

**THINLINE ELECTRIC ROUND-UP** \$375-\$575  
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON LEES



# Semi-conscious

Picking up a quality semi needn't mean you have to auction off a few organs, as this collection proves... **by Ed Mitchell**

**G**ibson's iconic ES-335 is, to put it mildly, an oft-tributed design. The wooden centre block through a hollow body – to promote sustain and reduce feedback – has turned up in countless other instruments over the years. And it's not surprising as the real deal ain't cheap.

The basic construction of the ES-335 is simple, with its body of laminated maple, and so it's easy for mid-range makers to imitate the classic design.

To introduce you to the world of affordable thinline semis we've rounded up four ES-335-inspired guitars, all under £600. Two of them are actually

under £400. When it comes to guitar design, 'inspired by' can be just a nice way of saying straight copy. To counter that, we've chosen guitars that combine the classic details we love – centre block, twin humbuckers, retro cool – with some design flair and a good old sprinkle of individuality.

## The Rivals

Alternatives to the guitars on test include the **Schecter Corsair** (£849), the **Reverend Manta Ray** (£529) and the **Sparrow Primitive** range – from £499 for the 'no art' **Primitive Pro** model, to £899 for the **Primitive Ace**, loaded with a deuce of Kent Armstrong humbuckers, a Bigsby vibrato and finish options that include hand-painted hot rod flames or 'Von Dutch'-style pinstripes.

Guitarist  
**CHOICE**



### Hagstrom Viking Deluxe £575

From the moment we first laid hands on the Viking Deluxe it's been evident that Hagstrom's quality control department is firing on all cylinders. The amber sunburst finish, fretwork and set-up out of the box are flawless. The whole package oozes class, from the rounded block fingerboard inlays to that asymmetrical headstock design pillaged from the Viking models of the seventies. Incidentally, the Viking's headstock and elegant f-holes (referred to by some Hag fans as 's-holes') were designed by the late archtop builder Jimmy D'Aquisto. There's some serious pedigree here.

The Viking Deluxe maintains the Hagstrom reputation for fast necks, but you don't need a neck with the profile of a lolly stick to get around at speed. We reckon the Viking Deluxe strikes the perfect balance between an ultra-playable neck and one that still has a reassuring amount of meat on its bones. It's a joy to play. Incidentally, the fingerboard is formed from Hagstrom's Resinator composite material,

which offers a similar level of toughness to ebony.

#### Sounds

If we had to describe the tonal character of the Viking Deluxe in a single word it would be 'fat'. The bridge humbucker offers a chunky, warm tone with just the right amount of jangle. Perhaps thanks to the tough fingerboard material, the neck humbucker offers plenty of definition even with a bit of drive. Incongruously, perhaps, the Viking is loved by high profile punk rockers such as Tim Armstrong of Rancid, but the sophisticated tonal range is likely to steer these guitars more towards blues- and jazz- leaning players.

#### The Bottom Line

**We like:** First class finish; warm blues and jazz tones; great eye candy

**We dislike:** We won't hear a word said against it!

**Guitarist says:** A strong performance at this price

### LTD PS-1 £399

The LTD PS-1 represents a more contemporary take on the ES-335 concept, which may very well appeal to those not feeling the old school vibe of the other guitars in this round-up. While it may seem unfair to pigeonhole LTD (and its parent company ESP) as primarily a 'metal' brand, providing tools for the heavy stuff is what it excels at. With this in mind, the fact that this guitar's slim profile neck comes loaded with 22 frets that are so 'jumbo' they'd give Nellie The Elephant an inferiority complex really gives the game away. LTD has basically produced another rock/metal guitar fiendishly disguised with some retro visuals. We're on to you!

In a major departure from the classic ES-335 blueprint, the PS-1 has a bolt-on neck. Purists might well object, but the bolt-on design has some real benefits, most obviously in the neatly contoured heel, which allows great access to the upper frets. In addition, the PS-1's compact body makes it feel like you're playing a

solidbody guitar, albeit one that's a bit lighter in weight.

