





Living The Dream

If you love Taylor guitars and everything the brand stands for but hanker for something more organic and vintage in look and sound, read on...

Words Neville Marten Photography Phil Barker



TAYLOR AMERICAN DREAM AD17 BLACKTOP & AD27 £1,715 & £1,619

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What You Need To Know

1 So, what is the American Dream?
This is Taylor's response to COVID-19's effect on people's desire to play great guitars but with perhaps compromised financial situations. Hence, it's a stripped-down range using different timbers, and few cosmetic appointments. It also means the guitars, which ship with Taylor's AeroCase, cost £300 to £400 less than their 300 series equivalents.

2 What are some of these woods?
Ovangkol is a hardwood from West Africa. It's related to bubinga and looks a bit like walnut. Mahogany relative sapele is often used in place of it due to similar appearance and tone, while Australian timber eucalyptus is something of a chameleon, with many different grain styles and colours.

3 Grand Pacific? That's a new one...
This is Taylor's take on the round-shouldered acoustics of yore. Fitted with Andy Powers' V-Class bracing, it's the company's attempt to evoke the look and sounds of classic acoustic recordings. With a broad waist and treble and bass bouts not hugely different in size to one another, there's something of the nylon-string classical guitar look to it.

Anyone who's played a variety of acoustic guitars will have an opinion on where the various brands excel and where each one falls down. This might, of course, not always be accurate but, as they say, perception is the new reality. So, while Taylor has a brilliant reputation for building top-quality, highly playable, reliable and technically advanced instruments, people don't usually talk about the 'Taylor sound'. That's perhaps because, historically, the company has created clear-toned, beautifully balanced instruments, but in ironing out the idiosyncrasies of past designs, it has arguably robbed its own

creations of a distinct voice. So, while the Gibson and Martin characters are pretty recognisable, the same can't always be said of Taylor – or indeed many other top-flight modern acoustic brands.

Taylor's talented guru, master guitar designer and acoustical engineer Andy Powers, has gradually been addressing this situation, bringing in the V-Class bracing system and essentially rethinking the instruments from the ground up. While Powers is keen to retain everything for which Taylor is rightly praised, he's not afraid – with Bob Taylor's active blessing – to radically re-examine things.



Simplicity is the order of the day with the new American Dream range, albeit with Taylor's ever impeccable build quality



It's to this end, and with a little direction from COVID-19, that we see the emergence of the American Dream series. Just as the depression of the 1930s and the havoc wrought by WWII caused the American guitar factories to amend their product lines due to materials shortages and financial hardship in the population, so the emergence of the Coronavirus has created similar circumstances. Taylor and Powers instantly clocked the situation and within a few short months created the American Dream. They call it "inventing our way out of a mess" and, you know what, they may well have hit the jackpot.

The American Dream currently comprises three acoustic instruments, each also available with Taylor's innovative ES2 Expression System. They're stripped down models that remove almost every cosmetic nicety while leaving the instruments looking not only purposeful but insanely attractive. On review we have the AD17 Blacktop and AD27.

The AD17 Blacktop and AD27 are essentially the same guitar, with solid ovangkol back and sides, mahogany neck, eucalyptus fingerboard, bridge and headstock veneer, and solid spruce top. The sole difference is the ebony-finished soundboard of the Blacktop (also with black rather than tortoise pickguard) whose perimeter has been masked off to reveal the top's edges and lift the guitar's appearance.

A sapele body with mahogany top is all that marks out the AD27 as materially

different from the other two, all three models employing the same neck and fingerboard.

To underline these models' designed-in austerity you'll find no binding anywhere, the only eye candy being a basic soundhole rosette, small acrylic dot inlays, the Taylor headstock logo and black heel cap. But it's this very simplicity that makes the ADs so darned attractive. Visually, we would have preferred three-on-a-plate plastic-buttoned tuners over the individual enclosed machines that are fitted – but that may have bumped the price a tad too far.

