



SIGNATURE SOUNDS

AMONG GIBSON MEMPHIS'S RELEASES SO FAR
THIS YEAR ARE THESE THREE ARTIST BEAUTIES:
ONE HISTORIC REPLICA AND
TWO DIFFERENT TAKES ON GIBSON SEMIS,
OLD AND NEW

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GIBSON MEMPHIS

FREDDIE KING 1960 ES-345, TAMIO OKUDA SIGNATURE

1959 ES-330 & ALEX LIFESON ES-LES PAUL

£3,999, £3,549 & £3,299

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Aside from being a trio of signature limited editions for 2017, in terms of construction, our review models also book-end Gibson's ES 'thinline' models from the original classic, the ES-335, which spawned the ES-355 and ES-345, up to the latest, the ES Les Paul.

The Freddie King 1960 ES-345 is based on the hugely influential bluesman's own guitar; Alex Lifeson's latest signature uses the iconography of the Les Paul Custom but in semi-hollow ES LP style, while the lesser known Tamio Okuda is clearly a man of taste, mixing the hollow 1959 spec ES-330 with P-90s and a Bigsby. Both King and Lifeson models are limited runs of 200 pieces; the Okuda of 150. All three are what you see is what you get – there no options.

While it's hard to second guess the price-points and style of Gibson's often forward-looking USA production range, the Memphis division output has never failed to impress us with an eye firmly on the past. Yet these guitars are not just about

replicating the past: along with new designs (as the ES-LP exemplifies along with others such as the ES-275 and the downsized ES-339), Memphis is surprisingly cutting-edge, too, employing 'thermally engineered' woods – aka torrefaction, a process for 'ageing' woods and a growing trend for both acoustic and electric makers – as we've already seen on the Premiere-level guitars such as the ES-335 Premiere Figured and here in regard to the centre block, on the Lifeson ES-LP. Earlier this year, division head Mike Voltz indicated Memphis's plans to use more of the same, suggesting torrefied mahogany for necks, for example, once the production process has been sorted, due to the more brittle nature of the timber after its heat treatment.


Ironically, this modernism is being used to try to nail more closely the weights and sonic response of older vintage pieces. Gibson's certainly created a more vintage-like appearance with its VOS treatment where both the nitro-cellulose gloss

GIBSON MEMPHIS DIMENSIONS

(in mm unless stated)



	FREDDIE KING	TAMIO OKUDA	ALEX LIFESON
Neck width (nut)	43.64	43.5	42.88
Neck width (12th)	52.54	53.4	52.24
Neck depth (1st fret)	23	23	22.1
Neck depth (12th fret)	25.3	26	24.6
Weight (kg/lb)	3.63/8	3.13/6.9	3.03/6.7
Bridge string spacing	51	51	51
Bridge PU DC resistance (ohms)	7.76	6.99	7.76
Neck PU DC resistance (ohms)	7.33	6.92	7.40



The Freddie King 1960 ES-345 includes some love-'em-or-hate-'em features such as a stereo setup and Varitone circuit. However, the tonal shades these bring to the guitar are undoubtedly a key part of its appeal



1. The only one of our trio with the artist's signature, the Lifeson remains a classy piece with its Les Paul Custom style

2. In their authentically aged covers, these MHS (Memphis Historic Spec) humbuckers, with an Alnico II magnet for the bridge and Alnico III for the neck, have mismatched scatter-wound coils and are classed by Gibson as its "most accurate PAF clones yet"

3. These split, or double, parallelgram inlays on the King are an easy identifier of the ES-345: the cheaper ES-335 used dots then small blocks and the 'deluxe' ES-355 used large block inlays

finish is cut back to a lower-gloss lustre and hardware is aged – not distressed – to match. It's not meant to fool anyone into thinking these are real old guitars, but they certainly don't look like those box-fresh 'don't touch me' high-gloss pieces, either. The Lifeson does have a standard gloss with shiny gold-plated parts, but even that looks slightly old with a creamy hue (we suspect it will yellow more with time and use). The Okuda isn't spec'd with a VOS finish, but it appears more dulled than the Lifeson, matching its aged nickel and aluminium hardware, while the King goes for the full treatment on its bright '60s red' body finish, hardware, toned binding and even aged-looking split parallelogram inlays. If the signature artist bit bothers you, the King and Okuda would simply need standard truss rod covers to hide their associations. But you'd be stuck with the Rush man's signature below the pickup toggle switch.

Construction-wise, there's plenty of commonality such as the three-ply maple/poplar/maple laminate tops, backs and sides of all three. The King uses a maple centre block with spruce 'bracing' above and below to match the domed top and back plates. The ES-330, originally conceived as a 'student' model version of the ES-335, is

hollow save for its two longitudinal spruce top braces, while the Lifeson uses a fairly emancipated centre block made from that torrefied mahogany and spruce bracing.

