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# ATKIN WHITE RICE STANDARD & RELIC

Something old, something new – a pair of guitars that pay tribute to two legendary bluegrass players... **David Mead** takes his pick.

There's a fascinating story attached to these guitars. We'll cover the intricate details in our interview with maker Alister Atkin in a few pages' time, but I'll just skirt around the basic history behind these instruments before we look at them both in close-up detail.

The name "White Rice" came about because the guitars are modelled after the Martin D-28 that was once owned by Clarence White, a renowned bluegrass and country artist and at one time a member of the legendary Byrds. Sadly, Clarence passed away in a car accident in 1973, but his treasured Martin found its way into the hands of another famous player, Tony Rice – hence, "White Rice". Tony is a Grammy Award winning guitarist whose playing career reads like a who's who of country, having played with just about everyone including David Grisman, JD Crowe and even

the Grateful Dead's Jerry Garcia. So, as you've probably guessed, if that original D-28 could talk, it would have a lot of tales to tell.

UK maker Alister Atkin decided to build a special tribute to the celebrated guitar and do it in two different guises: one, a pristine dreadnought, the other a painstakingly wrought relic that mimics as near as dammit the look of Clarence White's 1935 original Martin after its lifetime spent playing music.

## WHITE RICE STANDARD

We'll begin with the non-relic version of the White Rice, which is clearly based around a pre-war Martin D-28. Clarence White's original is thought to be one of the best sounding – and loudest – D-28s in the business; in fact you might have already noticed the enlarged soundhole from the accompanying pictures. More on that later, but for now, let's take a closer look at the nature of the beast...

## BUILD QUALITY AND FEATURES

There's a considerable wow factor when you open the White Rice's case. Martin's inimitable D-28 has become something of an iconic design in the acoustic guitar industry, with pre-war models reaching astronomical prices if one ever finds its way to an auction house or private sale. It's true to say that the dark amber colour to the top would be a lot paler if this guitar was fresh from the factory back in days of yore. But it manages to give you that impression that it's what Fender would refer to as "new old stock": in other words, it's brand new and aged to perfection.

The Atkin's top is Sitka spruce and peering through the stained nitrocellulose lacquer, looks to be a fine piece of tonewood. The original would almost certainly have been Adirondack spruce, but Alister has his reasons for switching materials and we go into those in the

accompanying interview. Back and sides are Indian rosewood and the body binding is the familiar herringbone pattern. The story behind the enlarged soundhole is that it simply wore away on the original through years of hard use. Certainly other Clarence White models – both Martin themselves and Santa Cruz offer one in their respective catalogues – include this feature and it is thought that this factors highly in the guitar's reputation for being an extremely loud instrument. The soundhole is neatly finished on this non-relic model; it's different on the relic, but we'll address that later on.

The neck is a single piece of mahogany and doesn't feel like it has too much of that pre-war chubbiness, either. The headstock is slim, with Grover open backed tuners and vintage style butterbean knobs. It's rosewood for the White Rice's fingerboard, which is both position marker





free and with 21 frets as opposed to the modern D-28's 20. This is an unusual feature of the original Clarence White guitar, as is the overlap of the fretboard over the edge of the soundhole due, in part, to the aforesaid "wearing away".

## ATKIN WHITE RICE RELIC

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

**Manufacturer:** Atkin Guitars  
**Model:** White Rice Relic  
**Retail Price:** £3499  
**Body Size:** Dreadnought  
**Made In:** UK  
**Top:** Sitka spruce  
**Back and Sides:** Indian rosewood  
**Neck:** Mahogany  
**Fingerboard:** Rosewood  
**Frets:** 21  
**Tuners:** Grover  
**Nut Width:** 45mm  
**Scale Length:** 650mm  
**Strings Fitted:** Ernie Ball Phosphor Bronze .012 - .052  
**Gig Bag/Case Included:** Hiscox case

### ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

**Pros:** A guitar which oozes character & charm  
**Cons:** The price hike for a beaten up guitar might seem like folly to some  
**Overall:** A loving recreation of a bygone instrument with a seriously virtuous tone!

### ACOUSTIC RATING

**Build Quality** ★★★★★  
**Sound Quality** ★★★★★  
**Value for Money** ★★★★★

**5 Stars:** Superb, almost faultless.  
**4 Stars:** Excellent, hard to beat.  
**3 Stars:** Good, covers all bases well.  
**2 or 1 Stars:** Below average, poor.

