



Duesenberg Starplayer TV Outlaw & 49er

£1,160 & £945

Take a German-designed retro Duesenberg, add a thumbs-up from a Stone and you have a runaway success. Or so we're told... by Dave Burrluck

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Initially seeming to be retro also-rans behind the likes of classic brands Gretsch and Rickenbacker, Duesenberg seems to have taken over where Italia left off. Usage and endorsement by Ronnie Wood, with his pearl-front Starplayer TV, has widened the audience dramatically, and Rolling Stones bandmate Keith Richards has taken delivery of a couple of new 49er models. While Duesenberg is keen to point out that there's no official tie-up with Keef, he did pose for a thumbs-up photo holding the Outlaw, which was a contributing factor in this model – originally just a 2005 limited run of 60 pieces – being continued for 2006.

Duesenberg is a German-based company, the brainchild of designer Dieter Gölsdorf, previously responsible for the Rockinger brand of kits and parts. The wooden parts are made in

Korea and assembled in Germany, with hardware and electronics that hail from numerous Far Eastern and German sources. As a consequence, there's no 'Made in...' imprint on the guitars themselves.

Starplayer TV Outlaw

The Starplayer TV is the definitive Duesenberg instrument and it has spawned numerous 'specials' and limited editions, including the Ronnie Wood Signature. While the standard model is available in seven finishes (including a blue and a silver sparkle), the bling factor is high, even in basic black or two-tone sunburst.

Four separate D logos are featured, along with a heavily stylised Duesenberg-logo'd truss rod cover. Even the side-mounted jack socket is elaborate in an Art Deco/auto style, inspired by the luxury Duesenberg cars of the early 20th century, which were once owned by famous names such as Clark Gable and the Duke of Windsor.

The Outlaw differs from the standard model, with a croc-skin black Tolex covering the face of the body and the headstock. And whereas the distinctive pickguard is usually plastic, here it's chrome-plated metal – handy for checking that your hair has just the right degree of tousle mid-gig. But if the Outlaw is one of the most highly

While the Outlaw presents itself as a brighter, more compact version of an ES-335, the 49er comes across as a brighter, twangier version of a Les Paul

accessorised guitars you'll find outside of a custom shop, it's also tidily and intelligently put together. Its centre-blocked, arch-topped laminate construction recalls a single-cutaway ES-335, although there are no linings and the sides seem little thicker than the approximately 4.6mm top.

Internally, the guitar appears very clean, with visible flaming to the maple back visible though the translucent black finish (although the sides and neck are opaque black). The body is bound top and back with a single cream-coloured strip of plastic; likewise the rosewood fingerboard. However, the head seems to have a maple edge, presumably a thin maple facing under the Tolex topping.

The majority of Duesenberg designs are set-necks and here the join is in a classic Gibson style, neat and tidy with no finish pooling at the joint. In terms of shape, the maple neck has quite a chunky D section that feels a little bigger than it actually is, thanks to the fuller shoulders. A little V-ing here might just improve the feel, but it's an old-school, if not classic, shape that's perfectly useable.

Fretwork is tidy too, from a chunky but not over-high wire (2.8mm wide x 1.0mm high). The 'board radius is quoted as 12 inches, though it measures slightly flatter, and while the set-up is a little high, it gives a tough working feel, helped by a full 25.5-inch

DUESENBERG STARPLAYER TV OUTLAW

PRICE: £1,160 (inc case)

ORIGIN: Korea/Germany

TYPE: Single-cutaway, arched-top, semi-solid electric

BODY: Spruce-faced arched-top laminate, flamed maple laminate arched back and sides, centre block (unspecified), fully bound

NECK: Hard rock maple, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH:

648mm (25.5-inches)

NUT/WIDTH: White synthetic/42mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, pearloid dots, 356mm (14-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE:

Duesenberg Super Tremolo vibrato, tune-o-matic-style bridge, Duesenberg Deluxe enclosed tuners with three-step kidney-shaped buttons, all nickel plated

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS:

Duesenberg Grand Vintage humbucker at bridge and DP90 single-coil at neck, three-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb):

3.97/8.75

OPTIONS: The standard

Starplayer TV is £965

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Black leather 'croc-skin' Tolex front and headstock facing, gloss black back, sides and neck (as reviewed)

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STARPLAYER TV OUTLAW TEST RESULTS

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

■ **WE LIKED** Stylish design; good build; retro-inspired sounds and performance

■ **WE DISLIKED** The finish, although the standard model is in more conventional hues

