



# SOMETHING IN THE AIR

Three new Gibson Memphis models offer a different spin on their classics. Which one's for you?

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## GIBSON MEMPHIS ES-275 FIGURED, ES-335 PREMIERE FIGURED & ES-LES PAUL STANDARD £2,949, £2,999 & £2,499

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**D**espite its huge heritage and perception of conservative style, Gibson is actually remarkably forward-looking and innovative. Okay, not everyone gelled with the ‘robot’ tuners, brass zero frets (and the like) of some recent USA production models, but that’s only one part of what the brand is about.

Gibson’s Memphis division, which creates the mainly laminate ‘f-hole’-styles, seems to take a different slant on modernism that’s typified by the recent semi-solid ES-Les Paul and the downsized ES-339: classic guitars but with a different spin. This year, Memphis introduced another in the form of the ES-275. And while plenty of its Historic-style output centres on highly ‘old-looking’ VOS finishes, plenty more core models have a contemporary gloss sheen and ‘posher’ figured woods, like our trio here.

There is plenty of commonality in our three review models: laminate woods, neck shapes, pickups and hardware yet each one retains a hugely individual character that, depending on your preference and style, might just be the guitar of your dreams.

### ES-275 Figured

“This came from Japan, actually,” said Mike Voltz, director of R&D/product development at Gibson Memphis, when we spoke earlier this year at the winter NAMM show. “I was there eight or nine months ago. We go over a couple of times a year to support the market and look out

for new trends. A thing we noticed is that a lot of younger players have discovered jazz – their request was for something that wasn’t so ‘old’. They wanted better access to the [top] frets. See, an ES-175 has 20 frets, and ES-295 has only 19, and they’re not as accessible [as a Les Paul or ES-335]. I came back and thought about it and concluded there’s nothing more ‘jazz’ than an L-5, so I took that and reduced it by 10 per cent so when you look at it, it still says Gibson!

“The neck is a Les Paul neck,” continues Mike, “with 22 frets and all of a sudden

you’ve got access, but it’s a jazz box – totally hollow and it’s braced like an ES-175.”

In the flesh, this outline works perfectly: it’s a design from a bygone age, updated for the modern player. It’s 385mm (just over 15 inches) wide, much smaller than the 432mm (17-inch) bulk of the L-5 and many other Gibson archtops, and the neck joins the body at the 16th fret, not the 14th. While our Figured version has block inlays and ES-355/Les Paul Custom-style head logo, the standard version, in Faded Cherry, has ES-345-style split parallelogram inlays.





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1. Gibson's Memphis Historic Spec (MHS) pickups are installed on all three guitars here, with no wax potting
2. "The tailpiece is the same as on our '59 ES-175 [2015 Collection], says Mike Voltz. "They're solid brass, hand-bent and silver-soldered together"
3. 'Figured' refers to the flamed maple used as the outer layers of the three-ply maple/poplar/maple body construction
4. A Les Paul Custom headstock on a jazz box? Yup. Note the toned top coat giving the binding an aged hue

While it follows Gibson's classic laminate wood construction, in this Figured version the outer maple veneers of the back and top back are quite heavily flamed through the new Montreux Burst finish (named after the jazz festival, of course), which is quite a muted mid-brown in the centre with a darker outer 'bursting' – the same colour as the sides, through which you can see subtle flaming. Despite the gold-plated 'zig-zag' tailpiece (hand bent on the original tooling), tune-o-matic (on a pinned rosewood foot), pickup covers and Grover tuners, the overall look remains hugely classic, and not overly blingy or posh. Incidentally, above the Studio level and excluding the Historic models, all core Memphis ABR-1 tune-o-matics, as here, have titanium saddles for this year. Why? "We really like the sound," says Mike, simply.

The toned topcoat of the nitro finish gives the cream outer binding a vintage nicotine-

stained hue (except the bound edge of the tortie pickguard, which is brilliant white), while the unbound f-holes are black painted. Internally, it's very clean, too, with kerfed linings and dual longitudinal top braces from 'red' Adirondack spruce – a very tidy job.

