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THE NEW WAVE OF THE OLD SCHOOL



ESP PHOENIX
IS THIS A BASS REBORN?



bassplayer



50
years of

Led Zep IV

JOHN PAUL JONES

We explore the
bass secrets of a
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Plus!
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BASS CENTRE

Ashbory

Time for something a little different,
suggests our Editor...

BASS CENTRE
www.basscentre.com

£345

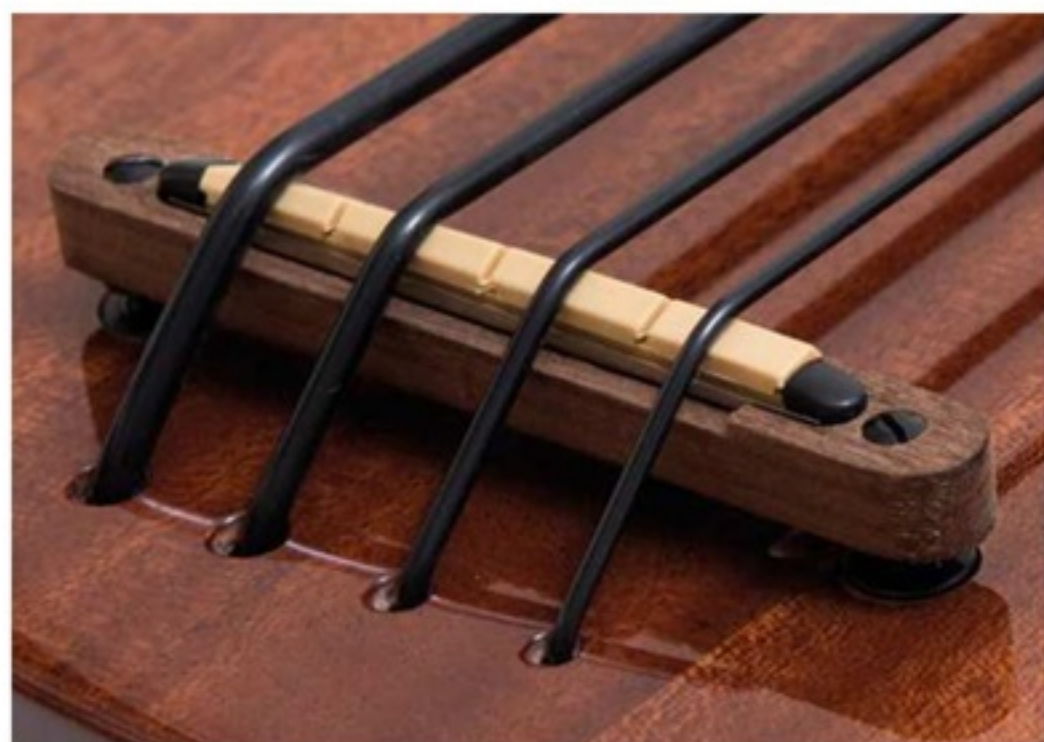
The Ashbory story goes back as far as the late Eighties, and while these rubber-stringed, small-bodied instruments have a reputation for quirkiness in a classically English way, most of their owners are actually in the USA, thanks to a production deal with Guild in the Nineties. You can read the full story at the Bass Centre's website – and it's a revealing tale, digging deep into the vagaries of instrument distribution and manufacture – but suffice it to say that this new bass, also available as a ukulele, has changed radically over the years. The silicon rubber strings are still in place, but the tuners are way more robust, and the active electronics – and therefore the tones – have been completely revamped. Let's see how it matches up.

Build Quality

Small, affordable basses often suffer from cost-cutting in the fine details, but there's no evidence of that here. The body is a smooth, slickly-finished slab, the 24" scale neck is fitted securely and the tuners do their job with little effort – no mean feat given the chunky rubber strings. There's very little superfluous detail, with the under-saddle piezo pickup invisible for obvious reasons, a simple three-control layout and a wooden bridge with through-body stringing. Everything fits together as it should, and there are no sharp fret ends, wobbly pots or any other evidence of quality-control skipping. How refreshing.

