

ATKIN GUITARS THE FORTY THREE £2,999  
ACOUSTIC GUITARS







# Atkin Guitars The Forty Three

Faux distress isn't for everybody, but in the case of Alister Atkin's Buddy Holly-inspired dreadnought it's more than skin deep.

**HUW PRICE** discovers that it's a slippery slope...

**A**rtificially aged guitars have become commonplace in the electric market in the last two decades, but the opposite is true for acoustics. This writer's one previous encounter with a relic'd acoustic was inauspicious, to say the least, but times they are a-changin' – as evidenced by Canterbury-based luthier Alister Atkin's slope-shouldered dreadnought, The Forty Three. Rather than content himself with a straight-ahead vintage Gibson J-45 clone, Atkin's aim was "to capture the aura of a guitar that has been played for the last 70 years".

Atkin began distressing finishes by chance when building a limited run of J-45 replicas for the Buddy Holly Foundation. One of the guitars accidentally picked up a ding so Atkin figured 'why not' and set about copying the extensive play wear on Holly's original. Originally intended as a one off, customers who saw the guitar soon began placing orders for relic'd finishes of their own.

Not all aged guitars are created equal but Atkin takes a holistic approach. Of course you get extensive lacquer checking and tinted lacquer over the bindings, but look inside and you'll see dust on the back and the braces. Even the label looks a bit 'tired'.

Digging deeper we learn that Atkin uses a different formulation of lacquer for those guitars destined for relicing and the thickness is reduced because up to 33 per cent less nitro is sprayed.

Although Atkin's website doesn't make a big deal of it, the sitka spruce top is torrefaction. The process, also known as torrefaction, releases moisture from the wood and crystallizes the resins.

It's argued the same things will happen to spruce over six decades, but

after torrefaction, when the originals may have shrunk by up to 1/8-inch.

The result is a guitar that has a more 'vintage' voicing, but is more stable structurally, too. However Atkin is no slave to the vintage aesthetic because he incorporates a two-way

*The guitar has a 'vintage' voicing but is more structurally stable, too – Atkin is no slave to the vintage aesthetic*

Atkin's method reduces this process to about 60 minutes. He also freezes the wood, with the intention of helping his guitars achieve a matured and played-in tone from the get go, and eliminating any potential shrinkage in the timber. This is why the top plates are jointed

truss rod and uses a two-bolt method for neck joints that's similar to that used by Collings. Since Atkin's clients include a number of pro players, ease of repair is considered as crucial as tone.

Fixtures and fittings include a bone nut and saddle, bone bridge

## KEY FEATURES

- **PRICE** £2,999 (inc hard case)
- **DESCRIPTION** All-solid 6-string acoustic. Made in the UK
- **BUILD** Solid torrefied sitka spruce top with solid mahogany back and sides, mahogany neck, rosewood bridge and fingerboard, ebony peghead overlay, 14-fret neck join, scalloped bracing, vintage-style three-on-a-plate tuners, bone nut and saddle
- **ELECTRICS** N/A
- **LEFT-HANDERS** Yes
- **FINISH** Relic gloss nitrocellulose
- **SCALE LENGTH** 631.52mm/24 7/8"
- **NECK WIDTH** 42mm at nut, 53mm at 12th fret
- **DEPTH OF NECK** 20mm at first fret, 23mm at 9th fret
- **STRING SPACING** 36mm at nut, 55mm at bridge
- **WEIGHT** 1.875kg/4.13lbs
- **CONTACT** Forsyth's 0161 956 2052 [www.atkinguitars.com](http://www.atkinguitars.com) [www.forsyths.co.uk](http://www.forsyths.co.uk)



The hardware is meticulously aged, including the three-on-a-plate tuners

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### ACOUSTIC GUITARS

The 'banner' headstock decal is a tribute to the design that appeared on WWII-era Gibsons such as Buddy Holly's



#### LIKE THIS? TRY THESE...

**Gibson's** regular **J-45** reissue **£1,699** features the later 'backwards' belly bridge and an LR Baggs pickup system and the **True Vintage** version **£2,722** has a 'thermally treated' Adirondack spruce top. Other high-end options include the **Collings CJ £5,049** and the **Bourgeois Slope D £5,950**