Controls are classic Gibson, although the angle of the diamond layout is slightly flatter than a Les Paul or ES-335, just as you'd see on a classic L-5, along with that rounded Florentine cutaway. We also get a shoulder-placed toggle that sits in a thick rubber grommet. There's very little to moan about here, perhaps with the exception of the rather random-looking pickup angles, especially the over-slanted neck 'bucker.

Neck shape is classed as a 'rounded C', which feels full and classic and very slightly flat-backed with nicely rounded edges to the top of the fingerboard binding. The man-made Richlite of the fingerboard looks

very ebony-like, while the chunky medium frets (approximately 2.28mm wide by 1.3mm high) further enhance that Les Paul-like neck feel.

Aside from the 'Patent Applied For' sticker on the back of the humbuckers, there's no specific ID, though the specs tell us they are Gibson MHS (Memphis Historic Spec), which Gibson has called "our most accurate PAF reproductions yet" with scatter-wound, slightly under-wound mismatched coils, an Alnico III magnet in the neck 'bucker and an Alnico II in the bridge unit.

The so-called 'Memphis Tone Circuit' seems to refer to a number of different specifications: here, we have CTS 500k linear taper pots for the volume controls and 500k audio taper pots for the tones, with a .022 microfarad cap for the bridge pickup's tone and a .015 microfarad cap on the neck to cut less treble.



### ES-335 Premiere Figured

So, you've got the 'Figured' bit, but 'Premiere'? "These are new for this year," says Mike, "but all the changes are internal. We started working with thermal treating a couple of years ago – so, here, the centre block is thermally engineered. The bracing is quarter-sawn thermally engineered Adirondack spruce, and we adhere the braces with hot hide glue and that helps to create a guitar that's acoustically louder, open, and with more clarity."

These changes aside, our classic centre block thinline semi is pretty identical to the ES-275, measuring 42mm at the rim, and 409mm wide (just over 16 inches). There's no yellow-toned top coat here, so the look is a little more contemporary. The 'burst top and back also look more modern than vintage, while the translucent dark brown/almost-black sides and neck-back finish add contrast that creates a classy appearance, along with the nickel hardware.

We also get a lightweight aluminium stop tailpiece with locking studs, but this is all-very-classic ES-335 fare, such as the small block inlays and the small fleur head logo. Again, Gibson's build specs tell us we have MHS 'buckers and here the 'Memphis Tone Circuit' includes matched pots with a tight five per cent tolerance, with the same 'orange drop' tone caps as the ES-275.

### ES-Les Paul Standard

The ES-Les Paul, of course, more usually has dual f-holes. This one doesn't, although it follows the same construction and it looks like a classic Les Paul until you pick it up and discover its wonderful light weight. Like our other guitars, it's laminate in construction, but has an emancipated centre block in solid mahogany. It's a similar finish to our ES-335, but comes with a flat dark-brown-hued back to match the sides and neck-back, and only the top is figured. Whip off the control cavity backplate and you see kerfed linings like an ES-335... as well as plenty of air!

Again, the neck follows our other models in shape and feel – though with obvious difference to the inlays – including the rolled-edge fingerboard binding, while pickup/control specs follow the ES-275. It's hugely familiar, and weight aside, it's another cracking piece.

### Sounds

Even just looking at the ES-275 you feel you're entering an exclusive club of the Gibson Archtop – no riff-raff allowed here! This perception is certainly confirmed by the clean amp sounds, especially the neck

and neck/bridge combination. Even with the volume and tone full up, the neck sound is quite velvety in the basses with bell-like clarity from the high strings. There's lovely hollowed snap from the mix and even the sharper bridge with a little tone roll-off adds some attack to the low strings (without rattling the wine glasses).

