



Words Jonathan Horsley / Photography Olly Curtis

# AFFORDABLE SPEED MACHINES

With slim necks to match slim pocketbooks and double-locking vibratos as standard, these electrics are built to rock fast and hard



**Y**ou want it fast. You want it cheap. In this day and age, who doesn't? But how realistic is it to rock up at your local guitar emporium and walk off with a shred-ready electric for around 500 bucks? Well, as this month's round-up proves, it's more than feasible. We could have extended this test to models from Schecter, Jackson and LTD, too, and hardly covered all the bases. This month's affordable speed machines are culled from arguably the most competitive marketplace for guitar design, and that's great news for everyone – especially when you have

the hardy perennial Squier Stratocaster fitted with active pickups and a double-locking Floyd Rose vibrato for guitarists looking to take their lead game to the next level. It's joined by two fiscally responsible signature models in the form of the EVH Wolfgang Standard and Ibanez JEMJR, and Kramer's wacko-spandex retro-shredder: the 84. All have double-locking vibrato units, zippy necks, little nips and tucks to ease you into an orgiastic display of hemi-demi-semi-quavers. Powerful humbuckers are the order of the day. Hell, these high-powered electrics might even set your hair on fire. But, rest assured, they won't cost you an arm and a leg.







## EVH WOLFGANG STANDARD

£455

### Steady like Eddie

**Wait, is this an EVH signature model for less than £500?**

Yes, it is. There are, of course, a few concessions on the spec when compared with the US models; there is no D-Tuna, for instance. But with the reverse pickup switching, the double-locking Floyd Rose vibrato, the basswood body, the shape and the feel... EVH (or Fender, rather, who manufactures EVH), has done a great job of downscaling this for the average-salaried musician.

**Speaking of scale, that headstock's pretty weird.**

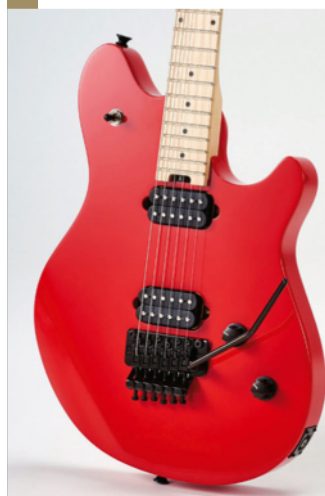
There's not much to it, and it contributes to the Wolfgang's unique



feel. Designed for comfort and playability, it feels like a short-scale guitar even though it's a Fender-sized 25.5". There's something toy-like about the Wolfgang, and that's not a criticism. It's easy and effortless.

**So it's fun, then?**

When you think of Van Halen's back catalogue, it's all about fun, and the Wolfgang is no different. Its 'comfort cut' a contour on the forearm side, not to mention the neat sculpting on the belly and heel, make the Wolfgang feel like an extension of your body.



### AT A GLANCE

**KEY FEATURES:** Basswood body, maple neck (bolt-on), 647mm (25.5") scale, maple fretboard, 22 jumbo frets, 2x EVH Wolfgang humbuckers (neck and bridge), three-way pickup selector, 1x master tone, 1x master volume, EVH Floyd Rose Special vibrato

**FINISH:** Gloss Black, Matte Blue Frost, Ferrari Red (as reviewed)

**CONTACT:** Fender EMEA 01342 331700 [evhgear.com](http://evhgear.com)

## IBANEZ JEMJR STEVE VAI SIGNATURE

£449

### The jewel in the crown

**Is this to Vai's fans what the Wolfgang is to Eddie's?**

Surely. Since 1987, and as far as Steve Vai fans are concerned, the Ibanez JEM has represented the alpha and omega of shred guitar design. With the iconic Monkey Grip on the bass side of the body, the smart Lion's Claw tremolo cavity, and the Tree of Life inlay, this looks like the real deal.

