

When we launched Guitar Buyer back in 2001, Kent-based guitar builder Alister Atkin was five years into establishing a foothold in the custom acoustic marketplace. Having honed his skills in formal studies, repairs and commissions, the new millennium brought with it the confidence to up the ante, and start mixing it up with the top names of the professional acoustic guitar world.

In the five years since, Atkin has worked tirelessly to refine his designs and develop a line of models that offer high quality and value for money. It's no easy task, of course – carving a niche in the guitar market is woefully difficult for anybody, even with an established dealer network and a £100,000 marketing budget. It's fair to say that Atkin had neither, so the fact that he has already cemented a solid reputation among those in the know is high achievement indeed.

To see how far he's come, here we take a look at one of Atkin's most popular models. Based on Martin's legendary Orchestra Model (OM), it's a no-fuss, professional acoustic guitar that definitely favours high-quality build and materials over fancy ornamentation. Serious guitar, and thanks to a direct sales operation at present, it's also a very sensible price...



BODY & NECK

Atkin pulls no punches with the design inspiration for his OM model, right down to its name. Martin's prewar classic is the basic blueprint, a guitar that shares its body design with the company's 000 model, itself the forerunner to all 'modern' flattop acoustic guitars as we know them; a 14th-fret neck join, steel strings and an X-braced soundboard.

Here, Atkin has done little to alter the Martin body at just over 15 inches wide, four deep, and with a pinched waist that makes it look considerably smaller than the more

ubiquitous dreadnought. We're dealing with solid high-grade timber throughout this guitar, starting with very respectable Indian rosewood coming as standard. Usually defined by a pretty, striped deep chocolate colour, the set used here is a little lighter in colour than some, though nonetheless attractive. More importantly, rosewood is a superb choice for OM-style guitars, as its rich overtones and colour in the bottom end can often add character in the absence of huge pounding dreadnought-style bass.

This Atkin OM's soundboard is Engelmann spruce as standard, though you can choose – at no extra cost – Sitka spruce (marginally softer with a darker colour), or cedar for a much softer, warmer response, often preferred by fingerstyle players with a lighter touch. Underneath, it features a lovingly scalloped X-brace pattern for the appropriate combination of strength and vibration, and it's here you can really appreciate the quality of Atkin's work. Nobody can see this, but it's nonetheless expertly crafted; every brace and tonebar hand carved and sanded as if it were out front, alongside the flawless white celluloid binding and faux tortoiseshell soundhole rosette.

Where the OM design differs principally from the 000 is in scale length, and thus Atkin's mahogany neck extends to the full 25.4 inches, which results in a little extra string tension, and very often a more apparent separation between notes; more of which in due course. Like a lot of modern builders, Atkin has chosen a bolt design to attach the neck, which negates



ATKIN OM

BUILT IN: UK

SCALE LENGTH: 645mm (25.4 inches)

NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.69 inches)

STRING SPACING AT NUT: 36mm (1.42 inches)

TOP: Solid Engelmann spruce

BACK & SIDES: Solid Indian rosewood

NECK: Brazilian mahogany, set

FINGERBOARD: Ebony

FRETS: 20 medium

BRIDGE: Ebony

STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 55mm (2.16 inches)

ELECTRONICS: Optional

MACHINEHEADS: Chrome sealed Grover with mini buttons. Other options available

CASE: TKL hardshell case included

FINISH: Natural gloss (shown), nitrocellulose. Sunburst available for upcharge

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra cost

CONTACT: Atkin Guitars

PHONE: 01227 719933

WEB: www.atkinguitars.com

DETAILS

ATKIN BUILDS A FAB, HIGH-QUALITY GUITAR FOR A VERY REASONABLE PRICE



■ Grover tuners complement the other high class appointments across the board



■ Simple elegance rules, with decoration kept to a reserved but no-less-stylish minimum



■ Neck and body are finished separately, resulting in this beautifully clean joint



the use of glues. 20 years ago, that would almost certainly have raised an eyebrow or two, but Bill Collings for one has proved that traditional acoustics can have bolt necks with no tonal detriment whatsoever. Atkin's joint is similar to the Collings method of using a V-shaped mortise and tenon (Atkin's is still hand carved) with two bolts that, according to Alister, make for the ultimate union of wood-on-wood contact. The fingerboard is glued to the soundboard, but that's it in terms of adhesives. There's also an advantage in terms of easier fit and finishing – the heel/body junction here is absolutely perfect which means it'll come off easily in the event of a neck reset down the line.