'Jazz', of course, is such a catch-all, but the ES-275 is remarkably pliable. It exudes smoothness, especially with volume and tones rolled back a little, and has a tonal depth that, again, is sometimes lacking – purposely – from a shallower thinline style. At lower volumes, it creates rootsier Americana sounds that edge into break-up, not to mention chewier blues. Also, achieving much funkier soul/pop voices is easy. It's this balance of chiming clarity with old-school depth that's so appealing in a body size that's big enough to feel very comfortable seated, but not too big to make you feel swamped. There might be "no money up there", as they saying goes, but the extended range and access is welcome

The ES-335 is the perennial 'Mr Versatile'. Plugged in, all our Christmases have come at once





5. What exactly is the Memphis tone circuit? "It refers to specific part values and a wiring pattern unique to Gibson Memphis for all of our non-historic models," says Gibson Memphis's Jim Lillard

6 & 7. Once again, we have Gibson MHS humbuckers on our ES-335 model

8. While the ES-335's back and sides are finished in Faded Lightburst, the sides and neck back are a dark brown, almost black. And it's all nitrocellulose

and feels very natural, not least for higher chord voicings. We did find ourselves raising the wound G string's pole piece – it sounded a little quiet compared with the plain B and wound D, but don't pigeonhole this one. Yes, 'jazz' ain't a problem, but that's like saying you can only use a Telecaster for country picking. The ES-275 is a beautiful, musical guitar.

So, too, is the perennial 'Mr Versatile', the ES-335. Plugged in, it's like all our Christmases have come at once. There's a more solidbody response here, as you'd expect, and it really pushes out the sound. It takes that oh-so-Gibson voice of the ES-275, cleans up the lower end, but still does effortless jazz or hugely vocal blues and fusion lead and we're still on the neck pickup. Clean up your amp again and just funk out on the mix: sparkle, depth, musicality. Swap to a classic rock Marshall voice with a gain boost and edge back the

tone and/or volume, and you could rock out with just about anyone – there's a vibrancy and resonance that you can feel from the guitar as it leans into feedback. Go to the mix again, roll down one of the tones, and it's a Clapton-y 'woman' tone or Santana-esque tube-y vocal sustain. A good ES-335 is really something. This is a good one.

To be fair, we weren't too sure of what the 'Memphis Les Paul' had in store. It sounds a little more restrained than the ES-335 – there's less 'solid-ness' here, a little more hollowbody with a softer, less pushy projection. But, again, it's a chameleon: on the one hand, there's a beautiful sweet-toned jazz voice, but in contrast with a gained Marshall, it sounds wonderfully fat and fruity, resonant and superbly touch-sensitive, especially if you use fingers not a pick. There's a little squeal from the bridge pickup in this area (we understand these MHS humbuckers aren't wax potted), but

control that and it edges into pretty easy musical feedback and sustain. In some ways, it's less 'rock' than it looks and lacks that solid midrange 'chunk', but for many it would be a perfect way to get some 'hollow' or 'semi' character from a very familiar-looking and feeling piece. Without the weight, of course. Put another way, if you've never 'got' the Les Paul thing, this one seems aimed at a player who enjoys subtle tonal shades rather than purely rock bluster.

## Verdict

Three similarly priced 2016 Memphis-made Gibsons they may be, but each has its own quite distinct tonal stamp – any player wanting to explore the different resonance of a hollow or semi is in for a treat or three! If you're working on the jazzier side of the tracks, the ES-275 is perfect – a modern take on a classic that oozes class. The ES-Les Paul? Don't blame us if you fall for



its resonant, lightweight charms. And then there's the ES-335 that, in this Premiere guise, is far from cheap in appearance and (not least) sound.

Not everyone will get the somewhat 'old-school' finishing you'll find in places, compared with the modern detail-driven craft of Collings or PRS, for example, but – honestly – from a player's perspective, that's of little consequence. We have to say, every time we get our hands on a Memphis model, we seem to see and hear improvement.