**What's this Lion's Claw tremolo cavity?**

Well, it's the sculpting under the bridge and it allows a lot more play on your Floyd Rose vibrato; fret a harmonic, pull back on the bar,



and rest assured that you'll have the neighbour's dog howling in no time.

**That finish is intense. Is this a metal guitar?**

It's more than capable of metal. But while the INF2 Alnico 5 humbucker in the bridge is one hot potato, there's a classic rock quality to it that's capable of a lot more. The neck's INF1 'bucker is real doozy, too, with a little more of that equine nasal quality that's trademark Vai. Basically, in Vai parlance, this Bad Horse is no one-trick pony.



### AT A GLANCE

**KEY FEATURES:** Mahogany body, Wizard III maple neck (bolt-on), 647mm (25.5"), rosewood fretboard with Tree of Life inlay, 24 jumbo frets, 1x INF1 Humbucker (neck) INF51 Alnico 5 single coil (middle), INF2 Alnico 5 humbucker (bridge), five-way pickup selector, 1x master tone, 1x master volume, Ibanez Standard Double-Locking vibrato, Monkey Grip

**FINISH:** Pink, Yellow, White

**CONTACT:** Headstock Distribution 0121 508 6666 [ibanez.com](http://ibanez.com)

## SQUIER CONTEMPORARY ACTIVE STRATOCASTER

£420

### A bargain-buy Superstrat

#### What's the deal with the active pickups?

Well, they're there to serve a purpose, and that purpose is high-output with zero hum, and these Squier humbuckers are a hugely impressive budget alternative to the more celebrated EMGs you might find on a pro-spec instrument. They're powered by a nine-volt battery, which is stored in the rear of the instrument and accessed via a plastic clip.

#### So this makes for a very different type of Strat.

It sure does. That single-coil bite, the bright twang Strats are



renowned for has given way to a more pugnacious tone, with great bass and treble response. It's super-articulate (a Strat quality, come to think of it) in clean and overdriven tones. But, goodness gracious: fire up the gain and this thing wails.

#### Aren't there faster electrics on the market than a Squier Strat?

You're probably right, but the Stratocaster's easy C maple neck is more than shreddable. With its satin-smooth finish, you won't find your fretting hand gumming it up when you're sweating bullets, and the heavier fretwire helps to make it super-playable.



#### AT A GLANCE

**KEY FEATURES:** Poplar body, maple neck (bolt-on), 647mm (25.5") scale, rosewood fretboard, 22 jumbo frets, 2x Squier Active humbuckers (neck and bridge), three-way pickup selector, 1x master tone, 1x master volume, Floyd Rose Licensed vibrato

**FINISH:** Olympic White (as reviewed), Flat Black

**CONTACT:** Fender EMEA 01342 331700 fender.com

## KRAMER THE 84

£569

### For the discerning Atomic Punk

#### Did Eddie Van Halen play this one, too?

Yes, in fact, he did. During the 80s, Kramer was the archetypal Eddie guitar – a hot-rodded S-style that ushered in the arms race in shred guitars. Van Halen hooked up with Kramer in 1981, only to switch to Ernie Ball/Music Man a decade later.

#### Why is the paint job different?

Kramer's 'Diver Down' paint job is a not-so-subtle homage, the white strip on red a cultural reference to EVH's now-trademarked black and white stripes on red.



#### We like it, but doesn't this need a second pickup to justify the price tag?

There is no denying that the 84 is a specialist instrument. Think sparkly, harmonically-rich rock tones. Some might want more, but with the coil-split, it has some single-coil snark that only the JEMJR can compete with, and, even then, it doesn't have the snap and bite of the 84. Indeed, with that headstock and finish, the 84 might not be the first guitar you'd rock up to the Grand Ole Opry with, but there sure is a rich seam of country twang to be mined from it.