#### Sounds

The PS-1 makes most sense through an amp's filthy channel. It's tight and focused in a way that the other guitars in this round-up just cannot compete with. The big frets make bending strings a breeze, as is pulling false harmonics out of the bottom strings. When switched to a clean sound, the LTD gives a decent account of itself, but feels like it's a tad out of its comfort zone, especially with the bridge 'bucker running solo. Our advice? Feed the PS-1 some serious gain, that should keep it happy.

#### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Upper fret access; compact dimensions; aggressive metal tones

**We dislike:** Not quite as versatile as the other contenders here

**Guitarist says:** It's a wolf in sheep's clothing



### Washburn HB-35 £470

The Washburn HB range of semi-acoustic guitars has been around for a few years now, and during that time it seems that the brand's quality control has steadily got better and better. In fact, given our recent experiences with the maker, we were sure our review HB-35 would prove to be a worthy contender even before we had unpacked it. Happily, we weren't disappointed.

Not only is the guitar well put together and set-up, it's pretty to look at. The split-block fingerboard inlays, flame maple top and gold hardware give the HB-35 the look of a more expensive guitar. Bling in moderation can work wonders it would seem.

The HB-35 has the chunkiest neck of all our round-up guitars. We're not talking about the much maligned baseball bat here, but it's no skinny puppy all the same. Don't be afraid, even as all that wood fills the palm of your hand you'll still find the HB-35's fingerboard easy to navigate. As they say, once you've had fat, you might not want to go back. Ahem.

#### Sounds

The HB-35 does its job well, albeit without offering any real surprises in the tonal stakes. The bridge pickup isn't as well-rounded or fat sounding as the example found on our Viking Deluxe, but it does have bags of power and definition. It can sound a little brash through a clean amplifier, but add some dirt and you'll unleash a cracking rock machine. Back on the clean channel, adding the neck pickup to the mix dials in some useful beef to balance out that brashness and the HB-35 reveals itself to be quite a versatile beast. Just the thing for punk, rock, blues... and all that jazz.

#### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Well put together; the fat neck; great all-round workhorse

**We dislike:** Nothing at this price

**Guitarist says:** Another strong performer and excellent value for money

### Ibanez Artcore AS73T £375

We love the plain Jane looks of the AS73T. There's a tendency for manufacturers to add a shedload of unnecessary bling – gold hardware, mother-of-plastic inlays and the like – to their mid-range guitars to pimp the desirability. We appreciate the simple approach Ibanez has applied here. It gives the Artcore a vintage look that's not a million miles away from an old Guild Starfire. Aesthetics aside, the slim neck profile makes the AS73T feel even more approachable, although the fingerboard did initially feel a little bit scratchy when we started bending strings above the 12th fret. That's pretty easily sorted, though.

Unfortunately, there is a fly in the ointment. The Bigsby-style vibrato unit is set up so it's too stiff to use easily. In our opinion it needs a more forgiving spring to allow the vibrato arm to wobble back and forth with a bit more freedom. It looks extremely cool and is easily sorted, but as it stands with this review instrument, the AS73 hardtail

model (£330) has just been promoted to our first choice from this range.

#### Sounds

The Artcore AS73T has a slightly lower output than the other guitars here. It's certainly not as bright as the Washburn, and nowhere near as in your face as the LTD, but the bridge humbucker boasts a lovely sparkle that energises poppy rhythm parts – think Johnny Marr of The Smiths. The neck humbucker provides the expected warm jazzy tone and responds well to a bit of drive, making upper fret blues noodling hugely enjoyable. Get that vibrato sorted, and this is a steal at £375.

#### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Refreshingly plain looks; sweet vintage tones

**We dislike:** The vibrato setup lets the side down

**Guitarist says:** A good guitar at an excellent price – the hardtail is even better value

**Final Thoughts**

There's nothing like walking around a bunch of music shops with a list of 'must try' guitars and a few hundred quid burning a hole in your pocket. If you're on the sniff for a good quality semi then you're in for a fun day's hunting we reckon. At the very least, you'll come away pleasantly surprised by just how much guitar you can get for your money here.

