

PEARLY GATES

ATKIN GUITARS' TAKE ON THIS CLASSIC SHAPE IS ENLIVENED BY SOME CUSTOM EXTRAS. **DAVID GREEVES** INVESTIGATES

Launched in the early 1940s in response to the Martin Dreadnought, the Gibson J-45, with its distinctive rounded shoulders, has stood the test of time. With a large body – a full 16 inches wide across the lower bout – offering plenty of volume and a shorter scale length than Martin's ubiquitous Dreadnought, this model traditionally offers a mellower tone that's favoured by many a campfire strummer or folk singer-songwriter.

Alister Atkin's take on the J-45 is a faithful one in some respects, though the particular guitar we're reviewing here has been embellished with a couple of custom upgrades. While Atkin offers numerous options for no extra charge, including the choice of Sitka spruce, Englemann spruce or cedar for the top, this model's sunburst finish and eye-catching pearloid headstock fascia both add to the price of the guitar. Let's find out if these extras, and the guitar itself, are worth the cash.

BODY & NECK

This pearloid headstock fascia is a brand-new option, and it was apparently inspired by Atkin endorsee and vintage guitar enthusiast Richard Hawley. "He asked if I could do a pearloid headstock on one of the Everly Brothers-style jumbos I've made for him," Alister explains. "He asked for it after seeing Elvis Costello playing



his pearl-covered Gibson L-00. It's something you see sometimes on old small-bodied Gibsons like the L-1 and the Nick Lucas Special, and also on some National resonophonic guitars, sometimes covering the whole fingerboard. After I'd worked out how to do it for Richard, I thought, that's pretty cool actually, it would be a nice option to offer."

The pearloid headstock certainly does look good, evoking the spirit of those pre-war Gibsons. The three-ply fascia is very neatly done, with the Atkin logo, usually inlaid in mother of pearl, applied as a decal over the top. It does add £100 to the model's base price of £1,695, but if you're buying a hand-made, custom-ordered instrument and want to add a bit of

visual individuality, this is a nice alternative to copious abalone inlays.

This guitar's other upgrade is the sunburst finish on the top, which is £200 extra. The standard option is a clear gloss nitro-cellulose lacquer, while a black top with add £150 to the bill. The sunburst on this guitar is an interesting alternative to a traditional Gibson-style yellow to black 'burst (which is also available). When viewed in bright light, there's a reddish hue to the outer ring while in darker conditions it looks dark brown.

Otherwise, this J-45 follows Atkin's standard spec. The top is made from a fine piece of solid Sitka spruce, with a tight, straight grain and some handsome cross-silking. The back and sides are made from solid Indian rosewood and look no less impressive, while the neck is a three-piece affair made from Brazilian mahogany, with headstock and heel portions grafted onto the main section.

This might raise a few eyebrows among those who would consider a one-piece neck to be superior, but Atkin is adamant. "I think this method is better in some respects, as it makes for a stronger neck. It also helps us to conserve Brazilian mahogany. From a sound point of view, I'd say it makes no difference. I don't think it has any detrimental effects at all."

The smooth ebony fretboard is home to 20 medium frets that have been nicely profiled for a low and narrow vintage-style feel. The fairly flat fingerboard and generous

GE INFO



ATKIN J-45

PRICE: £1,995 as reviewed (base price £1,695)

BUILT IN: UK

SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9 inches)

NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.69 inches)

STRING SPACING AT NUT: 37mm (1.46 inches)

TOP: Solid Sitka spruce

BACK & SIDES: Solid Indian rosewood

NECK: Brazilian mahogany

FINGERBOARD: Ebony, 406mm radius (16 inches)

FRETS: 20 medium

BRIDGE: Ebony

STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 55mm (2.1 inches)

MACHINEHEADS: Grover open-gear, nickel

WEIGHT: 2kg (4.4lb)

FINISHES: Sunburst (shown), black, natural; high-gloss nitro-cellulose

CASE: Deluxe hard case included

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra charge

OPTIONS: Pearloid headstock fascia (shown, £100), sunburst top (shown, £200), black top (£150)

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DETAILS

A BEAUTIFULLY MADE,
WONDERFULLY DYNAMIC
UK-BUILT ACOUSTIC



■ The tasteful ivoroid body binding and simple centre strip complement the guitar's elegant looks



■ This sunburst top is an optional extra, along with black, while a natural finish is standard



■ Tuning duties are taken care of by six Grover open-g geared machineheads, finished in nickel



GBVERDICT

ATKIN J-45 GOLD STARS

- ★ Great looks
- ★ Excellent playability
- ★ Deep, full sound

BLACK MARKS

- Slight untidiness around soundhole

IDEAL FOR...

Most styles, with lush strummed chords a speciality

GBRATING



C-shaped neck profile make for a very comfortable playing experience, aided by a competent setup. Obviously, you could specify a different neck profile and fret size if you so wish.

Some very neat ivoroid body binding and a clean and simple black and white rosette round out this guitar's handsome aesthetics, and in terms of build quality and neatness of finish there is very little to find fault with here. The only exception is that the inner rim of the soundhole looks a little rough and untidy, while the strings have a slight tendency to stick in the bone nut when adjusting the open-g geared Grover tuners. However, this is not unusual on a brand-new acoustic and is easily remedied with a bit of lube [see page 116 for details].

SOUNDS

Starting off with pick in hand to explore the strumming territory that the J-45 traditionally calls its home, we're immediately impressed by the size and volume of sound produced. There's some real low-end muscle here, but without the tight, clanky quality of a typical dreadnought. Here the low end has a broad, buttery smoothness

that seems both to whisper and to roar all at the same time.

Open chords have a wonderful sustain and ring to them that is positively addictive, the full frequency range blending together with great evenness and musicality. Who needs complicated picking and fingering when simple chords sound so deeply lovely?

That's not to say that there isn't potential for fingerpicking here, with ample string definition and separation. Still, dedicated fingerpickers might prefer a slightly wider string spacing and a smaller body. Meanwhile, there's also scope for folk flatpicking.

Most impressive, however, is the guitar's dynamics range. You don't have to pick hard for it to come to life, while vigorous strumming doesn't cause the sound to compress – on the contrary, it seems to bloom further. This is one thing that sets a well-made, all-solid acoustic like this one apart from more affordable mass-produced fare. The difference it makes in terms of both tone and how expressive the instrument allows you to be is, in our opinion, well worth the additional cost.

GBCONCLUSION

EXTRA SPECIAL, WITH OR WITHOUT EXTRAS

■ We've touched on the **Atkin J-45's price, but it's worth pointing out that, if you go without the optional extras, the asking price remains fairly low for a fine, British-made acoustic. Given how good it looks, sounds and plays, this has to be regarded as good value for money.**

Together, the sunburst top and pearloid headstock fascia add £300 to the price. While both are skillfully executed and add a considerable amount to the guitar's aesthetic appeal, many players might prefer to hold onto their cash and do without. However, that's the beauty of ordering what is essentially a custom-made guitar – you can have exactly what you want, and you get exactly what you pay for. In the case of the **Atkin J-45**, what you get is sweet-sounding round-shouldered dreadnought that's more versatile than you might expect, with great playability and impressive dynamics. Highly recommended. **GB**