One unwelcome trait was that the neck pickup on both the Lifeson and the Freddie King weren't working when we went to plug in. The former came back to life after we had a fiddle with the electronics, but the latter was resolutely dead. Then we noticed, buried in Gibson's spec, a *stereo* jack socket, which means we have a historically accurate *stereo* output, unlike the last ES-345 we tested. Obviously, we have a Varitone, too, but again, oddly, this isn't mentioned in Gibson's spec either.

Sounds

With their big 16-inch-wide bodies and that substantial centre block, contemporary guitars based on the ES-335 platform can be weighty, but the King, while substantial, comes in at a classic solidbody weight. The hollow Okuda drops half a kilo (and that's with a Bigsby), the Lifeson a shade more.

The Okuda's more compact neck joins the body at the 16th fret, not the 19th fret of the ES-335 design, and makes it feel almost bigger in the hand than it is. Either way, its big and rounded 'Traditional C' profile neck

4. Each of our review models is very limited: the Lifeson (pictured here) and King models run to 200 pieces; the Okuda, just 150

5. As per its historically accurate spec, the ES-345 comes with a stereo output and the 'Marmite' Varitone circuit. It also comes with a stereo 'Y' lead



Alex Lifeson's semi-hollow ES-165 is the new kid on the block here in terms of history, its design only appearing in 2014. It's got bags of character, though, with a surprisingly hollowbody sound, and a manageable weight to attract players who find the 16-inch-wide ES bodies too bulky



Tamio Okuda is a household name in his native Japan, and his signature ES-330 delivers with authentic vintage jazz/blues tones from those Memphis Historic Spec P-90s



6. The MHS 'dog-ear' P-90s use Alnico III magnets and they sound superb on the hollow platform of this Tamio signature

7. Along with the elegant simplicity of the headstock, the nut on the King is vintage-style nylon, like the Okuda; the Lifeson shoots for bone

8. The Bigsby on the Tamio, like the rest of the hardware, is nicely aged to match what appears to be its VOS finish, although that's not in the Gibson spec



feels huge. The additional length, not to mention its darker cherry colour, suggests the King's neck is slimmer, but there's very little in it. The Lifeson is slimmer by a whisker and, in lower positions, feels less rounded with more tapered shoulders.

Strapped on, the guitars each have their own feel. The ES-345 feels like home. The ES-330 does feel a little cramped in the higher positions, while the very slightly neck-heavy ES-Les Paul feels quite unique, albeit it in a good way, and altogether less 'jazzbox' than the others. Supplied setups are pretty manly – they feel like proper guitars, for sure. They also feel like old guitars that have been played, especially the Okuda and even the slightly shiner Lifeson.

It's no surprise that the 'jazziest' guitar is the ES-330 and its thrummy hollowness is a perfect bed for the clean MHS P-90s. We just can't get a duff sound out of this guitar. On one hand, it's a jazz/blues machine that sounds way more authentic than any other semi to hand, but the way it handles light gains is an equal asset. Watch the volume (it is hollow), but learn to work it and here's a modern guitar that pulls back the decades, not to mention its wide stylistic use.

If you're not familiar with a stereo guitar such as the King, then be warned: it really isn't for everyone. It really needs two amps to maximise its potential for a start – one for the neck pickup, the other for the bridge.

But if a thinline semi such as this isn't versatile enough, this stereo setup kicks us into a different league. For example, run the neck pickup into a clean jazz/blues combo and add a little hair or grit to something Vox-y for the bridge pickup. There are all manner of setups you can consider, and in centre position (both pickups on) it's like running two guitars in one with none of the interaction you get on a mono guitar in the same pickup position. Summing the outputs into mono (passive), things can get a little weird, but we used a passive Taylor ABY box (in reverse) and that worked fine, but TheGigRig's Three2One box proved superb to sum both outputs via their own true bypass channels or via a level-adjustable preamp. Another option is Yamaha's THR Dual head, which again really maximises the fun.

Then we have the Varitone with its scooped voices that get progressively 'odder' as you move from position one (bypass) through to six. That said, for those BB or Freddie tones, well, you'll hear them here and adding some grit and crunch produces numerous tonal shades that might not be your number one sound but have plenty of appeal, not least for overdubs or working with another player. As ever – and certainly compared with the other pair – it's the most solidbody-sounding of our trio, with that lovely power if you need it. To be honest, we only scratched the surface. Okay, to some a Varitone is a no-go 'tone sucker', not to mention in stereo. In the setups we've described, that wasn't our experience.

Another oddity here is the non-standard reversed bridge pickup, which wasn't standard spec. It has no effect on the phase of the mixed pickups and will in theory subtly change the response due to the mismatched coils and the screw/slug polepiece



9. The Lifeson is the only one of our trio to use titanium bridge saddles on the tune-o-matic (the others use brass). It's also the only one with unaged hardware and a non-VOS finish.

10. The neck of this era ES-330 sits further into the body than the ES-335. It means that the neck on the Tamio is a little shorter and high-fret access isn't as good as the others on review.