With its black croc-skin covering, the Outlaw is a very distinctive guitar



DUESENBERG STARPLAYER TV OUTLAW & 49ER £1,160 & £945

ELECTRICS



DUESENBERG 49ER
As Outlaw, except...
PRICE: £945 (inc. case),
£870 (exc. case)
ORIGIN: Korea/Germany
TYPE: Single-cutaway,
arched-top solidbody
electric, fully bound
BODY: Arched maple
on solid mahogany
back (flat)
NECK: Mahogany,
glued-in
HARDWARE:
Duesenberg STB system
with tune-o-matic-style
bridge and adjustable
strings-thru-body
anchorage, Duesenberg
Z-tuners with three-step
kidney-shaped buttons,
all nickel plated
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.3/9.5
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS:
Duesenberg's pickups
and hardware are
available separately.
The humbucking-sized
P-90-style Domino costs
£48; likewise the Grand
Vintage humbucker
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Black (as
reviewed), amber and
blue pearl (plus £50)

49ER	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ WE LIKED Well-made, retro-looking single-cut; good sounds and performance	
■ WE DISLIKED Not everyone will get the point of the adjustable tailpiece	

→ scale and heavy-bottomed .010-.050-inch gauge strings. This is a guitar you want to attack.

Duesenberg is also becoming well known for its highly useable hardware and pickups, most of which are available as after-market parts. The Super Tremola is an 'improved' Bigsby-style design with easy string anchorage, where the strings hook into a bar under the lower roller so you don't have to mess around with those silly pins. The forward roller bar is also grooved so that the strings line up correctly with the saddles.

The bridge is a tune-o-matic style, but with its vintage fixing, it slightly rocks as the arm is depressed. It all feels very smooth in action and lowers the pitch around three semitones on the low E, and half a semitone on the high E. Return to pitch is good too, even before the strings are properly stretched. The nut's string grooves have been beautifully smoothed and there's been a lot of care lavished on these important performance details.

The Grand Vintage humbucker and DP90 Domino single-coil is pretty much the standard pairing on most Duesenberg electrics. With their open tops and side covers, there's more shielding than you'd get with an open-coil humbucker, plus there's the obviously Gretsch/Rickenbacker-like retro appearance.

Control-wise, things are simple, with a three-way lever switch (with natty nickel-plated switch-tip, of course), master volume and tone controls that have knurled-edged, nickel-plated knobs with contoured tops and a large ridge so you can see and feel exactly

where you are. Typically, they look good, but like many other aspects of these Duesenberg instruments, they're highly functional too. Even the enclosed tuners, with their three-step kidney-shaped buttons, introduce a new twist on a classic design. If this sounds as good as it looks, we're onto something...

49er
Despite the single-cut outline of the Starplayer, up until this point, Duesenberg hasn't offered a mahogany/maple set-neck single-cut to challenge a Les Paul. The closest to date has been the Starplayer Special, though that's a bolt-on, so the 49er fills an obvious gap. However, if you're expecting it to be a Les Paul-alike, think again. Duesenberg doesn't do the obvious, and this guitar has its own quirks and sonic twists.

Under its gloss black paint job, we have a 58mm-thick maple/mahogany laminate (the carved maple top is 20mm thick) and the translucent amber samples we've seen don't go for a default figured wood – it's definitely in the plain-top category. Again, we have binding on both top and bottom, but like a Les Paul, the back is flat and there's no ribcage cut. It's a slightly downsized outline – 440mm long and 317mm wide, as opposed to the Starplayer's 459mm x 340mm dimensions – though because it's solid, it's noticeably weightier.

There are numerous similarities between this and the Starplayer. Not only are the necks nearly identical (though the 49er's is, we're told, mahogany), but both have the same pickups, controls and bridge. We get one less D logo and the scratchplate is a strange greeny-looking plastic that looks like those luminous plastic stars that you stick on your kid's ceiling. It's not as rock 'n' roll as the Outlaw's 'plate but at least this one fits the top contour more snugly.



The enigmatic headstock and cool fixtures just scream fifties retro

That aside, the major differences concern the string anchorage. Behind the tune-o-matic, there's a wide V-shaped sextet of knurled-edge collars as the strings emerge from the back of the body where they're anchored in metal caps. As supplied, these front collars are of differing heights, with the tallest on the outer strings.

