

SMALL & MIGHTY

CAN YOU REALLY GET FULL-BODIED FLAVOUR FROM A SIZE-0 ACOUSTIC? PAUL ALCANTARA TRIES THE ATKIN DIET

... Back in the 1970s, the search for a pro-quality, steel-strung flattop acoustic inevitably led to an American-made instrument. Gibson, Martin and Guild offered a standard of manufacturing that most homegrown luthiers in the UK could only aspire to. More recently, US manufacturers like Collings and Santa Cruz have upped the ante with vintage recreations that match the best from the exalted pre-war era of acoustic guitar building.

"When I encountered my first Collings," Alister Atkin recalls, "I saw a build quality that I'd previously thought was impossible to achieve. I had to go home and seriously rethink the direction that I was heading in." If the Atkin guitar reviewed below is anything to go by, the lesson was well learnt. Today Atkin offers a truly world-class product, a fact reflected by a growing list of users that includes Boo Hewerdine, Nick Harper, Chris Difford, Mark Potter (of Mercury Prize-winning Manchester band Elbow), Richard Hawley and a certain Ronan Keating!

BODY & NECK

"I wasn't aware that anyone had built a small bodied guitar with a 14-fret neck until Doug Chandler (Collings' UK distributor) showed me a Collings flattop that was based on a pre-war 0-sized Martin," says Alister Atkin. "I'd been trying to build a small-bodied version of a Martin OM for some time and until Doug disabused me, I thought that I'd actually come up with something new!"

The 'O' model is the smallest guitar currently offered by Atkin. Though its body dimensions are not identical to those of the aforementioned Martin – the Atkin is approximately 3mm shallower in the body, 5mm shorter and around 9mm wider – the overall shape is more or less the same.

The review guitar's bookmatched top is built from close-grained Sitka spruce (Engelmann spruce or cedar tops are also available at no extra charge), while its back and sides are made from Indian rosewood. The rosewood that Atkin uses is a distinctively deep, honey-brown colour that is quite unlike the purplish shade that's usually associated with this timber.

Both the back and front are bound →

GBINFO



ATKIN O STANDARD

PRICE: £1,895 as reviewed

BUILT IN: UK

SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9 inches)

NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.67 inches)

STRING SPACING AT NUT: 37.5mm (1.47 inches)

TOP: Solid Sitka spruce

BACK & SIDES: Solid Indian rosewood

NECK: Brazilian mahogany

FINGERBOARD: Ebony, 406mm radius (16 inches)

FRETS: 20 medium/thin

BRIDGE: Ebony

STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 55mm (2.1 inches)

MACHINEHEADS: Grover Sta-Tite vintage-style open-gear tuners, nickel

FINISHES: Natural (no extra charge – base price £1,695), black top (add £150), sunburst top (add £200, shown), sunburst top, body and neck (add £400); high-gloss nitro-cellulose

WEIGHT: 1.58kg (3.5lb)

CASE: TKL Prestige Arch-Top Case included

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra charge

OPTIONS: See website for full list of wood, finish, binding, hardware & pickup options

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MAN AND MACHINE

ALISTER ATKIN ON THE PROS AND CONS OF EMPLOYING NEW TECHNOLOGY

■ Atkin Guitars has recently acquired a CNC (computer numerical control) automated routing machine.

Before deciding to go down the CNC route, Alister Atkin talked to some of the big names who have already invested in this technology. "I asked about their experiences with CNC and got a variety of conflicting answers," he laughs. "Bob Taylor said, 'Get one, it's a no brainer!' while Bill Collings commented 'You'll never make any money out of it – we never have'! I hope that CNC technology will bring a little more continuity to my guitars but I'm determined not to compromise anything that we do. If something is better when it's made by hand, then that's how we'll continue to do it. Our new



CNC machine is currently sitting downstairs in the machine room. Wish us luck – we hope to switch it on next week!"



■ The Brazilian mahogany neck is fitted with an unbound ebony fingerboard

"A PERFECT CHOICE FOR FINGERSTYLE PLAYERS"



with a black/white/black wood border that is framed by an outer layer of ebony. Additional details include a rather attractive tortoiseshell celluloid rosette – a welcome change from the by now ubiquitous circle of abalone – and an ebony pinned belly bridge.

Atkin favours a traditional nitro-cellulose finish, which he polishes to a high gloss. "There are quicker ways of finishing a guitar," he



says, "but nitro has a look and feel that no other finish can achieve. It ages beautifully and, more importantly, it's thin."

