

# Do The Time Warp



Want a vintage classic but don't have the cash? We examine three American legends faithfully reproduced by a top British luthier..

Words Neville Marten Photography Neil Godwin





## ATKIN GUITARS RETROSPECTIVE SERIES

### D-28, 000-28 & 00-28 £2,849, £2,849 & £2,949

CONTACT **Atkin Guitars** PHONE **01227 719933** WEB **www.atkinguitars.com**

#### What You Need To Know

**1 So, who's Alister Atkin?**  
Alister Atkin has been building fine acoustic guitars in Canterbury, Kent for 20 years. As well as fine interpretations of legendary guitars from Gibson and Martin, he also offers a range of more forward-thinking designs of his own. The bulk of his guitars are made to order and so options are customer-driven.

**2 What's so great about pre-war Martins, anyway?**  
It's generally agreed that the guitars built by Martin (and other companies) from the 1950s and before, are some of the finest in history. The availability of woods such as the legendary Brazilian rosewood and Honduran mahogany was not an issue. Also, the natural ageing of timbers and finish have a marked effect on tone.

**3 What on earth is 'torrefaction'?**  
This is a process whereby the wood is carefully dried by baking. The idea is to remove the desired amount of moisture to leave the wood as it would have been through decades of natural ageing; this includes crystallising the natural resins. Martin says that it can age a guitar to a specific time, and calls its own method Vintage Tone System (VTS).

**W**hen a guitar builder from Canterbury in England receives an order from a senior figure in Martin's Custom Shop, and can boast plaudits from Collings and Santa Cruz, it's safe to say his guitars are well made. And when that builder, Alister Atkin, who hand-fashions no more than 70 to 80 instruments a year, can count Graham Coxon, Richard Hawley, Eddi Reader, Mark Nevin, Boo Hewerdine, Sinéad O'Connor and Elbow among his customers, they're likely to play and sound pretty good too. If this reputation needs cementing further, how about a commission from the Buddy Holly Educational Foundation in Lubbock, Texas, to build J-45-style guitars for Paul McCartney, Dolly Parton, Elvis Costello and rock 'n' roll legend Dion?

Alister has been making acoustics since 1995, and his guitars have since become so sought after that his order books are never less than full. Working as a two-man team, with Danny Martin, he carefully constructs a range of instruments inspired by history's foremost flat-top boxes, as well as more forward-thinking designs of his own. Atkin's recent Rice White model, a remake of Tony Rice's ex-Clarence White Martin D-28, was hailed as a triumph among dreadnoughts for its canon-like tone.

This instrument was aged to replicate the original, and helped drive Alister's desire to get more heavily into ageing. "We've been working on the aged finish for the past five years," he says; "it's designed to give the player the feel, sound and look of the pre-war guitars while still making them affordable. I'd worked on so many originals but could never afford one, so I decided to create the next best thing."

The guitars feature torrefied tops – a baking procedure that's taking the acoustic world by storm – as well as Alister's personalised antiquing methods that include lacquer tinting and finish-checking. "Torrefying the top really does help with stability," Alister states. "It brings the moisture content right down so when the guitar goes to somewhere like Canada in the winter, it's much more stable. It also plays a part in giving the guitar that vintage tone, crystallising the resins, which happens naturally over time. The aged finish instantly relaxes the player and lets them get on with playing the guitar without worrying about marking it."

We have three of Atkin's Retrospective 28 Series to examine: a big-bodied D-28, the folky-bluesy middle-sized 000-28, and the slightly bigger than parlour-sized 00-28. They're all available non-aged should you prefer; and Alister's Retrospective 18 Series provides the mahogany equivalent to these rosewood models.

Martin's 28-style has been a staple of all musical genres since the early 20th century. In its various sizes it's propelled songs by Hank Williams, The Beatles, Joni Mitchell, Lonnie Donegan, Neil Young, Stephen Stills, Big Bill Broonzy, Michael Hedges, Noel Gallagher, Eric Clapton and thousands of others, famous and ordinary (your intrepid reporter among the latter group). The D-28 is its powerhouse, renowned as a great all-rounder with a hefty punch; smaller, and with a more elegant waistline the 000-28 is a fingerpicker's dream with its balanced output and wider string spacing; and while the even more diminutive 00-28's 12th-fret neck joint and slot-headed design make it seem a more specialist instrument, smaller-