### CONTACT DETAILS

**Atkin Guitars**  
[www.atkinguitars.com](http://www.atkinguitars.com)

### SOUNDS AND PLAYABILITY

Well, I was promised "loud" and I'm not disappointed! This version of the White Rice certainly is a feisty little beast in that respect; relatively well mannered when fingerpicked, but when you introduce it to a plectrum, bluegrass style, it really comes alive. If the enlarged soundhole has done anything for the sound it's accentuated the treble twang and tamed the dreadnought's natural tendency towards boomy lower midrange. That's not to say that there's anything lacking in the White Rice's bass register, there isn't. It's just that what's there is more uniform than I've come to expect from this particular body size.

Open string chords sound absolutely huge, making this guitar a real powerhouse for players wanting to explore the bluegrass style of playing. But personally I think that a lot of singer-songwriters would enjoy its sonic capabilities, too.

### WHITE RICE RELIC

On to the alternative White Rice, then. Alister says that there are people out there who just don't "get" the relic idea and would probably not understand why this distressed model costs £500 more than a "new" one, either – well, not until they think about the extra work that has to be involved, anyway.

### BUILD QUALITY AND FEATURES

The basic template for ageing this guitar was drawn from photographs and video of the original Clarence White/Tony Rice model and also from a composite of pre-war Martins that have come through the Atkin workshop for repair in the past. You have to admit that this instrument looks like it has already



The tuners have been artificially discoloured on the worn headstock



spent a lifetime playing the bars and clubs of the bluegrass circuit, despite being fresh from the workbench. It even smells old. Both Fender and Gibson have explored the relic route and it has proved to be very successful in both instances. There's something about a guitar that looks like it's been in a fight in that it's

somehow imbued with a personality and vintage mojo all its own.

Needless to say, the inventory of building materials for the relic White Rice is practically the same as before. Only this time the Sitka spruce top displays signs of some pretty intense handling in its "virtual" long life. There are scuffs, chips and grooves, discolouration and scratches that would normally be a nightmare for any conscientious guitarist.

But somehow here they just fit; you're aware that this is a tribute to an absolute workhorse of an instrument and that everything here is effectively a special effect, despite appearances. There's also the wear and tear to the soundhole I





Open string chords sound absolutely huge, making it a real powerhouse

mentioned earlier. Alister has left this rough to the touch, as opposed to the rounded-off smoothness of the non-relic version and it works well against the backdrop of battle scars elsewhere on the guitar.

On the back of the guitar there are further signs of distress – no buckle rash, thankfully, but rubs in the lacquer that have left the wood underneath exposed and other seemingly ad lib knocks and scrapes, too.

If you've ever seen a genuine relic from the early part of the last century then you'll know what to expect from the back of the neck. More down-to-the-wood wear to the finish, especially in the region of the lower frets and a distinct

nicotine stain to the ivory binding. The Grover tuners have been artificially discoloured and the front of the headstock is worn around the tuner capstans and abraded on the edges.

You can see the extent of the relic process in the pictures and doubtless some will prefer the "new" model, but I think this is a real work of art.



## SOUNDS AND PLAYABILITY

Of course, it's comparatively easy to distress the finish of a guitar to make it look old – but making it sound old is another matter. Historically, the pre-war Martins are heralded as the definitive Golden Era, with the type of tonal sophistication that comes only with years of opening up and ageing. So how does the sound of the White Rice relic fare? I suppose the most surprising thing is how different it sounds – and feels – to its unblemished counterpart. For a start, this guitar has a subtle V to the neck which explains the difference in feel. But the most outstanding thing is the subtle sweetness that has crept in to the sound; and whereas the non-relic was loud, I'll swear that this instrument is a few percent louder still. When subjected to the same spectrum test as before the guitar once again sprang to life – and I can totally endorse Alister's comment about this instrument being "an absolute cannon".

## CONCLUSION

I should point out that both of these guitars are built to order and so the customer can have some say with regard to the extent of the relic process on the White Rice. Alister reckons that this particular example would probably rate around a nine on a 10 scale, for instance. But I suppose the main question here is which one would I choose?