While the back and sides of the review guitar have been left *au naturel*, the front features a sunburst finish that adds £200 to the base price of £1,695. A black top costs an extra £150, while an all-over sunburst on the body and neck adds £400. Atkin offers a variety of sunbursts, including two- and three-tone finishes in cherry, tobacco and black. "We can do whatever is asked of us," says



Alister. "It's fun to try out new ideas, or attempt to match a classic 'burst from a vintage guitar. It's one of those jobs that I look forward to. It's like jamming with an airbrush!"

The Atkin O model's neck is built with a separate heel and a scarf-jointed headstock, a style of construction now seen on all Atkin guitars. "Our decision to go with a three-piece neck was due to the dwindling stocks of Brazilian mahogany, which we use for the necks of all of our guitars," Alister explains.

Although this approach certainly ups Alister's green credentials, some players will inevitably regard the use of a scarf joint on an instrument costing the best part of two grand as unacceptable. This is largely down to the fact that American steel-string guitars have traditionally been built with a one-piece neck.

The times they are a-changing, however, and unless endangered tonewoods are used responsibly, the future of our favourite fretted instrument appears bleak indeed. In the world of classical guitars, spliced headstocks are now standard practice and, if properly executed, this method of construction should provide plenty of strength and have no adverse impact on the guitar's tone or performance whatsoever.

The nut width is a standard



DETAILS
A COMPACT FLATTOP
BOASTING VERSATILITY
AND LOTS OF VOLUME



■ The headstock is fitted with open-backed, nickel-plated Grover Sta-Tite vintage-style tuners



■ The body is finished in traditional nitro-cellulose lacquer and polished to a high gloss



■ The strings are held in place by a smoothly carved pinned ebony belly bridge



GBVERDICT

ATKIN O STANDARD
GOLD STARS

- ★ Top-notch materials
- ★ Very high build quality
- ★ Excellent, surprisingly big and loud sound

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Anyone looking for a compact yet big-sounding acoustic for both fingerstyle and flatpicking

GBRATING



43mm (1.67 inches) but in cross section, the neck is very slim – it is closer in feel to the neck of a Taylor guitar than that of a Martin, Collings or other vintage-style flattop.

According to Alister, this reflects the preference of guitarists who have grown up playing Strats and Les Pauls. “I like fat necks myself,” he comments, “but most players these days seem to prefer a slender, electric-style neck.” Since all Atkin guitars are, in effect, custom-built, Alister can shape the neck to any profile that you specify.

The unbound ebony fingerboard has been left plain (although some helpful little dots along the edge of the fingerboard should prevent you from getting lost) and fitted with 20 medium/thin frets, all of which are expertly profiled and polished.

The headstock shape is virtually identical to that of the budget-priced Kalamazoo brand acoustics that Gibson built prior to World War II. Here it is seen with an ebony overlay that carries the Atkin logo in mother-of-pearl. A set of open-backed, nickel-plated Grover Sta-Tite vintage-style tuners provide a wallet

friendly alternative to Waverly tuners, which add £100 to the price.

SOUNDS

Where guitars are concerned, size and loudness can often appear in inverse proportions, a fact borne out by the Atkin O model’s astonishing volume. This little guitar is seriously loud!

An excellent balance between the bass and treble strings makes it a perfect choice for fingerstyle players, though it sounds equally good played with a pick too. The O model works well in an acoustic line up, where its gutsy voice and powerful projection enable it to cut through the other instruments with ease.

All told, it’s a versatile instrument that’s equally at home pumping out bluesy lead lines, strumming gentle chords or fingerpicking complex accompaniments. It can’t match the powerful bottom end of a good dreadnought, making it less than ideal for bluegrass players and those who habitually use dropped tunings. For just about anything else, this cute, compact and comfortable little guitar will certainly fit the bill.

GBCONCLUSION

A LITTLE BEAUTY

■ Having reviewed an Atkin Dreadnought and Small Jumbo back in 2003 (see issue 18), we looked forward to the arrival of the O Standard model with pleasure. After several days spent playing the guitar, we have to say that it exceeded our expectations!

Small it may be, but in terms of volume and sheer wallop, this diminutive flattop is more than a match for many larger instruments, and it’s well-priced for a hand-made, high-quality British guitar. Players accustomed to a solidbody electric will immediately feel at home with the guitar’s compact dimensions, and with 14-frets clear of the body and a Gibson-like 24.9-inch scale length, it plays and feels like a full-size guitar. With a range of eight standard models in various shapes and sizes now available, along with a long list of options that let you effectively choose your own custom model, Atkin is a name well worth investigating. **GB**