Once again, though, there's method in Duesenberg's apparent madness: because of these different heights (which are adjustable), the string angles behind the tune-o-matic remain constant, as if the strings were anchored in a conventional stud tailpiece, when in fact it's a Tele-like through-body system. How you set these collars is up to you. Whereas some players like to have the stud tailpiece on a Gibson-style guitar quite high to avoid string breakage, here you can do that on a specific string.

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ELECTRICS



Adjustable collars are designed to reduce string breakage and also aid the intonation

The rivals

Epiphone Les Paul Standard from £539
Yamaha SA503 TVL

£649

Gretsch G6128T Duo Jet w/Bigsby £1,699

Epiphone's Les Paul Standard is still one of the best hardtail single-cuts in its class. This classic, affordable LP is available in a variety of colours, including black. Yamaha's Troy Van Leeuwen signature is based on an ES-335 but with Bigsby, three P-90 single-coils and some neat switching. Great build, looks good and sounds good too. Gretsch remains the inspiration for many retro brands and the Duo Jet is a sealed-body semi available with or without Bigsby and a pair of twangsome Filtertron pickups – a class act

→ The tuners also appear very similar to those on the Starplayer but are in fact Duesenberg's new Z-tuners. Like the old Fender 'split-post' tuner, you thread the string into the post for much tidier fitting, but here the post hole goes right through to the back of the tuner. You literally push all the string through the tuner and clip it off at the back, which is neat. Here, though, there's also a standard hole in the post if you prefer, and the post itself is only cut away on one side, not both, as on the Fender that can lead to the post tips becoming bent or even breaking away. They're smooth in use, with tension adjustment should you need it.

SOUNDS: With both guitars fitted with the same electronics, there's clearly going to be some similarities here. First off, the Outlaw presents quite a wide tonal palette. The bridge humbucker has plenty of bite, countered by the neck pickup's smooth nose. Both pickups together adds a little harmonic funk and, overall, it's a nicely balanced guitar in terms of relative pickup output. There's a twangy stridency to the tone played clean that certainly has some Gretsch-y vibe about it, while the combination of the Tremola and semi-hollow body adds a little openness to the sound. It's not as dark or round as an ES-335, perhaps,

but not as focused as the 49er proves to be. Typically, with a little crunchy gain, the Outlaw creates a typical semi texture – it's less predictable than a solidbody and reasonably feedback friendly; indeed, it's easy to evoke musical feedback here. It's more microphonic than the 49er too, and there's quite a metallic 'clonk' as you change pickup selections.

The 49er is no easier to pigeonhole, producing a similarly wide tonal

range from the pickup selections, although at higher gains it sounds a little smoother and more rock ready. It's a more direct sound too, and certainly with reduced guitar volume, there's twang aplenty from the bridge pickup, and some good Fender-like mixed sounds

too. On both guitars, the neck pickup sounds very smooth, while on the 49er it's a very vocal tone with additional gain, and only at really high gains does it mush up excessively.

While the Outlaw presents itself as a brighter and more compact – both tonally and physically – version of an ES-335, the 49er comes across as a brighter, twangier version of a Les Paul. The controls on both are well placed for easy adjustment and although the string gauge and tight feel will be alien to some players, both guitars feel very stage ready and businesslike.

If you're expecting the 49er to be a Les Paul-alike, think again. Duesenberg doesn't do the obvious, and this one has its own quirks

Verdict

We've often said that as far as guitar design goes, you can't reinvent the wheel. Certainly, both of these Duesenberg guitars have a lot of retro influence and both exude a stage-ready attitude that's perhaps the key to the success of this brand. The auto references, in name and style, create a very classy vibe, and if the basic guitars are competent, the hardware and pickups add highly functional icing to the cake. The 49er's adjustable strings-thru-body set-up is unique, as are its Z-tuners, while the Outlaw's tremolo is virtually a work of functional art.

Both guitars offer a pretty wide range of sounds, with a sort of Gretsch/Fender stridency to the fore that's just as comfortable with twangsome alt.country as it is with more modern rock and pop tones. Despite their retro references, both sound and look very much like guitars of the moment.

While the Outlaw aptly illustrates why the Starplayer TV is Duesenberg's classic calling card, the 49er shows how a single-cut solidbody doesn't have to be a Les Paul knock-off in either sound or style. If you haven't experienced the Duesenberg vibe yet, we suggest that you try one out for yourself and see what the fuss is all about. **A**

Duesenberg Starplayer TV Outlaw

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Duesenberg 49er

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★