Both are excellent instruments and, seeing as the spec is almost identical, it really comes down to a question of aesthetics in the end. It did occur to me that while I had both guitar cases open in front of me, I kept picking up the relic. There's



just something vaguely mysterious and enchanting about this relic White Rice, and when you think about the amazing players that it pays tribute to, that's not too surprising, right?

**David Mead**

## ATKIN WHITE RICE STANDARD

### TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

**Model:** White Rice Standard  
**Retail Price:** £2999  
**Body Size:** Dreadnought  
**Made In:** UK  
**Top:** Sitka spruce  
**Back and Sides:** Indian rosewood  
**Neck:** Mahogany  
**Fingerboard:** Rosewood  
**Frets:** 21  
**Tuners:** Grover  
**Nut Width:** 43mm  
**Scale Length:** 650mm  
**Strings Fitted:** Ernie Ball Phosphor Bronze .012 - .052  
**Gig Bag/Case Included:** Hiscox case

### ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

**Pros:** An absolute powerhouse of a dreadnought!  
**Cons:** Fingerstylists might want an even more pronounced bass response  
**Overall:** An elegant, stylish tribute to two world class players that sounds as sweet as it looks

### ACOUSTIC RATING

<b>Build Quality</b>	★★★★☆
<b>Sound Quality</b>	★★★★★
<b>Value for Money</b>	★★★★☆

**5 Stars:** Superb, almost flawless.  
**4 Stars:** Excellent, hard to beat.  
**3 Stars:** Good, covers all bases well.  
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# AGED TO PERFECTION

David Mead talks to Alister Atkin about the process of ageing the White Rice relic guitar.

The “relic” is a concept in guitar building that has been around for a few years now. Companies like Fender and Gibson have both produced aged versions of their instruments, some of which have become highly sought-after limited editions. But relics are a bit of a Marmite subject for many; you’ve only got to eavesdrop in a couple of guitar forums to find a heated debate going on between the fans and the naysayers. However, the process is still comparatively unusual in acoustic instruments, but judging from the popularity of the White Rice, this is something that we could soon see change. There are a couple of mysteries about the original guitar - for instance, it appears to have a longer fretboard and 21 frets, whereas the standard D-28 has only 20: “As I understand it, the original fretboard is from a Gretsch,” Alister tells us.

**There’s a video in the digital edition that features John Jorgenson, Herb Pederson and Jon Randall trying out the White Rice, which is particularly poignant seeing that Herb used to play with Clarence White and so is familiar with the original guitar. Were they able to shed any further light?**

I’ve got more footage from that meeting and all three of those

players are familiar with the actual guitar. Herb had played it back in the day and the other two had played it more recently and each of them had a different story to tell about what that guitar is. So I guess my feeling now is that it’s all a little bit down to interpretation and folklore. I had a customer who sent me some pictures that he took of the original guitar when it was right in front of him and I don’t think that it was a herringbone model. But some of the photos that I’ve got of it from a magazine in the States show that it didn’t have herringbone. So that obviously wasn’t Clarence’s, unless Tony Rice has two of them and isn’t taking the original out. I’ve grabbed information where I can and arrived at my own interpretation.

**The original would have most likely had an Adirondack top and Brazilian rosewood back and sides as this was practically the norm with Martin guitars from the 1930s. The White Rice has a Sitka top - why the change?**

I initially went straight to Sitka just to check the idea out, really. We build in Sitka most of the time with our standard range and our retrospective series, so it was the first thing that I had to hand. We have used Adirondack on these models for special orders and



so we have the capability of using it, but it's not as readily available as Sitka. As far as Brazilian rosewood is concerned, it's a difficult one to use and in some respects it's not really worth me telling anyone that we will make those guitars with Brazilian rosewood backs and sides. Firstly, it's all to do with whether we can get any at all and, secondly, if it comes with the right certification that makes it possible for us to sell to people who are going to be moving around the world.

#### **So what are your thoughts on the relic process in general?**

You're trying to build up layers of history, basically. We all know where the places are that guitars wear over time, but making them wear in the right way and imagining where that guitar might have been and what it might have gone through and how different owners might have treated it at different times is the thing. The original Clarence White D-28 is from the 1930s and so it could have had between one and 20 owners and each one would have done something different to it and that's what you're putting into the story.