Sounds And Playability

At only 5.5 pounds in weight and with its short scale, the Ashbory



probably wouldn't produce particularly epic tones as a passive instrument, hence the turbocharged active electronics under the hood. While the treble boost is excellent, giving the player all sorts of zippy clank to use, it's at the bottom end where the instrument excels. Max out the bass boost and you'll find a fully-ledged reggae and/or soul tone, presumably designed in so that whining reviewers like me won't bewail the lack of a full low end. It's genuinely huge, and indeed I suggest you have this secret weapon ready to deploy the moment your guitarist makes a sarcastic comment about how small the Ashbory is.

The real reason to buy, or not as the case may be, is the silicon rubber strings. Personally, I really like the feel and playability of this material, unfamiliar as it undoubtedly is, because silicon enables fast legato playing, with a grippiness that lends precision. You may disagree, though, and for any number of reasons. If your style requires heavy, picked downstrokes, for example, you may miss the mass of metal strings. If you tap and slap, those techniques are perfectly doable with rubber strings, but the feel is very different. Furthermore, the strings bend with great ease, and while I enjoy the bluesy expression that this enables, this may not be for you.

Conclusion

I had so much fun with the Ashbory that I hate to give it back, but of course there's no real way from reading words on the printed page that you can get a true picture of the way it feels. Try one if you can: the instrument has huge charm. Live gigs are coming back, we're told, and the next time you're faced with aggressive airline check-in staff, you'll be glad of a bass that you can simply stick in an overhead locker. ■

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

RRP | £345

Made In | China

Body | Mahogany

Neck | Maple, 24" scale

Neck Join | Bolt-on, four bolts

Fretboard | Richlite, 22 frets

Pickups | Under-saddle piezo

Controls | Volume, active treble and bass boost

Weight | 2.5kg / 5.5 lbs

Left-hand available? | No

Case/gigbag supplied? | Gigbag

WHAT WE THINK

Plus | Very playable; powerful tones

Minus | The rubber strings are an acquired taste

Overall | Affordable, useful and portable – a wonderful little bass

BGM RATING

BUILD QUALITY

★★★★★★★☆☆

SOUND QUALITY

★★★★★★★☆☆

VALUE

★★★★★★★☆☆

THE 2021 BASS PLAYER AWARDS ISSUE

bassplayer

ONE OF FOUR COLLECTABLE COVERS!
• BASS PLAYER AWARDS •

MARCUS
MILLER
GAIL ANN
DORSEY,
JOHN TAYLOR
+ CHARLES
BERTHOUD

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT

MARCUS MILLER

*"I'm always evolving. I don't
want to sound like it's 1983!"*

PLUS TAL WILKENFELD THE ULTIMATE SESSION BASSIST?
GEAR OF 2021 THE BEST BASSES, AMPS
AND EFFECTS OF THE YEAR
QUEEN WE MEET THEIR FIRST BASS PLAYER

FUTURE

GEAR OF THE YEAR 2021

So, which was the least worst year for music, 2020 or 2021? It's a close call. Fortunately, we've had plenty of cool new gear to console ourselves with. Behold the best bass guitars, amps and effects of the year! Did your favourite bass-related product make the cut?

As the pandemic finally seems to be coming under control, there's a lot to celebrate in bass world, not least because there's been some great gear to drool over. Sure, with no in-person gear shows, manufacturers of basses, amps and effects haven't found it easy to show us what they do, but we're here to help them with that task.

As usual, we've separated the bass guitars, the busiest area of the market, into four price bands for convenience, meaning that the winner in each band is rated against similarly-priced instruments. Items rated two to five – or two to 10 in the midmarket section, where bass releases are most common – in each price group are not ranked, so an item rated second isn't necessarily any better than an item

rated fifth, as we see it. Each product comes with a brief excerpt from our review. Note that the price groupings are broad: given the varying recommended and street prices, there's little point in specifying exact numbers.

