



# Atkin J-45

Independent British luthier Alister Atkin proves, yet again, why we should look closer to home for that classic steel-string acoustic by Matthew Wig



ATKIN J-45	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ <b>WE LIKED</b> Tastefully minimal style, an exceptionally mature flavoursome tone, and it's not a re-mortgage job either</p> <p>■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Minor discrepancies here compared to the best US comparisons</p>	

In past decades, classic American acoustic guitars like Gibsons, Martins and Guilds were in much shorter supply here in the UK. Despite this, our native luthiers have still seemed reluctant to be seen as copyists – unlike the Japanese. Instead, British lutherie has become associated with baroque-looking instruments and a parochial, home-grown folk image. The problem with this situation is the fact that it's futile denying that many of the most successful and attractive flat-top steel-string acoustic designs were

perfected long ago across the Atlantic. UK builder Alister Atkin appreciates this; and, as a contemporary luthier, he's been more directly inspired by the 'new wave' of small-scale US makers like Collings and Santa Cruz. He too aspires to create meticulously crafted recreations and reinterpretations of archetypal Martin and Gibson acoustic models. We reviewed our first Atkin model about four years ago; and around 150 guitars later his small workshop near Canterbury is doing great business supplying rock, roots and folk players alike with a selection of unpretentious models in the 'classic American' vein. This J-45 unashamedly references its Gibson namesake, but like Collings Santa Cruz, Atkin does not produce slavish copies; however, he is faithful to what he believes are the finest and most unique qualities of the best Gibson round-shouldered jumbos. This particular review model is not the most basic J-45 that can be ordered, but is 'standard' in all fundamentals.

Inside we find a clean and tidy environment with precise joinery. The smoothly finished soundboard braces are scalloped and laid out in a traditional 'X' pattern. Atkin opts for the traditional short scale here, so the soundhole, the bridge and the main X-braces are all shifted up slightly on the soundboard compared to a long-scale 14-fret dreadnought. Combined, these factors contribute to the unique tone of a classic J-45.



The top's thin, grain-rippled nitro gloss and optional dark-cherry sunburst finish certainly look the part, but there is a sprinkling of over-spray into the orange-hued centre here. Other than that it's as neat as you like, with a perfectly clean-cut and attractively tortoise-centred rosette. The custom body binding is ebony, flanked either side by generally neat black/white purfling. Closely scrutinising this purfling there is the odd flaw, and there's a noticeably rough bit of rosewood edge grain along the sides' tapered ebony end-joint inlay strip, but the back's multi-coloured marquetry strip is immaculately laid.

Atkin necks are butt-jointed and bolted as standard these days, and this example is also a three-piece structure (the only sensible option in these mahogany-conserving times), although it is cosmetically unified with dark stain. Atkin uses traditional bracing methods to support the upper bout and fingerboard extension (no L-shaped neck blocks or wooden pads), but, like many luthiers, slightly over-pitches his necks back to compensate against any likely wood movement. The fingerboard and frets are both very tidily presented; topped off with a squarely seated nut. This headstock shape is another new look for Atkin acoustics, breaking up the Martin-esque straight outlines. Nickel Waverly tuners are another 'deluxe' appointment on



the model; and their authentic vintage vibe belies their precision-engineered, stiff yet smooth mechanisms

Not much to say about the simply and neatly fashioned bridge, except for its notably proud fractionally leaning saddle in an ever so slightly baggy slot. Bridge pins are ebony. We get an excellent nitrocellulose finish here too, with the neck done separately for a clean join. It may not be as durable as other coatings, but it'll age in an appropriately 'vintage' manner, is noted for not damping vibrations and is relatively easy to repair.

In use, we find an invitingly slim neck with a subtly modified 'C'-profile, tapering in depth from 20mm (first fret) to 23mm (10th fret). Since the heel is quite square on this model, the neck's central peak flattens off around the 10th fret. String spacing could go a fraction wider, but this is a matter of taste. The fingerboard is textbook ebony luxury, with a gorgeously smooth self-lubricated surface; and while the frets are gleaming, their unbound ends, though neatly manicured, still offer some slight snags.

The view down the fingerboard from the nut confirms an even, uniformly fretted playing surface as far as the body joint. However, the neck's alignment does result in some "hinging" at the 14th fret, where the fingerboard starts pitching more steeply away from the strings. This isn't really an issue on a non-cutaway, and the geometry of it allows plenty of spare saddle height (for future adjustments) while still achieving an effortless action.

Considering the non-compensated saddle, we were surprised to find particularly harmonious high-fret intonation; and despite other hindrances, at least the flattened heel offers encouragement to scale these upper reaches. This being a short scale neck, everything seems a bit easier to play, too.

**As with all the best acoustics using this body style, there's plenty of deep, well-rounded bass, which Atkin has kept to a warm reverberant hum rather than an overpowering boom**

**SOUNDS:** From the first strum you feel a vibrant connection between what your fingers are doing and what's coming out of the soundhole. There's that sense of the raw resonant energy of the wood, and the movement of air. We're not talking of a technically perfect sound (whatever that is), but a sound with real, honest guts.

As with all the best acoustics using this body style, there's plenty of deep, well-rounded bass, which Atkin has kept to a warm reverberant hum rather than an overpowering boom. However, the real volume and power we hear is driven by the roaring mid-range voice, which imbues everything you play with exceptional musical energy. It seems impossible to play anything but strong assertive notes. There's an edge, too,

but in the best sense, with a crisp spicy treble keeping things sounding clear and well defined. That said, the unwound strings remain satisfyingly fruity sounding, which is a hard balance to achieve.



Our test guitar had Waverlys, but Grover and Schaller tuners are an Atkin option

Sure, these qualities do give the Atkin J-45 a slightly strident demeanour and it's true that a devout fingerpicker might be better off with a sweeter sounding small-bodied acoustic, but this is a bruiser with a heart of gold. Chug away in a flat-picking or strum-based style, and you feel this guitar literally bouncing you along, but it's power and headroom is coupled with great sensitivity, and you can play some very subtle stuff too (not just blues, either) and sound equally convincing.

While there is a uniform perception of a J-45 sound, Gibsons themselves (vintage and new) can be hit and miss, but like Santa Cruz's Vintage Southerner (reviewed issue 262), the Atkin take on this classic style captures the best of the tonal character traits.

## VERDICT

Despite James Blunt and Jack Johnson's current partiality for original J-45s, the round-shouldered jumbo (aka slope-shouldered dreadnought) style is not actually that common, with Gibson/Epiphone still the main purveyors. However, for those who turn to Alister Atkin to fulfil their yearning, any concerns about brand credibility should be instantly dispelled by the notably superior performance his instruments deliver. Checking out the really high-end US alternatives, you'll also find it pays to buy local, too. Atkin might not be quite up to the punishing technical perfection of Santa Cruz or Collings yet, but he's certainly a match for tone.

Every now and then, what you might call a 'real acoustic' falls into your hands, and reminds you of what this wooden box with strings stretched across it is all about. The Atkin J-45 is one such instrument. A great job!

### Atkin J-45

---

Guitarist RATING