#### **How early in the building process does the ageing begin?**

The relic process itself can take me a couple of months and will involve freezing at various different stages to get lacquer checking and things like that. But in general it starts really early on – at the beginning, almost. When we're making the top, sides and back there are certain things we will or will not do to replicate what a guitar from that period would look like now. So whether we glue the struts or work on the inside before we glue the body together, we're trying to make things look older than they are. We even try to recreate the smell of an old guitar and some of that is done with oils and various compounds that we've developed. The chances are that the guitar would have been in hundreds of bars and played in some pretty smokey, alcohol-fuelled situations and so that's a part of it as well. I'll light cigarettes inside them to mask the new smells and gradually build up this fug.

Then we might finish spraying it, do some wear, clean it up and spray on top of that, imagining that the guitar might have been refinished at some point, too. We're making something that doesn't need to have the same finish as a brand new guitar and looking for any slight imperfections that we can throw into the building process that will make it look more like an old guitar. There are so many ways of building the picture up, basically.

#### **On our review guitar there are pick grooves above the soundhole. How do you do that?**

For most of it we just sit down with the guitar and look at the original pictures to see where people didn't look after things and work away at it to try to build those blemishes in where the original had them. There's a way that lacquer falls off guitars: there's the "hitting it" method and then there's the "flaking off" method that happens over time once something has been blemished and so we try to achieve both of those. We might play the guitar heavily with a coin to get the process started and then try to chip the finish off or pull it up with something so that it's breaking away and it doesn't look like it's been hit.

#### **The headstock looks really authentically aged on our review model, with worn edges and marks around the tuner capstans that simulate years of string changes...**

We're very much trying to force damage on to it in the same way that we would all damage our guitars. Let's say that guitar had

been on the road for 20 years and a roadie was taking the strings on and off every night and he didn't really care too much about how he did it. That's an easy thing to replicate; you've got a string winder and you're going to go for it! Then, you know when you've put a string on and it hasn't gone on right and the end of the string is dragging around the lacquer? You wind it around a few times and then look and think, "Bugger, look what I've done..." and so we imagine that it's happened loads of times over a period of 70 or 80 years and so we're going to do some of that, too.

#### **I mention in the review that the binding on the fretboard has a nicotine-like stain to it – how did you do that?**

That type of yellowing is common in those guitars and that is done by putting a tint on the lacquer when we spray the top – there's a tint in there to replicate the ageing process – but I don't mask up the bindings. So then I spray the bindings with the same stuff and rub it off, leaving some behind and then spray it with clear lacquer and rub it off again and gradually you get this kind of effect like it's gone nicotine yellow.

#### **The tuners look old too and here the ageing process has to look authentic, but the tuners actually have to work afterwards.**

We age those using various acids that we've found that work in "pickling" the plating and building up verdigris on the actual tuners. But we take them apart and remove parts from them first and that works really well. If anyone is doing this kind of thing at home, these days there are various people who have done some decent YouTube videos about how they do these things. There are some authorities on it and we've got a few in this country who have done work for guys like the Eagles, Graham Nash and all sorts of people, replicating guitars that they might perhaps own but not want to take out on the road any more.

#### **Do you think that the original guitar's enlarged soundhole would have been down purely to wear and tear that has been tidied up at some point?**

As I understand it that would have been the case and it would have been a way of cleaning it up to the inner ring [on the rosette] and making it look tidier. But, to be honest, it's a wonderful thing, the bigger soundhole. It definitely changes the tone of an instrument and we've certainly used it a lot on other instruments as well, when we've had the opportunity. It works great on an OM, for instance, and I think it's definitely a good thing to put into the mix when you're trying to achieve certain things. I'm a fan.

#### **The neck profiling on the relic has a very authentic feel to it.**

I've changed things again in that respect recently in that we've developed the V shape volute at the back of the headstock and so all the new guitars now have that on them as well, which is more in keeping with the original. We pay a lot of attention to detail when we're going for a proper vintage feel. There is something about the aura of a relic guitar that puts you in touch with the past and perhaps takes your playing to a different place, more than a new guitar would and that's what it should be all about. It's something I never thought I'd get involved with, but the first one I made someone just bought straight away and it's rolled on from there. We've done it with our J-45 models and Martin dreadnought replicas as well and we've ended up doing quite a few now.

*For more information on the White Rice guitars, and Alister's other work, visit his website: [www.atkinguitars.com](http://www.atkinguitars.com)*

*"We even try to recreate the smell of an old guitar – I'll light cigarettes inside them to mask the new smells and gradually build up this fug."*