

Guitarist  
**SPECIAL FEATURE**  
GIBSON  
'59 LES PAUL STANDARD

# Bargain 'Bursts

**Can't afford** a pukka vintage Les Paul? No, us neither, so thankfully Gibson and Epiphone make a great selection of new Sunbursts. Here are your choices...  
*by Neville Marten*

**Y**ou'd think a guitar designed and first built 55 years ago would be so outmoded, look so old-fashioned and have been surpassed in so many ways that it would be all but obsolete. Imagine using a 1952-designed washing machine, motorcar or other such item on a day-to-day basis and expecting it to cut the mustard against current products. Typewriter anyone?

Well, the good ol' Les Paul is not only still here, but looking as good as the day it came off the drawing board; it still defines the look and sound of rock and blues and is available at so many price brackets

that happily it's not just the well-heeled that can afford one.

Of course, this wealth of models can be confusing – is it really worth spending 12 times as much for one than another, especially when they look all but identical?

Well, that's why we're here. Over the next pages we will look at six Gibson and Epiphone Les Pauls, from the sublime £4,460 Custom Shop '59 Reissue to the ridiculously affordable Epiphone Standard at a 'mere' £389. We'll tell you what they play and sound like and let you know which one we'd take home based on these factors and, of course, value.





**Epiphone Standard Plus:** a lot of Les Paul for little outlay



**Epiphone Ultra:** a chambered LP with a sonic hint of ES-335

### Epiphone Les Paul Standard Plus £389

**Good build** and playability straight out of the box and tones that are in the Les Paul ballpark have made the Epiphone Standard a valid model in its own right rather than just a cheaper 'copy'.

Okay, so it's not hewn from top grade South American mahogany like its Gibson brethren, and the gloss finish is polyester not cellulose, but the details are there; from cleanly installed neck and body binding to neat fretting and fingerboard inlays.

Epiphone uses an alder body faced on the back in mahogany and on the front in maple – the looks without the cost. The neck is mahogany and the fingerboard a decent slab of rosewood, while the Epi headstock is home to six Grover-alike tuners.

For players who want the look and sound but aren't bothered by vintage accurate detail the Epi's slim 'C'-section neck is spot on. It's slick, comfortable and easy to play and this one came perfectly set up.

#### Sounds

It's not silky smooth like the very

best Les Pauls but that slightly brash edge is what the kids want, isn't it? It's Slash not Clapton they're after. The real 'honk' is missing from the bridge pickup but the neck tone is buttery smooth – and the middle setting is clean and clanging for rhythm chops or arpeggio parts.

#### Verdict

The law of diminishing returns means you get 10 per cent extra for 90 per cent more outlay. And for those who don't care about the sonic difference but do about the money, it's a no brainer. Buy it – you can't go wrong!

#### The bottom line

**WE LIKE** Does what it says on the tin; great value

**WE DISLIKE** Lacks the genuine article's ultimate refinement

**GUITARIST SAYS** A taste of the real thing at a price a copy would struggle to beat.

### Epiphone Les Paul Ultra £439

**The Ultra** is a cute spin on the Les Paul theme, the improvements are all but invisible – you'll know they're there but your audience will simply see a cool, original-looking guitar.

A great-looking quilted maple veneer top is finished in classic cherry sunburst, and while neck and body base are both mahogany, the former is internally routed to remove around a kilo of weight, the by-product of which should be a more dynamically responsive guitar. It has a satin finished neck that's 42mm – not the standard 43mm – at the nut, and a belly contour that adds more comfort.

Epiphone has also introduced its own version of the TonePros idea of fixed-on bridge and tailpiece. Not only does it make string changes quicker and safer – no errant metal hardware scooting across your lovely gloss finish – it also improves tone since there's greater transmission of vibrations through the top.

A slim, playable neck is enhanced by the reduction in nut width, weight and belly cut.

Standing up you really notice the difference – a long gig with the Ultra would be no problem.

#### Sounds

There's a lighter, breezier tone to this guitar than the Standard. Those big chambers add a hint of ES-335 and that's no bad thing. The added dynamics make it a blues dream – backing off the volume even gives a hint of Fender!

#### Verdict

We can't praise Dr Epiphone highly enough for the refinements he's brought to the table – it's a Les Paul, Jim, but not as we know it.