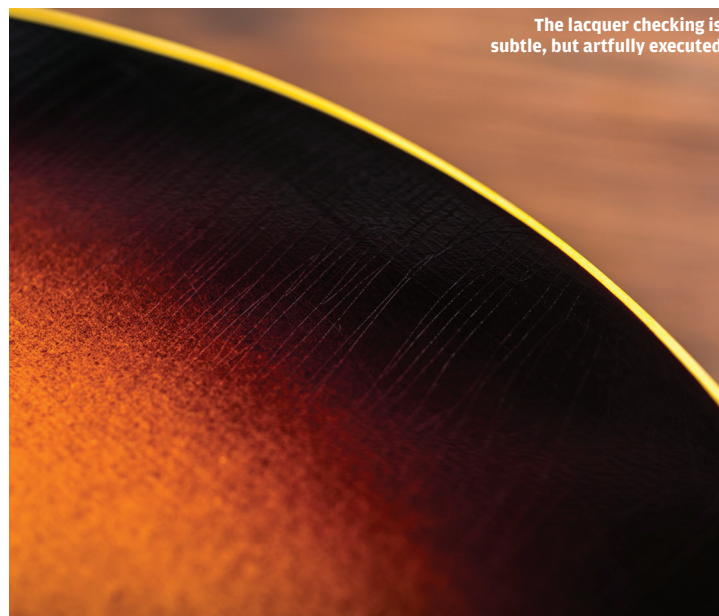
pins and a set of appropriate 'no line' Kluson-style three-on-a-plate tuners. The tuners are artfully aged and have an encouragingly smooth and positive action, but we think unbleached bone might suit the overall aesthetic of this guitar a tad better.

Atkin informs us that the back and sides are Honduran mahogany and Indian rosewood is used for the fingerboard and bridge. The rosewood

*Based on our experience of various old Gibson guitars we would say The Forty Three's sound is eerily evocative*

has a particularly beautiful colour and it's sanded and buffed to create a smooth vintage feel that further enhances the playing experience.

The celluloid pickguard with its soft bevelled edges is another classy touch. Atkin has them made in the US, each with a uniquely individual appearance. We're not certain if the headstock logos are decals or silk screened but they look utterly fantastic. The deep dark gold colour with subtle relicing is enhanced by lateral checking and grain sinkage.



The lacquer checking is subtle, but artfully executed

#### In Use

Last month we looked at the Fairbanks F20-S – a recreation of the 1930s Gibson Nick Lucas model. Although the Fairbanks is a jewel of a guitar producing a very fine tone, there is nothing especially 'vintage' about its sound or feel. In contrast, in every department The Forty Three is one of the most convincing vintage-style acoustic guitars that this writer has ever encountered.

No doubt the looks would have a powerful influence on anyone's perception but the effect would be fleeting if the sound couldn't back it up. Based on our experience of various old Gibson guitars, we would say The Forty Three is eerily evocative.

Although it's a slope-shouldered variety of dreadnought, the bass is powerful but well proportioned and far from boomy. It has an enjoyable

outstanding string-to-string transitions and properly defined chord voicing. It also means The Forty Three is equally well suited to strumming and fingerpicking, so long as you're a picker who can deal with the string spacing.

The medium depth 'C' neck profile may be slimmer than an original's, but it contributes to the sense of old slipper comfort. When we first take this guitar out of its hard shell Hiscoc case, country rhythm playing seems like the obvious place to start and we're rewarded with the kind of tones you've heard on countless classic records.

Moving onto fingerpicking, it's like the brooding hush you might get from Springsteen's solo work or the intimacy of early Davey Graham. The natural balance and compressed dynamics, combined with the rock-steady tuning and easy action, make it so easy to play.

You'll find dreads that are louder, brighter and more powerful, but this guitar wasn't designed for that. Instead Alister Atkin set out to replicate the look, feel and sound of a vintage 'banner' J-45 and we can report he has succeeded – and then some. 🎸

#### Guitar VERDICT

- + Vintage tone with wonderful contemporary playability
- + Extremely comfortable and familiar feel for J-45 lovers
- + Superb balance
- + Very accomplished relicing

- Nut and saddle look a bit too clean

*Some vintage purists may argue Alister Atkin has taken a few liberties with this J-45 tribute, but where it matters, we think he has got it spectacularly right. A simply wonderful acoustic guitar*

**10/10**