1. The guitar's tops are torrefied – baked to dry out the wood to make the guitar sound played-in. The process has become popular with many acoustic makers, including Martin, in recent years
2. In addition to making the wood sound old, Atkin has also made it look much older, thanks to a tint in the lacquer, giving all three guitars here a distinctly orange hue
3. The elegant aged herringbone purfling is a classy, minimalist piece of ornamentation on a very restrained guitar
4. We're used to seeing lacquer checking on relic'd electric guitars, but it's a lot less common on acoustics – there's little doubt, however, that combined with the tint of the lacquer, it gives these guitars an old, well-worn vibe
5. The tinted, checked lacquer continues on the guitar's neck, and the vintage effect is also reflected in the weathered Grover Sta-Tite tuners

bodied acoustics are very popular these days. Alister's guitars pay faithful homage to the brand, its models and its history. Darkly tinted and with lacquer checking all over, our 'vintage' trio are free from dings and wear – like they've been cosseted with decades of home-only use. You can of course specify any degree of distressing since Atkin guitars are mostly special order. As well as rosewood back and sides plus Sitka spruce top, all three instruments feature a mahogany neck with rosewood headstock overlay, ebony fingerboard and bridge. Decoration is minimal but elegant, with snowflake inlays, herringbone purfling and aged ivoroid edge binding. Nut and bridge saddle are bone, pickguards are vintage celluloid style, while tuners are aged nickel open-backed Grovers. Like many modern builders, Atkin bolts the necks of his guitars on and tells us that he's now devised a way of concealing the bolt head, which is clearly visible in the blocks of our review instruments. Although superbly constructed throughout, including pre-war-style scalloped bracing, Alister quirkily sprinkles

small amounts of dust and debris inside, to emulate a really old guitar that's collected such detritus over the decades: he even gives them the faint aroma of beer and cigarettes for ultimate authenticity (although such finer details could be omitted if you prefer).

### Sounds

It's great to have these three different sizes of guitars all together, to test common preconceptions of what they do and don't

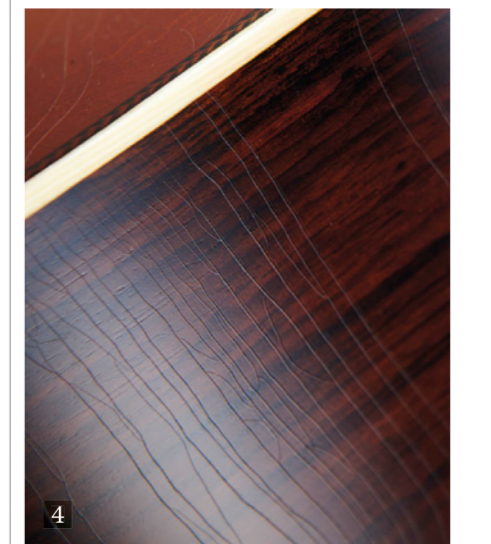
do well. Its large body and usually longer scale length (645mm compared to the 000's 632mm) mean the dreadnought is famed for a big, bassy sound that makes it the perfect strummer, providing the bed to a recorded track or simply as an accompanying tool. But dreads are great pickers too and our D-28 is no exception; that strong bass providing a solid foundation to the sweet top end. It's more bass and treble than middle, but check out any Joni Mitchell or Stephen Stills recording and there's nothing

lacking in their picked tone. With a nut width of 43mm the D-28 is an all-rounder that handles chords and lead with equal aplomb. Our Atkin is as clear and powerful an example as we've heard – the torrefied top providing the same vintage tone and clarity that we've heard in similarly treated Martins. The action – as on all the guitars – is set perfectly so that even the heaviest strumming elicits no undue rattle. Intonation is perfect, too, due to a lightly compensated saddle.

Under the fingers Atkin's 000-28 feels immediately right. With a shorter scale than its similarly sized OM stablemate the 000 has found favour with both folk and blues pickers. Its slacker string tension makes for an easier play, and even allows for a bit of string bending. Its wider 45mm nut width makes chording a breeze, and the slightly more generous spacing at the bridge (57mm as opposed to the dread's 55mm) gives picking fingers a tad more room. This Atkin fits the sonic stereotype like a glove, with strident mids balanced by strong trebles and a tight bass end. In fact, it compares favourably to this reviewer's own 000-42! With the same scale length, nut width and bridge spacing our smallest guitar is the natural little brother of the 000. However, its 12-fret neck joint and slotted headstock – with the steeper string break angle that it imparts over the nut – gives it a tone all of its own. Overall it's not so bassy when strummed, but played fingerstyle there's a tad more string separation and hardly any less volume. Clearly it's the least versatile of our 28-style trio, but possibly the best picker

## The Rivals

Martin's VTS Authentic series are among the finest instruments we've ever played. The D-28 Authentic (£5,699) is created after a specific instrument from this year, including the exact bracing style, a torrefied top plus all other pre-war appointments. Built with a 12-fret neck and slotted headstock, Martin's stunning 000-28K 1921 (£5,399) comes in beautiful figured koa; again a remake of an actual instrument in the firm's museum. Similar to our 000 is Martin's OM-28 Authentic 1931 (£5,999). In Madagascan rosewood, it has a longer 645mm scale than the 000's 632mm, and comes with a 14-fret neck







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as it's tonally tighter and even more defined.