#### The bottom line

**WE LIKE** Brilliant concept; great refinements; unreal price

**WE DISLIKE** That you can't get a Gibson version!

**GUITARIST SAYS:** A fascinating take on the classic that adds versatility to the mix.



**Gibson Standard: the real deal and good value**



**Gibson Classic Antique: ready to work**

## Gibson Les Paul Standard £1,990

Back in 2002 we had the first look at the redesigned Les Paul Standard from Gibson. The company had realised its breadwinner lacked refinement alongside ever more accurate Custom Shop reissues – and indeed products from elsewhere that were tramping a little too closely on Gibson’s ground.

So the guitar got a grade AA maple top – enough flame to look tasty but not over the top – the headstock went back to the old-style 17-degree pitch, and the finishing stepped up a notch or two – something for which Gibson has been criticised many times in these pages.

Our verdict was that the Les Paul had come of age all over again. And while we didn’t like the thicker fingerboard binding we appreciated it wouldn’t crack at the fret-ends like the old thin stuff could. We did love the fact that the guitar was available in ’59 and ’60 style neck profiles and the fact that it came with beefy BurstBucker Alnico pickups.

Today’s Standard is just as good

– ours has a tight flame, plays as a Les Paul should and is built with the best Gibson know-how.

### Sounds

What can we say? Those huge, girthsome tones of everyone from Kossoff to Slash, Clapton and Gary Moore are all on tap. It’s a proper Les Paul – enough said!

### Verdict

The ‘new’ Standard is great value for a professional instrument. Although no Custom Shop dream machine, from the third row who’d know except you? Great balance of build, looks and tones ensures ‘classic’ status.

### The bottom line

**WE LIKE** Proper Les Paul build; looks and tone

**WE DISLIKE** Thinner neck binding would be better

**GUITARIST SAYS:** All the Les Paul style you could need at a price many can afford.

## Gibson Les Paul Classic Antique £1,740

Gibson is always trying to plug perceived gaps in its product lines and so the 2007 Classic Antique exists as a blend of Custom Shop-style features, purposeful looks and realistic pricing.

Using traditional construction the Classic sports a grade AA maple top on a mahogany body with mahogany neck and rosewood fingerboard. What’s obviously different from other Les Pauls is the bound headstock – in antique cream to match that of the body and neck. It also bears the ES-335-style mini ‘crown’ inlay in pearl. We’re not sure about this – it’s typically Gibson, but looks more like a J-200 than a Les Paul so the jury’s still out.

To underline its Classic nomenclature the guitar comes with ’57 Classic humbuckers – a standard at the neck and more powerful Plus at the bridge. They’re open-topped, too, which adds a ‘jobbing’ element to things – this guitar wants to go to work.

Its 1960 ‘slim taper’ neck gives a modern feel that suits its workmanlike look. It’s best suited

to the rocky blueser – more Gary Moore than Peter Green.

### Sounds

Classic by name, classic by nature. It’s a tamer beast than the more barking Standard, but kicks plenty of butt just the same. Warm neck tones and a cutting bridge pickup gives it breadth and versatility – cranking it up reveals a monster.

### Verdict

The Classic wants to be a vintage reissue and yet confounds us with its bound and inlaid headstock. As a gigging Les Paul it’s hard to fault, but we wonder who would buy it over a discounted Standard.

### The bottom line

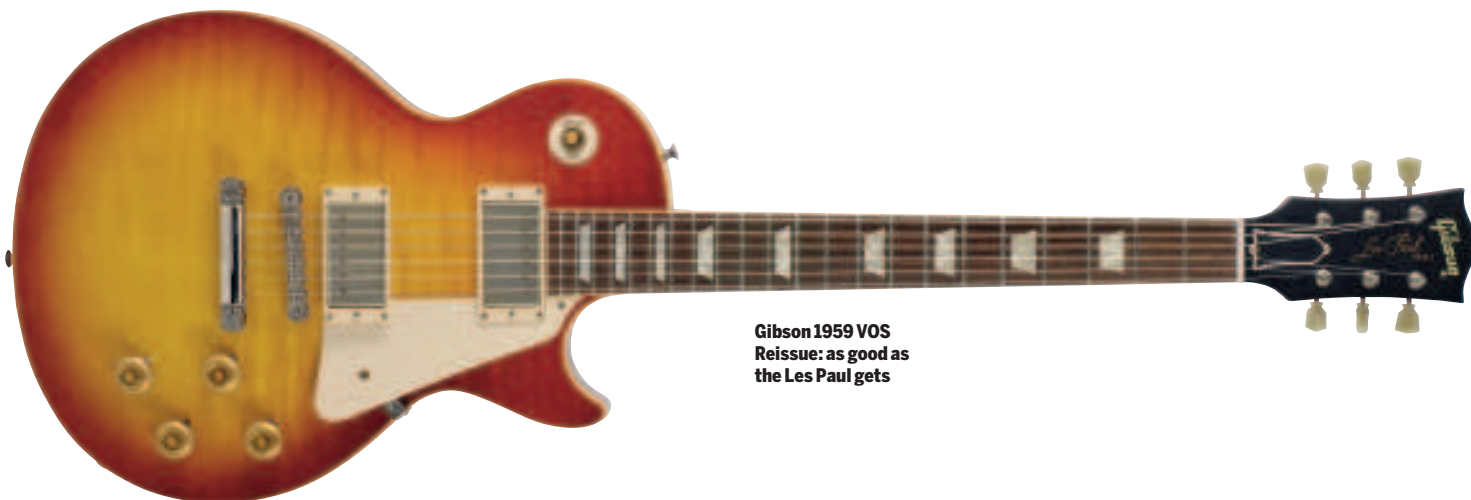
**WE LIKED** Good workmanlike instrument

