still the word?

£549

### This isn't as brutal-looking as most BC Rich stuff...

This new Mark 3 Mockingbird is positively sweet in its Trans Black Cherry finish, but still looks tough enough for the hard rock and metal crowd. The Mockingbird has always been a favourite of Slash of Guns N' Roses, natch.

### What lies beneath?

It's our old pal basswood for the body again, on this occasion topped with a quilted maple veneer to add some eye candy. While original US 'Birds had through-neck construction, our guitar has a bolt-on



maple partner capped with a rosewood 'board and 24 jumbo frets. Add a pair of high-output humbuckers and a quality licensed Floyd Rose, and all of the key metal food groups have been represented.

### Does it deliver the goods?

It's closest to the LTD in terms of feel. The neck is chubbier than the Jackson, and it ships with heavier gauge strings. It comes across more like a heavy riffing tool than a super-fast shred machine. The pickups pump out plenty of power and again work best when teamed with high-gain distortion.

### AT A GLANCE

**KEY FEATURES:** Basswood body with quilted maple veneer, bolt-on maple neck, rosewood fingerboard with 24 jumbo frets, licensed Floyd Rose double-locking vibrato, 2x BC Rich high-output humbuckers  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Trans Black Cherry (as reviewed), Trans Black, Black (£479)  
**CONTACT:** Rosetti 01376 550033 [www.bcrich.com](http://www.bcrich.com)

## HEAD TO HEAD

Which of our big four is the king of the hill?

**T**he Jackson X Series Soloist couldn't be more 80s if it wrote a Christmas song with Bob Geldof or starred in a camp fighter pilot movie with Tom Cruise. Its secret is that ultra-slim 'speed neck' with the 12- to 16-inch (305mm to 406mm) compound radius rosewood fingerboard. That radius shift allows easy fretting of chords over the first few frets – the 305mm (12-inch) bit – and a seriously low action, with effortless string bending, at the 406mm (16-inch) section beyond the 12th fret. The BC Rich and LTD share a 350mm (13.75-inch) radius, which is pretty flat, but doesn't offer quite the same low action as the Jackson. The Soloist also wins with its active EMG arsenal. The EMG 81 and 85 (bridge and neck respectively) is about the ultimate 80s metal mix. Offering more clarity than the traditional passive pickups found in the LTD and BC Rich, these pups really are worth the extra money.

## SOME SNOBS DISMISS THE FLOYD AS A TONE KILLER. NONSENSE. IT'S JUST A DIFFERENT TONE

In terms of hardware, the Floyd Rose is the great leveller. All three Floyd-loaded guitars here retain their tuning perfectly, and we would expect nothing less. Some gear snobs dismiss the Floyd as a tone killer. Nonsense. It's just a *different* tone. The whammys on all three guitars are floating, too, so you can pull up on the bar should you wish. That gives the Mockingbird, F-200FR and Soloist a more open, bright 'springy' tone than a hardtail model, or a guitar with the Floyd set on the body (as preferred by Eddie Van Halen).

The Fret-King Esprit V is a whole different kettle of metal. Its tone and feel is beefier than the other guitars. It has an old Gibson vibe that is more Southern rock, Foo Fighters and Queens Of The Stone Age hirsute rock 'n' roll than 80s Sunset Strip widdly showboating. You'd be hard pushed to find a better guitar to beat out heavy 70s riffs on for the money. Shredders on the other hand would be advised to start their search with the Soloist...



As you'd expect, our Floyd guitars hold their tuning perfectly



The AXB uses the same sound tech as the AXE-FX

# FINAL VERDICT

## Which modeller is the right one for you?

**S**o, four great guitars for your appraisal. Yet some are greater than others, or more suited to certain jobs, if you want to be diplomatic. The fact is, the Jackson is the most sorted guitar in this line-up. It takes us back to a time when squeezing the maximum tone and playability from the bare essentials was everything. These days, the smart money says the fatter the neck the better, but we like the fact that the X Series Soloist defies that

trend and delivers a seriously capable shred machine at a killer price.

The BC Rich and LTD offerings are evenly matched despite the price difference. These are good metal all-rounders. If you play heavy stuff, you'll find yourself at home here. The chubbier necks will appeal to more players than the Jackson's lollipop stick, we reckon.

The obvious termite in the anthill is the Fret-King. Beautifully put together with a gloriously old-school feel, the Esprit V offers

up some tasty clean tones in a line-up that feels more at home with heavy gain. It can do brutal though. It's not a million miles from the concept of a Gibson Explorer, so since we're talking metal, think of it as the kind of thing James Hetfield would warm to.

The bottom line is, if it's metal mischief you have on your evil mind, the world is your bivalve mollusc. There's never been a better time to shred, thrash or bludgeon on a budget. Now, choose your weapon...

### JACKSON X SERIES SOLOIST



### FRET-KING ESPRIT V



### LTD F-200FR



### BC RICH MK3 MOCKINGBIRD



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

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

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	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★