**Verdict**

It's clear that Atkin makes great guitars. It's also clear that he loves Martins, and in the Retrospective 28 Series has created amazing replicas of Nazareth's best vintage models. The torrefied tops make a huge difference to the tone, and each instrument has its own voice, perfectly in line with what we expect – the big, bruising all-rounder dreadnought, the medium-sized and perfectly balanced 000 that excels at both fingerstyle and strumming, and the sharply focused picking tone of the 00.

Alister says of the Retrospective range: "I wanted to make guitars with soul and spirit. The torrefied tops and much thinner-than-standard nitro finish make a big difference to the tone. Plus the necks feel like the originals, which were not thick but very comfortable to play."

We agree on every point. Whether you like your ageing quite so dark and lacquer checked is down to personal preference – we'd go for something a little less drastic – although all this can be specified with Alister when ordering. These are great guitars to play and they sound superb – big, clear, musical and faithful to the originals that they so lovingly emulate. **G**



**ATKIN GUITARS**  
RETROSPECTIVE D-28

**PRICE:** £2,849 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** UK  
**TYPE:** 14-fret dreadnought acoustic  
**TOP:** Solid, aged and torrefied Sitka spruce, pre-war scalloped bracing  
**BACK/SIDES:** Solid Indian rosewood  
**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 122mm tapering to 93mm  
**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 395mm  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 645mm (25.4")  
**TUNERS:** Grover Sta-Tite open back, aged nickel  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/43mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Ebony, unbound, with snowflake inlays  
**FRETS:** 20 medium/fine  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ebony w/ compensated bone saddle/55mm  
**ELECTRICS:** None  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1.6/3.5  
**OPTIONS:** These are custom-order guitars, but non-aged finish is £200 less; slotted headstock adds £100; shaded sunburst top adds £200  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Apart from the other guitars featured; 0-28 (from £2,649); smaller body than 00 but with similar appointments; OM-28 (from £2,649), same body size as 000 but with longer 645mm scale; 0-28 14-fret (from £649), as 0-28 but with 14-fret neck joint  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** To order, no charge  
**FINISHES:** Clear non-aged nitrocellulose, aged nitro, Sunburst nitro (as reviewed)

8/10

**PROS** Fabulous big dread sound with clarity and punch; it's cheaper than a proper vintage Martin!

**CONS** The lacquer's tint will be a bit too dark for the preferences of some players



**ATKIN GUITARS**  
RETROSPECTIVE 000-28

**PRICE:** £2,849 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** UK  
**TYPE:** 14-fret folk-blues style medium-bodied acoustic  
**TOP:** Solid, aged and torrefied Sitka spruce, pre-war scalloped bracing  
**BACK/SIDES:** Solid Indian rosewood  
**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 105mm tapering to 87mm  
**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 385mm  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 632.5mm (24.9")  
**TUNERS:** Grover Sta-Tite open back, aged nickel  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/45mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Ebony, unbound, w/ snowflake inlays  
**FRETS:** 20 medium/fine  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ebony with compensated bone saddle/57mm  
**ELECTRICS:** None  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1.5/3.3  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** To order, no charge  
**FINISHES:** Clear non-aged nitrocellulose, aged nitro, Sunburst nitro (as reviewed)



9/10

**PROS** Brilliantly balanced picker and very capable strummer, superb tones all round

**CONS** Again, the tint of the lacquer, while looking very handsome, will be overly dark for some tastes



**ATKIN GUITARS**  
RETROSPECTIVE 00-28

**PRICE:** £2,949 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** UK  
**TYPE:** 12-fret, slot-headed, small-bodied acoustic  
**TOP:** Solid, aged and torrefied Sitka spruce, pre-war scalloped bracing  
**BACK/SIDES:** Solid Indian Rosewood  
**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 103mm tapering to 84mm  
**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 365mm  
**NECK:** Mahogany  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 632.5mm (24.9")  
**TUNERS:** Grover Sta-Tite open back, aged nickel, rear-facing  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/45mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Ebony, unbound w/ snowflake inlays  
**FRETS:** 20 medium/fine  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ebony with compensated bone saddle/57mm  
**ELECTRICS:** None  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 1.4/3.1  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** To order, no charge  
**FINISHES:** Clear non-aged nitrocellulose, aged nitro, Sunburst nitro (as reviewed)

7/10

**PROS** Razor-sharp fingerpicker, a brilliant recording guitar or live instrument with a quality pickup

**CONS** The least versatile of the three, again, that dark tint will put some people off