

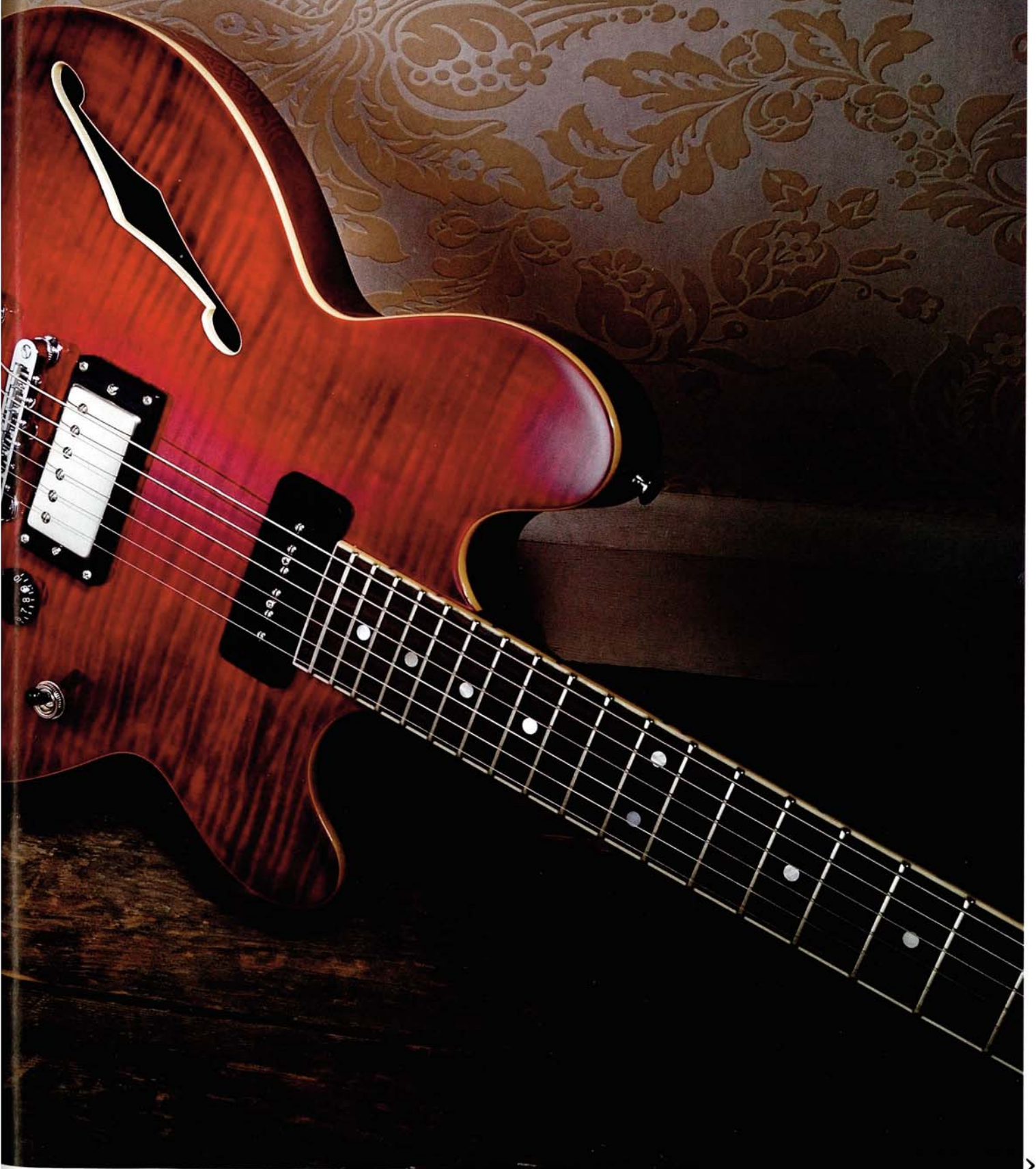


King Pair

The UK's Fret-King Black Label range follows 2011's Jerry Donahue artist model with two more affordable artist guitars... **by Dave Burruck**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON LEES

FRET-KING BLACK LABEL ECLAT DBC & ELISE GG ARTIST £599 & £829
ELECTRICS





Fret-King Black Label Eclat DBC & Elise GG Artist £599 & £829

Fret-King's Black Label range launched last year with the impressive Jerry Donahue model combining excellent build, a tweaked classic design, and a pretty tidy price. The next two artist guitars we've received pull in Brit legend Gordon Giltrap (who has a Vintage signature acoustic) and Dave 'Bucket' Colwell who has played with Adrian Smith, Humble Pie and Bad Company.