In terms of profile, the Atkin OM's neck feels good and meaty. 43mm across the nut is not wide by acoustic standards, but a generous profile with a hint of V means it fills your palm with confidence. Neck profile is very much about personal preference of course, but in our opinion a 'proper' guitar should have a 'proper' neck profile, and thankfully this one does.

Less subjectively, there's no arguing with the ebony fingerboard and pinned bridge. Ebony's tight grain makes it lively to play on and its relative lack of tonal colour means that the high end can really spring from the guitar, where rosewood can sometimes add thickness, sometimes mud. Interestingly, Atkin has decided not to stain it in any way, meaning you see some of the highlights of its grain (a lot of people assume ebony is always black, but that's far from the case).

Finally, the overall setup suits a combination of strumming and fingerstyle playing, with medium/low action. It will buzz a little if you hit it hard with a pick, but the neck is adjusted almost perfectly flat at present, so some extra relief is no problem if you want to hit it hard.

36mm at the nut and 55mm at the bridge isn't huge string spacing for dedicated fingerstylists –instead, this OM suits an all-round playing style, aided by the superb fret job and expertly cut nut –nothing less than you should expect, of course.



■ Rosewood comes as standard, resplendent in chocolate brown and tonally superb

GBOPINION**ATKIN OM****GOLD STARS**

- ★ Superb build quality
- ★ Great tone
- ★ Incredible value for money

BLACK MARKS

- Derivative design

IDEAL FOR...

Serious acoustic guitarists looking for a professional-grade instrument for a superb price

SOUNDS

'Clean' is the first word we'd use to describe the Atkin OM's tone. The combination of spruce top with scalloped bracing, 25.4inch scale and ebony fingerboard and bridge exemplifies everything that's good about this style of guitar. Get it wrong – brace it too heavily or use poor tonewoods – and you can end up with a boxy, very mid-frequency heavy guitar, that might cut well but does little else to fire the senses. Get it right, however – as Atkin has done here - and you end up with a discernibly deep though not-overpowering bass, sweet yet full high end, and the kind of string and note separation that you often hear described as 'piano-like'.

In terms of application, it's going to work well for any number of styles, particularly those that favour a traditional American flattop flavour, naturally. The Engelmann spruce top has a wide dynamic range, that's at its best, in our opinion, when it's being played assertively, rather than tickled. That's not to say it lacks subtlety – far from it. The guitar's impressive string-to-string balance and balanced response means it sounds sweet however you play, not least in front of a mic where the lack of thundering, overpowering bass is a boon when recording.

We think it's also worth pointing out that a guitar like this isn't perhaps as 'easy' to get the most from as something like a run-of-the-mill £500-£800 Takamine or Yamaha for novice acoustic players. Like a dedicated sports car compared with a hot hatch, though, the potential reward is far greater.



CONCLUSION

GB RATINGS

ATKIN OM

BODY & NECK 

ELECTRONICS N/A

PLAYABILITY 

SOUNDS 

VALUE FOR MONEY 

GB VERDICT 

PROFESSIONAL QUALITY AND VALUE FOR MONEY RARELY SYNC SO SEAMLESSLY.

There are a couple of things that genuinely stand out about the Atkin OM, even amid the plethora of high-quality flattops currently available. The first is that you're unlikely to find a custom-built, luthier-grade flattop acoustic guitar for a lower price in the UK, so it's already a bargain.

Secondly, the standard spec for that price includes Indian rosewood back and sides, an Englemann spruce top if you want it, plus ebony bridge and fingerboard. These are all top-spec materials, and in that respect, Atkin has used the budget in all the right places, leaving you to decide if you want to 'upgrade' with fancy fingerboard bindings, purflings and what have you. The only possible criticism is that the overall design is borrowed directly from Martin,

but in the cold light of day, that's what everybody wants. Brilliant build, addictive to play, sounds exceptional and it's superb value too: Atkin deserves great success.

GBREVIEW ACOUSTIC GUITAR

www.atkinguitars.com