All four guitars perform well from the word go, proving that Hagstrom, LTD, Ibanez and Washburn put as much effort into the playability of their guitars as they do building a product that looks the part.

Aside from the disappointing vibrato on the Ibanez, we didn't experience any other problems with our semi-finalists. All offer excellent value for money.

The LTD PS-1 is the obvious wild card in this pack. It isn't designed for the semi-hollow purist in either looks or tone. The PS-1 is designed for rock and metal players who want a brutal sounding guitar with looks that set it apart from the pointy headstock and LP-influenced brigade.

The other three guitars are for those of us who would like to own a Gibson ES-335 but find one out of reach for the time being. In that respect, the

AS73T, HB-35 and Viking Deluxe offer a level of playability, tone and aesthetics that satisfies our craving for an ES-335-inspired guitar without ever feeling like a booby prize.

But the Hagstrom Viking Deluxe stands out because it's the complete package. It's been some years since we played an original Swedish-made Viking, but we can testify that no matter what angle we take, this new Chinese-built version delivers the goods. The finish on our review model is flawless and we have no complaints with the set-up either. The action is set low (lower than we would usually set our own

guitars, in fact) with no annoying buzzes or rattles to spoil our time together. Playability is first class and the pickups offer some terrific tones. Warm jazz, bluesy sustain, punk power chords, the Viking really does cover just about all the bases, extreme metal excepted. The £575 price tag is well justified and actually quite modest in our opinion.

You should try as many different semis in your price range as you can before you plump for your own winner. We just think you'll be hard pushed to find a better example, with a sub-£1,000 price tag, than the Hagstrom Viking Deluxe. **G**



**Hagstrom Viking Deluxe**

**PRICE:** £575  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**BODY:** Laminated flame maple  
**NECK:** Canadian hard maple, set  
**FINGERBOARD:** Resinator, rounded block inlays  
**HARDWARE:** Long travel tune-o-matic-style bridge, trapeze tailpiece  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Hagstrom HJ-50 humbuckers, three-way toggle pickup selector, two volumes and two tone controls  
**OPTIONS:** Tremar vibrato model in black gloss (£620) and wild cherry transparent (£630); left-handed hardtail in white gloss (£555)  
**FINISHES:** Amber sunburst (as reviewed), cherry sunburst, white gloss, natural  
**Rosetti**  
**01376 550033**  
**www.hagstromguitars.eu**

Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



**LTD PS-1**

**PRICE:** £399  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**BODY:** Mahogany  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic-style bridge, stop tailpiece  
**ELECTRICS:** Two ESP LH-150 humbuckers, three-way toggle pickup selector, two volumes and two tone controls  
**OPTIONS:** Set-neck ESP PC-1V model (£699)  
**FINISHES:** Black (as reviewed), metallic gold, black cherry  
**Selectron UK**  
**01795 419460**  
**www.espguitars.com**

Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



**Washburn HB-35**

**PRICE:** £470  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**BODY:** Laminated maple with laminated flame maple top  
**NECK:** Maple, set  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic-style bridge, stop tailpiece  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Washburn humbuckers, three-way toggle pickup selector, two volume and two tone controls  
**OPTIONS:** N/A  
**FINISHES:** Natural (as reviewed), wine red  
**Sound Technology**  
**01462 480000**  
**www.washburn.com**

Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



**Ibanez Artcore AS73T**

**PRICE:** £375  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**BODY:** Maple  
**NECK:** Mahogany, set  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**HARDWARE:** VBS80 vintage vibrato, ART-2 roller bridge  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Ibanez ACH humbuckers, three-way toggle pickup selector, two volume and two tone controls  
**OPTIONS:** The AS73 hardtail version (£330) is available in brown sunburst and ivory  
**FINISHES:** Transparent cherry  
**Headstock**  
**0121 508 6666**  
**www.ibanez.com**

Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★