Both Vintage and Fret-King are handled by John Hornby Skewes & Co (JHS), a large British musical instrument distribution company, so family ties are close. Vintage is the JHS-invented and owned brand, while Fret-King was conceived by Trevor Wilkinson, who was also heavily involved in the design and improvement of the Vintage guitars. A case in point is the Vintage Advance range – the Elise GG started life there as the AV3H and the more Les Paul-like AV1 featured the unique upper shoulder cutaway and sloping horn that has made its way on to the DBC.

Eclat DBC

Classed by designer Wilkinson as a "no-brainer", the Eclat DBC is obviously based on the Les Paul Junior. The standard Eclat resides in Fret-King's Blue Label range – a Wilkinson-ised

version of a Les Paul Standard while the Eclat 2 goes for more of a Les Paul Special vibe. Aside from the iconic outline, this Eclat DBC differs with that very un-Gibson-like shoulder and cutaway, and like the other Eclats we have a scooped forearm cut. Aside from that it follows the Junior recipe: 45mm thick slab body with small edge radius, mahogany set neck with dot-inlaid 22-fret rosewood 'board. There's a simple, vintage-style wrapover bridge, three-on-a-strip tuners,

dog-ear P-90-style single-coil, a single-ply scratchplate and rear-mounted volume and tone controls, the output jack held in a recessed Tele-type collar.

It's a tidy job with a light, old-style two tone sunburst and a full profiled very slightly flat-backed neck. It's not a guitar to obsess over, just one to plug in...

Sounds

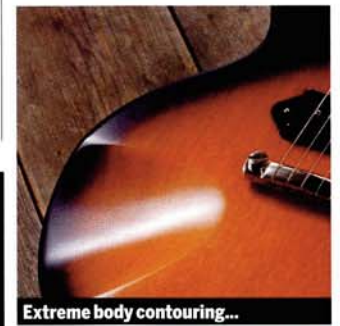
Warming our test amps up with an original Les Paul Junior, we're reminded just how raw and brutal they can sound.

With a 'c'mon beat that' cockiness we plug in the Fret-King and are very pleasantly surprised. The hot output of the '57 Junior is matched here; there's less hi-fidelity, the Eclat sounds a little rounder but with similar juicy mid-range and roomy low-end. Dial in a classic crunch amp tone and you have the archetypal rock rhythm machine. Kick in a level boost and the combination of the hot output and single-coil sparkle is the perfect anecdote to the almost over compressed LP Standard lead tone – this is edgier. The tone control is nicely graduated: fully off, that choked 'woman' tone is more than usable while the volume control does soften things

The Rivals

Eclat DBC

Gibson's Les Paul Junior (£599) comes in tobacco burst, Pelham blue and gloss yellow finishes and features an obeche fingerboard and usual Junior appointments. The British-made version is from **Gordon-Smith**. The **GS-1 '60'** with thick body option will set you back £486 with GSG's own humbucker or with a P-90 it'll be £524. **PRS's SE One Korina** (£499) is a Korean-made 'Junior', which sports all-korina construction with intonated wrapover bridge and single P-90-style single-coil.





slightly when reduced. On our original LP Junior it almost enhances the sparkle as the amp cleans up. The Eclat is different, but is a 'Junior' this writer would happily take on a gig, as its tuning is more stable, the neck less of a log and upper fret access easier.

Elise GG

Vintage's AV3H impressed us on its release and this Fret-King version is even better. Basically, the two-piece, centred-joined mahogany back is routed out to leave a centre block that runs just beyond the stud tailpiece – the rest is hollow. It's capped by a solid maple top – very unusual at this price point – carved inside and out, then faced with

a figured maple veneer. At 368mm (14.5 inches), wide and 450mm (17.75 inches) long, its smaller than an ES-335 and, of course, the treble side is pulled back, offsetting the horns and the waist. A major difference, visually at least, is the six-in-a-line back-angled headstock, giving a Gibson Trini Lopez vibe. It looks better than the bulky 'stock on the AV3H in our opinion. Aesthetics aside it's a complex guitar to make and that's before we get to the equally complex electronics housed under an over-sized inset backplate.