We would like to offer our sincerest thanks to the relevant manufacturers, distributors, and retailers for their help over the past 12 months for supplying us with their amazing products. Better times are ahead!

Reviewers: **BB** Bob Brinkman, **MB** Mike Brooks, **TB** Tom Bowlus, **DC** Dave Clarke, **SC** Stuart Clayton, **HD** Hywel Davies, **JD** Joe Daly, **IG** Ian Glasper, **KJ** Kevin Johnson, **SL** Steve Lawson, **JM** Joel McIver, **PM** Phil Mann, **KS** Kevin Sanders, **JT** Jon Thorne, **FV** Freddy Villano

BEST BASS *Less Than £500*

WINNER

Sire V2 U5

www.andertons.co.uk

Marcus Miller's Sire J-Bass model has been widely admired since its launch for its practical playability and no-nonsense price point. It doesn't seek to refine the J envelope or stray away from the 60-year-old template, and it doesn't break the bank either. This short-scale bass guarantees a rather different feel to that of its grown-up sibling, too. It's built in Indonesia, enabling its relatively low pricetag, but that doesn't mean it plays like a cheap bass. On the contrary: its alder body features a flamed maple top and binding that give it a tangibly lustrous feel under the fingers. The tobacco sunburst finish, or Sire's take on that design at least, is enhanced by the tiger stripes across the body, making it both cosmetically and economically a category winner. JM



Epiphone Embassy www.gibson.com

In body shape at least, this new Embassy is a replica of the original 1963-69 instrument. That bass's slightly ungainly four-in-a-row headstock was replaced by a smoother, beaky effort in the Japanese reissue from the Eighties, and again from 2004 to 2008; it now comes with a two-by-two headstock which, it must be said, serves the vintage look admirably.

Talking of the 2000s reissue, that bass came with long horns, presumably in an effort to fix the pesky headstock dive; those have quite rightly been banished permanently, leaving us with a friendly-looking bass that oozes Sixties-ness. You can gaze at the beautiful finish, with its slight sparkle, for hours, and the playability and tones are faithful to the original design. JM



Vintage Statesboro' www.jhs.co.uk

The near Jazz-bass dimensions of the neck make this instrument immediately familiar and comfortable, although playing the Statesboro' does take a little adjustment if you've only ever played a regular electric bass. We found the best technique was to play with your right hand resting on the top edge of the fingerboard. Vintage are marketing the Statesboro' as a bass that's been conceived to play blues; certainly, it's perfect for accompanying an acoustic guitarist playing slow, shuffling 12-bars and singing about railroads. However, it's much more versatile than that. Acoustically, there's just about enough volume here to play with a small folk band at an unplugged pub session, or perhaps with a jazz pianist and vocalist. KS



Bass Centre Ashbory www.basscentre.com

The reason to buy this unusual bass, or not as the case may be, is the silicon rubber strings. We liked the feel and playability of this material, unfamiliar as it undoubtedly is, because silicon enables fast legato playing, with a grippiness that lends precision. It comes with turbocharged active electronics under the hood, and while the treble boost is excellent, giving the player all sorts of zippy clank to use, it's at the bottom end where the instrument excels. Max out the bass boost and you'll find a fully-leaded reggae and/or soul tone, presumably designed in so that whining reviewers like us won't bewail the lack of a full low end. We suggest you have this secret weapon ready to deploy the moment your guitarist makes a sarcastic comment about how small the Ashbory is. JM

Harley-Benton JB75 www.thomann.de

The JB-75 is a little on the heavy side, but we're confident that's not going to put off many players. Nor does the lack of authentic inlays on the board bother us, as your fingers won't know the difference. Handling better than a four-by-four over a rocky back road, the maple fretboard makes your hands feel right at home, giving you a smooth, clear ride no matter where you're playing. We barely touched the machine heads, which is always a plus, especially as the bass arrived in tune. HD





Charlie Jones • Bass with Goldfrapp, Page/Plant & many more • Elites Strings user for 25 years

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