**WE DISLIKED** Bound headstock ruins vintage vibe

**GUITARIST SAYS:** A solid, fine-sounding instrument that is let down by its unusual looks.



**Gibson 1958 VOS**  
Reissue: vintage tone  
and playability on tap



**Gibson 1959 VOS**  
Reissue: as good as  
the Les Paul gets

### Gibson Les Paul 1958 VOS Reissue £2,640

**Today Gibson** makes the plain top '58 as a cheaper alternative to the figured maple '59. In true '58 style it boasts a big old neck and slim frets. It also retains 'Vintage Original Spec' features like the thin binding, thin toggle switch surround, long neck tenon, holly headstock veneer, accurate shape and colour fingerboard inlays, lightweight aluminium stud tailpiece, and square-edged scratchplate. Internally it's vintage accurate too, with original-style CTS pots and 'bumble bee' capacitors. On these larger necked guitars, notice that the truss rod cover sits a little way from the nut – this is because the truss rod itself has to be sunk deeper in the neck and so emerges further up.

Actually you soon become accustomed to the neck's palm-filling nature – after a while you start believing that all necks should be this big. The slim frets are tall enough not to prove a problem when bending and, once you're over the psychological hill, it's a great playing experience.

#### Sounds

Some say plain tops sound better(!), and with the '58's big neck and Burstbucker pickups we have a real vintage sounding machine. It's not the loudest guitar on review here but chords are big and chiming while sweet, singing sustain emphasises the famous Les Paul tones we all know and love.

#### Verdict

It's not the prettiest Les Paul of the bunch but if genuine vintage tone and playability are your things, and you wouldn't mind saving £1,800 on the price of a '59, then this is the one to go for.

#### The bottom line

**WE LIKE** No nonsense looks; fantastic tone; price

**WE DISLIKE** The posers among us wish it was prettier

**GUITARIST SAYS:** At this price a real catch if you can handle the big neck and small frets.

### Gibson Les Paul 1959 VOS Reissue £4,460

**This is** the flagship of Gibson's Les Paul series and over the years the company has been striving to get closer to the original spec – hence Vintage Original Spec.

Having reviewed one of the first VOS '59s in the country back in 2006 – a corker of a guitar – this one is disappointing by comparison. While it's no doubt a great looking instrument, the dulled finish looks overdone and obvious and the flaming top is a trifle underwhelming.

As with the '58, Gibson has strived to include as many original features as possible here and so this guitar carries all the specs as above but with the addition of curly maple.

The '59 neck is chunky, although not quite as fat as the previous year's model, but a set of 22 'wide oval' frets helps it feel more akin to today's instruments. It's a great player too – effortless for blues and blues-rock bends and vibrato, if typically restricted at the upper frets.

#### Sounds

We didn't think anything could beat the '58 for tone but the '59 just has it. Even with identical Burstbucker pickups there is more girth and volume here – it's an instantly fatter sound and the balance between neck and bridge pickups is perfect.

#### Verdict

At £4,480 the '59 VOS is a massive outlay. But reiterating the "law of diminishing returns" comment, with this guitar the difference in price is quite a difference! It's so much money, but when listening to those glorious tones you begin to think it might just be worth it.