We have three pickup sources: the two Wilkinson magnetic pickups and the piezo elements of the tune-o-matic-

style bridge that, like most hybrids, aims to provide an acoustic-like tonality to contrast and complement the conventional magnetic tones. Control of the passive magnetic pair is straightforward with a three-way toggle pickup selector, master volume and tone. The active piezo circuit is more involved with a volume and three-band EQ from three separate, centre-notched rotary controls. Finally, a three-way mode switch allows magnetic or piezo individually or both together. The output is a single jack that with a mono lead mixes both sources to the same amp or with a stereo 'Y' you can output the two systems to separate amps.

Again, it's very tidily constructed and a good weight. The neck has a similar profile to the DBC, although here it's very a tad asymmetric feeling slightly bigger on the bass-side. And despite the plethora of controls, it's pretty obvious what's what. The smaller centre-notched knobs operate the EQs, the regular knobs the volume and passive tone, the piezo volume being the lowest of the three. Telltale details such as how clean the body and fingerboard binding is and fret ends are all very ship-shape, likewise the very tidily bound f-hole. Fret-King has established a reputation for quality and these, just like the JD we looked at last year, don't let the side down at all.

After the raw rock heaven of the Eclat, the Elise looks and sounds a little bit more sophisticated



Sounds

After the raw rock heaven of the Eclat, the Elise looks and sounds a little bit more





Both guitars are based on Vintage-brand models, but this is a real step up

sophisticated. The humbucker has a nice hotter-than-PAF-like output, a little more aggressive in the high end, but the neck single-coil is very much in the 'hot Strat' camp and played clean there are a host of older sixties tones here, some smooth jazz or way more contemporary arpeggios that work effortlessly with our pedalboard. There's a nice fat fullness to the overall sound, which is more woody than a standard ES-335 style. Edging up the wick, electric blues and more forceful jazz fall out of the guitar. If you know your sounds and how to get 'em, this guitar will suit pretty much anything, with perhaps with the exception of clinically clean country Tele twang and all-out metal. Adding a coil-split to the humbucker would certainly help the former and if you can control the feedback then the latter would be a possibility. But those extra knobs are calling...

The quality of the piezo sound is acceptably acoustic-ish, certainly good enough to add texture to the magnetics when, for example, run through an acoustic combo; good enough certainly for a hybrid jazz tone, less acceptable for a strummy acoustic intro and pretty much a no-go if you need to do an acoustic gig and this is the only guitar you have. Along with what are clearly a couple of pre-production glitches on this sample, there's also a high frequency, almost out-of-phase 'halo' to the sound that doesn't do the tonal quality any favours. That said we got some very usable hybrid sounds running both signals into a clean-ish Fender-style combo where the piezo adds a different, certainly acoustic-like, texture. Potentially, it's a very powerful machine but be prepared to do

a little work to get the most from the piezo side.

Verdict

You can buy a US-made Gibson Les Paul Junior for the same price as this DBC model, which clearly remains its huge rival. Is the DBC 'better'? Quite probably, but the iconic appearance and name is a huge draw. Do yourself a favour and try the DBC though – it's a really good rock guitar.

Giltrap's Elise is a bold guitar that, so long as the piezo hiccups are sorted by the time it hits the stores, is a lot of guitar for the money – a really neatly designed and excellent sounding electric guitar with some acoustic-like colour. You'd be foolish not to audition these and the rest of the Black Label range – they punch well above their prices. **G**

The Bottom Line

Fret-King Eclat DBC

We like: Excellent, LP Junior-inspired solidbody

We dislike: Not everyone will like the design quirks

Guitarist says: Anyone need a raw rock machine? This is it

Fret-King Elise GG

We like: Design; build; magnetic tones; everything in fact, except...

We dislike: ...the piezo circuit's hiccups

Guitarist says: With or without its piezo circuit, the Elise should be a guitar you try this year. The best thinline semi for the money? We've yet to play better...



Fret-King Eclat DBC

PRICE: £599 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Korea

TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Two-piece centre-joined mahogany with forearm scoop

NECK: Mahogany, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75 inches)

NUT/WIDTH: Graphite/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearl dots, 305mm (12-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Vintage-style wrapover bridge/tailpiece, Wilkinson WJ15 tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Single Wilkinson WP90 single-coil, master volume and tone controls

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.1/6.75

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: See boxout for other Black Label models. The Blue Label Eclat Standard costs £1,199; the Eclat 2 is £649

LEFT-HANDERS: No, although the Blue Label Eclat 2 is available left handed at £649

FINISHES: Original classic 'burst (as reviewed)