On the downside, though, Memphis makes a mind-boggling number of models and limited runs, and finding your fit isn't helped by a lack of information. For example, at the time of writing, only one of our trio was actually mentioned on Gibson's website! And while certain divisions of this classic brand seem to polarise opinion on a regular basis, our Memphis chums are producing some of the most evocative instruments money can buy. It's time to treat yourself. **G**



**9 & 11.** The ES-LP (aka the Memphis Les Paul) looks like a classic Les Paul, despite the virtually hollow construction. All its parts and hardware are the same as the solidbody version

**10.** Again, the ES-LP's flat back, sides and neck back are a very dark brown in contrast to the Lightburst top

**12.** Our review models, along with other core (non-historic) models for 2016, use a classic ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge, but with titanium saddles, noted for their sustain and clarity

## Gibson Memphis dimensions

(all dimensions in mm unless stated)



**ES-275**

**ES-335**

**ES LP STD**

<b>Nut width</b>	43.11	43.08	43.42
<b>12th fret width</b>	51.73	51.4	51.6
<b>1st fret depth</b>	22.2	21.5	22
<b>12th fret depth</b>	25	25	25.4
<b>Weight (kg/lb)</b>	3.13/6.89	3.7/8.1	2.9/6.4
<b>String spacing bridge</b>	52	51	51
<b>Bridge PU DC res (ohms)</b>	7.8k	7.83k	7.79k
<b>Neck PU DC res (ohms)</b>	7.35k	7.37k	7.24k



10



### GIBSON ES-275 FIGURED

**PRICE:** £2,949 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Single-cutaway, thinline hollowbody electric  
**BODY:** AAA Figured maple/poplar/maple laminate  
**MAX WIDTH:** 385mm (15")  
**RIM DEPTH:** 53mm  
**NECK:** Mahogany, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 624mm (24.6")  
**NUT:** Bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Single-bound Richlite, mother-of-pearl block inlays, 305mm (12") radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic (ABR-1) bridge with titanium saddles on rosewood base, 'zig zag' tailpiece, Grover enclosed tuners – gold-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** 2x Gibson MHS covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls  
**OPTIONS:** None. Price upcharge for Dark Natural Vintage finish  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The non-figured ES-275, in Faded Cherry only, costs £2,799  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Montreux Burst (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose

8/10

**PROS** Enjoyable hollowbody with sounds to match its looks; extended range and access

**CONS** Not cheap – and there are many downsized 'jazz box' available options out there!



### GIBSON ES-335 PREMIERE FIGURED

**PRICE:** £2,999 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, thinline semi-solid electric  
**BODY:** AAA Figured maple/poplar/maple laminate  
**MAX WIDTH:** 409mm (16")  
**RIM DEPTH:** 42mm  
**NECK:** Mahogany, Rounded C profile, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 624mm (24.6")  
**NUT:** Bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Single-bound rosewood, m-o-pearl small block inlays, 305mm (12") radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic (ABR-1) bridge with titanium saddles, stud tailpiece with locking studs, Grover enclosed tuners – nickel-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** 2x Gibson MHS covered humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls  
**OPTIONS:** None. The ES-335 Figured version costs from £2,799  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** As the central Memphis model, there are loads of ES-335s to choose from – vintage to modern. Check your dealer/website  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Faded Lightburst with dark brown sides and neck back (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose



9/10

**PROS** If you're not after a 'Historic' ES-335, this is the best we've played; the Premiere tag is about sound

**CONS** A serious investment and almost too much choice of other new 2015/2016 ES-335s



### GIBSON ES-LES PAUL STANDARD

**PRICE:** £2,499 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Single-cutaway, semi-solid electric  
**BODY:** Figured maple/poplar/maple 3-ply laminate (top), plain maple 3-ply laminate back and sides with Adirondack spruce braces and ES-LP centre block  
**MAX WIDTH:** 331mm (13")  
**RIM DEPTH:** 52mm  
**NECK:** Mahogany, Rounded C profile, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 624mm (24.6")  
**NUT:** Bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Single-bound rosewood, pearloid trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Tune-o-matic (ABR-1) bridge with titanium saddles, Lightweight aluminium stud tailpiece, Kluson Single Ring Tulip Button tuners – nickel-plated  
**ELECTRICS:** Gibson MHS humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls  
**OPTIONS:** With f-holes, same price  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** There are numerous ES-LP models to choose. Check your dealer/website  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Lightburst with dark brown back, sides and neck back – gloss nitrocellulose

8/10

**PROS** The LP you've dreamed of – lightweight and resonant for a jazzier/bluesier styles, with a kick

**CONS** There are plenty of deals on ES-LPs out there; pickup squeal may be a problem at higher levels