#### AT A GLANCE

**KEY FEATURES:** Maple body, maple neck (bolt-on), 647mm (25.5") scale, maple fretboard, 22 jumbo frets, 1x Seymour Duncan JB humbucker (neck), 1x master volume w/coil-tap, Floyd Rose vibrato

**FINISH:** Diver Down (as reviewed), Banana Yellow, White Bullseye, Red Bullseye, White

**CONTACT:** Gibson kramerguitars.com





# HEAD TO HEAD

Enjoy an adrenaline rush with the speed freaks

**G**iven that Eddie Van Halen did as much as anybody to advance the popularity of shred guitar, not to mention the pioneering of the souped-up S-style electrics on which it was perfected, we should start with the Wolfgang and the Kramer. It's fascinating seeing them side-by-side. The 84's headstock is an oversized hockey stick that's in sharp contrast to the dainty, jig-sawed counterpart on the Wolfgang. Physically, the Wolfgang fits snug against the body, its basswood body modestly weighted, and perfect for smaller guitarists, or those wishing mercy upon their lower back.

With its maple body and maple neck, the 84 is a real behemoth, with a Les Paul-esque weight. Yet you can hear a lot of Eddie in both their tones. The 84 has a super-crispy crunch and that LA lead tone, evocative of the Sunset Strip glam scene. Mounted proud of the body, its Seymour Duncan JB humbucker has great mids and sparkling trebles, gutsy and

## THE 84 HAS THAT LA LEAD TONE EVOCATIVE OF THE SUNSET STRIP GLAM SCENE...

harmonically rich. We love the Wolfgang's humbuckers, too; the bridge pickup is as hot as you'd like, the neck brings out some of the cow tone, while both pickups selected in series gives a truly awesome rhythm tone.

The vibrato units on the Wolfgang and the 84 are super-stable, but unlike the Squier and the JEM Junior, they're routed to only allow divebombing. That's in keeping with the Van Halen vibe but that might be a deal-breaker for those looking for maximum versatility from their vibrato. You'll find that in spades with the JEM Junior and the Squier Strat. The Squier sounds the most aggressive; those active pickups are mother's milk to disciples of Hetfield and Hammett. But there's something very musical about the JEM Junior's voice, as happy dispensing jazz-funk fusion as it is *Eruption*, and its mahogany body gives it a warmth and thickness that marks it aside from its rivals. As for neck profiles, the JEM's Wizard III is seriously quick.

The iconic monkey grip on the Steve Vai signature



The super-articulate Squier with humbuckers



# FINAL VERDICT

Which shred machine is the right one for you?

**O**verall, the JEM Junior is hard to beat. Your ocular nerves won't thank us for such a recommendation – because, seriously, that pink finish could be seen from space – but its combination of authentic Vai touches, like the Tree of Life inlay and sonic versatility, could, and maybe should, give it the edge. But the Squier is a clear winner for anyone who values a high-gain voice over all else. Its reverse headstock is a nice touch, too,

marking it as the problem child in the Squier stable. The company has done a bang-up job in reimagining a near-ubiquitous guitar so that it surprises us anew. Its finish is impeccable, too.

Some finish issues on the Kramer 84 – frets that are a little sharp on the treble side of the fingerboard – allied to its weight might make it difficult for a wider audience to love, but those weened on Van Halen, or superfans of the Seymour Duncan JB1, might find its tone

too much to resist. Besides, a half-hour with a fret-file would make it tip-top. As for the Wolfgang, its playability and full-throated humbuckers are ridiculous for that price, and if it came down to that and the JEM Junior, it might be a case of whose sound and style do you love more: Steve Vai, the Zen master of cosmic shredding, or Eddie Van Halen, the OG? We can't help you with that. But we can conclude the market for super-spec'd and affordable electrics has never been stronger.

## EVH WOLFGANG STANDARD



## IBANEZ JEMJR STEVE VAI SIGNATURE



## SQUIER CONTEMPORARY ACTIVE STRATOCASTER



## KRAMER THE 84



SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★

SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★

SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★

SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★