JHS & Co

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Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Playability ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fret-King Elise GG

PRICE: £829 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Korea

TYPE: Offset double-cutaway, semi-solid hybrid electric

BODY: One-piece chamber mahogany body with carved solid maple top

NECK: Mahogany, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75 inches)

NUT/WIDTH: Graphite/43.4mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, pearl dots, 305mm (12-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Wilkinson-designed tune-o-matic-style bridge with piezo saddles, stud tailpiece, Wilkinson WJ05 tuners – all nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 50.5mm

ELECTRICS: Wilkinson WVC nickel-covered humbucker (bridge) and Wilkinson WP90 single-coil (neck), separate magnetic and piezo

volumes, passive magnetic tone, three-band active for piezo circuit, three-way toggle pickup selector for magnetic pickups, and three-way mini-toggle to select piezo/piezo and magnetic/magnetic only

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.4/7.5

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: See p106 for other Black Label models. The Vintage Advance AV3H on which the GG Elise is based costs £479

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Cherry red only (as reviewed)

Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Playability ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



On the throne: Trev Wilkinson, creator of Fret-King

Clever Trevor

Trevor Wilkinson is one of the highest profile UK guitar designers. We pin him down to catch up *by Dave Burluck*

Guitarist has hazy memories of first being shown a Fret-King guitar somewhere in the USA in the mid-nineties. “Yes, I originally conceived them for a distribution company in the USA,” says Trevor Wilkinson. “I honestly can’t remember who it was. It would have been in 1996. They showed about five guitars at the NAMM show; there were three different models. As with so many companies they thought they’d sell loads of guitars just like that, but while they got some interest, they didn’t write many orders. But I’d been listening to people’s comments and concluded that the idea was too good to give away so I ended up

keeping the name. So then in 1999 when I was back in the UK and working with the Patrick Eggle factory, that’s when I reintroduced the brand and then of course the tie-up happened with JHS, so finally Fret-King has a stable home.”

The new Black Label range was introduced in mid-2011 with the Jerry Donahue model and the original idea was for the range to be exclusively artist models. “We kicked it off that way,” says Wilkinson, “but then we looked at it and thought, if we can do this, we can use the artist guitars to drive the range – that’s been the way since the likes of Tal Farlow, Trini Lopez, you name it – it’s part of what our industry does to

market guitars. We thought if Jerry Donahue is actually going to get on board with this guitar at this price-point, we must be doing something right, so why don’t we do the more grass roots, non-signature guitars in that monetary ballpark too? It’s got to be attractive because of the quality.”

Price-wise the Black Labels drop in under the Blue Label range, but both are made in the same Korean factory. “Every guitar is the sum of its parts really,” justifies Wilkinson. “On the Blue Label guitars we use the top-of-the-line hardware on everything, which is made in Japan. Everyone knows that’s more expensive than if it’s made in Korea. It doesn’t mean

The Black Label Range

Along with the Gordon Giltrap and Dave Colwell guitars and the existing **Jerry Donahue** model (£599) we’ll be seeing a Fret-King version of the **Geoff Whitehorn** model (£629). More artist models are promised, but along with those come some familiar Fret-King names and models, all, as Wilkinson has explained, more affordable than the Blue Label guitars. The Les Paul-inspired **Eclat** (£649) is available in three different colours. There are two Tele-inspired **Country Squires**: the **Deluxe** (£579) and the thinline **Semi-Tone** (£629). The non-signature **Elise**, the same as the reviewed Gordon Giltrap model but without the piezo circuit and with dual humbuckers, is offered in two colours at £749. Then there’s the Strat-inspired **Corona SP** that comes in three colours at £599. Finally the **Perception** bass is available in both four- and five-string versions (£599 and £629 respectively). All models include a Fret-King gigbag.

to say its any better it’s just that it’s more expensive. That’s basically where Blue Label sits: we’re trying to give it the ‘affordable boutique’ vibe and actually give you the ultimate hardware you can buy for whatever guitar design we’re doing, which basically means we’re buying the hardware from Gotoh in Japan. Now you know that I took a lot of my designs and moved production to Korea where we obviously have a cheaper labour rate. But we still paid the same attention to the essential parts: if we’re doing a bent-steel saddle we want the right shape; if it’s going to be a steel top-plate its going to be heat-treated and have the chamfers correct so it pivots properly and all those kind of things. So [with the Black Label guitars] we’ve looked at what we’re buying and where we’re buying it, basically chipping a few bob here and there, but without losing the quality.”