While the instruments are built with Taylor's enviable precision, the company is happy to allow natural timber imperfections to shine through. Finishes are extremely thin but not buffed smooth, so sinkage into the grain is the order of the day. Headstocks are scarf-jointed and heels added on in order to sensibly cut costs and not waste precious timbers. We applaud such moves as ecologically sound but they also add to the vibe of these instruments.

Feel & Sounds

With their stocky waist and slope-shouldered styling the ADs' Grand Pacific shape puts us in mind of traditional classical guitar designs – or perhaps Lowden's similarly fulsome outline. Size wise, at 508mm (20 inches) long, 406.4mm (16 inches) wide and 117.5mm (4.63 inches) deep, they're broadly dreadnought sized so are great for playing both standing or seated. The lack of binding means Taylor can slightly

1. A thin finish allows the timbers' grain to show through. Note the AD17 Blacktop's black pickguard, simple soundhole rosette and beautifully grained ovangkol back and sides

2. With its eucalyptus overlay, simple black plastic truss rod cover and enclosed individual tuners, the headstock features Taylor's now classic outline

3. You can clearly see the ovangkol's strong grain pattern here and also Taylor's innovative side-mounted strap button, which renders the AD guitars (especially the 'e' models) stage ready





To save costs and also conserve timber, Taylor employs an extremely reliable scarf joint to connect the neck and headstock

round off the bodies' edges for a little extra comfort, with the thin satin finish lending a drag-free feel to body and neck.

With their 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length and 44.5mm (1.75-inch) nut width the guitars feel familiar under the fingers. Both came identically, and perfectly, set up right out of the box, so you wouldn't really know one from the other in that regard. The necks are Taylor's legendarily comfortable shape – a shallow C-meets-V profile that barely deepens from 20mm at the 1st fret to 22mm at the 12th. There's tons of finger space at the nut for clear chording and the actions are low enough for easy barring further up the neck. However, a quick strum of the strings reveals each instrument's inherent character.

While both have clear, rather 'dry' speaking voices, in the Blacktop with its spruce top and ovangkol back and sides one can detect a distinct Gibson dialect; it's strident with sweet trebles and balanced mid- and low-end. At home, whether picking or strumming chords, it's beautifully balanced across the sonic range and would cover virtually all bases.

Switching instruments to audition the AD27, it's clear this is a different beast altogether. Where the Blacktop offers that Gibson-like warmth, with rotundity and top-end sweetness in equal measure, the AD27's sapele/mahogany combination draws in the top and bottom boundaries somewhat, leaving a much more mid-focused instrument. Not surprisingly (and

we would guess not unintentionally), this kicks it into the path of Martin's all-mahogany 15 series – a range of instruments we have consistently admired.

Now, this taming of the outer frequencies might seem to limit the guitar but in truth it merely lends a different singing voice. While we might describe the Blacktop as 'fruity', the AD27 is perhaps more 'nutty'. We could see it kicking out Delta blues, strumming along in a jug band or playing trad jazz. Open-tuned it will really wake up, and with thumb and fingerpicks could be the perfect ragtime vehicle. No, it won't do as many things as well as the Blacktop but where it does excel it nails it.

THE RIVALS

With its street price of around £1,500 Gibson's J-45 Studio is a modern take on the company's vintage workhorse round-shouldered dreadnought. It offers great value, too. The walnut body and Sitka spruce top means it's pretty close to the Taylor AD17 in construction, and with a Fishman Sonitone pickup it's ready for stage action.

One of the true all-mahogany classics, Martin's D-15M (£1,389) features a highly playable 'low oval' neck shape, East Indian rosewood fingerboard and vintage-style open-geared tuners. Also boasting Martin's traditional X bracing, it's a modern-vintage icon.

One of the other great USA marques, Guild brings us the all-mahogany USA-made D-20 (£1,365). It's a square-shouldered model and comes fitted with LR Baggs' excellent Element pickup. It also features rosewood fingerboard and bridge, plus bone nut and saddle, and comes in a full hard case.