#### The bottom line

**WE LIKE** Fabulous tones; great vintage feel

**WE DISLIKE** Underwhelming top; unconvincing aged finish

**GUITARIST SAYS:** Definitely the most tonesome Les Paul here, it's got the lot.





### Epiphone Les Paul Standard Plus

**Price:** £389  
**Origin:** China  
**Body:** Mahogany back with carved maple top  
**Neck:** Mahogany, set  
**Fingerboard:** 22-fret bound rosewood  
**Electrics:** Two Epiphone humbuckers – standard LP controls  
**Hardware:** Grover-style tuners, tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece  
**Finishes:** Honeyburst, vintage sunburst, heritage cherry sunburst, trans blue, trans amber

#### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Epiphone Les Paul Ultra

**Price:** £439  
**Origin:** China  
**Body:** Chambered mahogany back with carved maple top  
**Neck:** Mahogany, set  
**Fingerboard:** 22-fret bound rosewood  
**Electrics:** Two gold-covered Epiphone Alnico Classic humbuckers – standard LP controls  
**Hardware:** Grover tuners, LockTone tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece, all gold-plated  
**Finishes:** Faded cherry sunburst

#### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Gibson Les Paul Standard

**Price:** £1,990 (inc case)  
**Origin:** USA  
**Body:** South American mahogany back, two-piece grade AA carved maple cap  
**Neck:** Mahogany, set  
**Fingerboard:** 22-fret bound rosewood  
**Electrics:** Two Burstbucker Alnico humbuckers – standard LP controls  
**Hardware:** Green Kluson-style tuners, tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece  
**Finishes:** 11 available including heritage cherry sunburst, goldtop, wine red, ebony, trans amber and honeyburst

#### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Gibson Les Paul Classic Antique

**Price:** £1,740 (inc case)  
**Origin:** USA  
**Body:** South American mahogany back with two-piece grade AA carved maple top  
**Neck:** Mahogany, set  
**Fingerboard:** 22-fret bound rosewood  
**Electrics:** Two '57 Classic humbuckers (Classic Plus at bridge) – standard LP controls  
**Hardware:** Green Kluson-style tuners, tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece  
**Finishes:** Vintage sunburst, honeyburst, heritage cherry sunburst, vintage sunburst, wine red

#### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Gibson Les Paul 1958 VOS Reissue

**Price:** £2,640  
**Origin:** USA  
**Body:** South American mahogany back with two-piece grade AA carved plain maple cap  
**Neck:** Mahogany, fat '58 style, set  
**Fingerboard:** 22-fret bound rosewood – thin '58 style frets  
**Electrics:** Two Burstbucker Alnico humbuckers – standard LP controls  
**Hardware:** Green Kluson-style tuners, tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece  
**Finishes:** Faded tobacco, washed cherry, iced tea

#### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Gibson Les Paul 1959 VOS Reissue

**Price:** £4,460  
**Origin:** USA  
**Body:** South American mahogany back with two-piece grade AA carved plain maple cap  
**Neck:** Mahogany, rounded '59 style, set  
**Fingerboard:** 22-fret bound rosewood – 'wide oval' style frets  
**Electrics:** Two Burstbucker Alnico humbuckers (Burstbucker 1 at neck, 2 at bridge) – standard LP controls  
**Hardware:** Green Kluson-style tuners, tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece  
**Finishes:** As 1958 VOS Reissue

#### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



Supermodels: six of the best line up

### Final thoughts

The **Epiphone Standard Plus** is silly money for what you get: it looks great, plays well and sounds like a proper Les Paul. The **Ultra** offers an intelligent twist, its chambered body feeling light and comfortable and its vibrant tones a welcome relief from the Les Paul assault. It could have won this test, yet despite its brilliance and value, it's very different from what we think of as classic 'burst.

The **Classic Antique** doesn't quite know what it wants to be – it is almost a cool and affordable vintage workhorse, but the bound headstock and pearl inlay in the middle don't work.

If you're looking for ultimate vintage tone and real Custom Shop value, go for the '58. Its big neck and plain Jane front won't endear it to some but try it through a Marshall 'Plexi' and you'll be convinced. Sonically the four-and-a-half-grand **VOS '59** stole the show by a bluesy mile. Huge and powerful it left our listening panel (Simon Bradley, Mick Taylor and Jason Sidwell) speechless.

And that leaves the **Standard**. Its great looking top, fine build and finish, excellent tone and reasonable price – certainly when discounted to 'street' prices – all add up to a winning combination. True, the '59 is the real heavyweight, but as an overall package the Standard takes it.