Verdict

Bob Taylor and Andy Powers' intention for the American Dream series was that it might speak to lovers of Taylor guitars who might be struggling to find the £2,000 and upwards that its US-made instruments often command. The secondary aim was to evoke the tones of the early recorded acoustic guitars – many of which were Gibson or Martin. The choice of solid timbers such as ovangkol, sapele and eucalyptus, along with the V-Class bracing system and round-shouldered Grand Pacific body shape, have ensured that these guitars are different to what we've generally come to expect from Taylor.



Notice the two-piece heel of the AD27 and see how similar the sapele body grain looks alongside that of the genuine mahogany neck



These instruments don't feel like they've crossed unspoken boundaries for Taylor

It's easy to spit out adjectives such as 'organic', 'earthy' or 'characterful' but in truth they work extremely well when offering up an impression of what these guitars sound like – certainly compared to Taylor's usually pristine palette of tones.

Pin us down and we'd offer that the ovankol/spruce AD17 Blacktop sits within the Gibson umbrella of sounds, whereas the sapele/mahogany AD27 sings with a voice more akin to Martin's mahogany-topped range. That said, these instruments don't feel like they've crossed unspoken boundaries for Taylor, merely that they've pushed a bit further down the path already trodden by the GS Mini and others.

Andy Powers has succeeded in his bid to unleash the tones of the past while retaining the impeccable build and stunning playability that have typified the Taylor ethic for almost 40 years. At around one-and-a-half grand they're still not cheap (get the 'e' version as they are only a smidgen more in real terms), and yet your money brings you two singular but vibey, vintage-toned acoustics with one of the most respected modern brands on the headstock. Living the dream indeed! **A**

4. The grain of the AD27's genuine mahogany really shows through its ultra-thin finish, while the simple soundhole rosette, eucalyptus bridge and tortoise pickguard add understated elegance



TAYLOR AMERICAN DREAM AD17 BLACKTOP

PRICE: £1,715 (inc soft case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: 14-fret Grand Pacific acoustic
TOP: Solid spruce with revealed edges and V-Class bracing
BACK/SIDES: Solid ovankol
MAX RIM DEPTH: 117.5mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406.4mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Schaller style, individual sealed
NUT/WIDTH: Black Tusq, 45.4mm
FINGERBOARD: Eucalyptus, unbound, with 4mm acrylic dot inlays
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Eucalyptus with compensated Micarta saddle/56mm
ELECTRICS: None
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2/4.4
OPTIONS: Electro version available, the AD17e Blacktop (£1,919)
RANGE OPTIONS: The American Dream AD17 (£1,619), with electro system (£1,835), has the same spec as the AD17 Blacktop but with natural satin finish top. Also see AD27 (as reviewed)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Clear satin unbuffered with Blacktop

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9/10

PROS A fabulous, head-turning instrument that plays and sounds great in a variety of musical styles. It packs personality galore, too

CONS If you like your instruments to look shiny and pristine then this one may not be for you



TAYLOR AMERICAN DREAM AD27

PRICE: £1,619 (inc soft case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: 14-fret Grand Pacific acoustic
TOP: Solid mahogany with V-Class bracing
BACK/SIDES: Solid sapele
MAX RIM DEPTH: 117.5mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 406.4mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Schaller style, individual sealed
NUT/WIDTH: Black Tusq, 45.4mm
FINGERBOARD: Eucalyptus, unbound, with 4mm acrylic dot inlays
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Eucalyptus with compensated Micarta saddle/56mm
ELECTRICS: No
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2/4.4
OPTIONS: Electro version available, the AD27e (£1,835)
RANGE OPTIONS: See AD17 and also AD17 Blacktop (as reviewed)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Clear satin with Urban Sienna stain

8/10

PROS Down home and earthy acoustic that's brimming with bluesy vibe and, despite austere appointments, looks very cool

CONS Reduced bottom- and top-ends means it's a specialist, not so much of a versatile all-rounder