11. Originally, the ES-330 was the 'student' version of the ES-300 series, like the Les Paul Special was to the Standard. Note the simple headstock with its white button 'economy' tuners.

12. It might look like a polished ebony, but the fingerboard on the Lifeson is actually man-made Richlite.

positions. But it's all part of the deal: we're listening to the guitar as a whole.

The Lifeson's condensed size makes it way more manageable both seated or strapped on, and we're surprised just how 'semi' it sounds on cleaner voices (and unplugged), yet it handles volume better than the ES-330. But despite the shape, it's more hollowbody-sounding than you might think, without that solid push of the King. The MHS 'buckers excel at smooth clarity – and be prepared to dial in the pickup heights/tilts to suit your rig. Like the ES-330, it handles boosted crunch tones exceptionally well, and maybe it was simply the mood we were in, but it seemed most at home with classic electric blues, not to mention some very evocative late 50s jazz tones. Upper-fret access, if that bothers you, is the easiest of the trio; the ES-345 might suggest different, but those larger horns of the first period do restrict things a little compared with the more open cutaway of the Les Paul. A small point to consider, but you need to find your own fit. If you find the 16-inch-wide ES bodies too big, or the whole construct just too bulky and heavy, the ES-Les Paul is your obvious choice. It

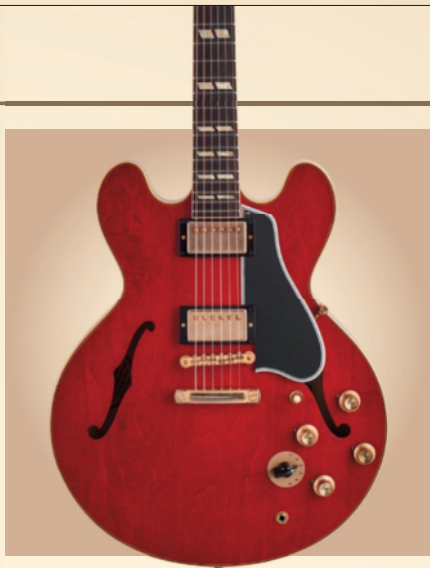
would make a great studio guitar, too: it really packs a lot of semi character into a small package.

Verdict

'Character' is the keyword here and all three guitars have it in spades. It's not just the VOS treatment, but the sounds and feel create instruments that take us back in time in the case of the King and Okuda. Even the new-construct Lifeson captures that same essence – it's hard to believe this design didn't appear until 2014.

The historic angle taken on the King does include that divisive stereo feature, and we can't all get on with a fully hollow ES-330 style despite its charm, superb sounds and light weight. And while not everyone will enjoy the aesthetic of the Lifeson, it's more proof that the ES-Les Paul is a hugely valid design that continues to intrigue and impress every time we get to play one.

Memphis has a large and constantly changing line-up of semis. It starts with the ES-339 Studio, under half the price of any of our reviewed models, which seems to have increased since we last looked at a Memphis guitar. So no, none of our trio is cheap and while there's healthy competition from numerous brands, there's something in the Memphis water that makes its guitars rather unique with their old-school build that seems slightly time-warped. To put it bluntly, if you like old-style Gibsons but can't afford them, or you don't want to put up with any issues, Memphis is the place to look. **G**



GIBSON FREDDIE KING 1960 ES-345

PRICE: £3,999 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Double-cutaway, thinline hollowbody electric

BODY: Maple/poplar/maple laminate with light weight maple centre block

NECK: Mahogany, 1959 Traditional 'C' profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")

NUT: Vintage style nylon

FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood, split parallelogram Aged-Cellulose inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, standard

HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic bridge (with brass saddles) and aluminium stud tailpiece. Kluson Single Ring Tulip Button tuners – VOS gold-plated

ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson MHS humbuckers (Alnico II bridge/Alnico III neck), Stereo Varitone, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls (550k Audio Taper with Sprague Black Beauty Bumblebee tone caps)

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: Other ES-345s include 1964 ES-345 Classic White VOS; 1964 ES-345 in Olive Drab Green w/ Bigsby at £4,099 a piece. The ES-335/339 Studios start at £1,749

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Sixties Cherry – VOS nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS Just a beautiful recreation of an early blues machine

CONS It's not cheap; not everyone will get along with the stereo output or that Varitone



GIBSON TAMIO OKUDA SIGNATURE 1959 ES-330

PRICE: £3,549 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Double-cutaway, hollowbody electric

BODY: Maple/poplar/maple laminate

NECK: Mahogany, Traditional 'C' profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")

NUT: Vintage-style nylon

FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood, Celluloid dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, standard

HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic bridge (w/ brass saddles) and Bigsby B-7 vibrato. Kluson White Oval button tuners – VOS nickel-plated

ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson MHS P-90s (Alnico III), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls (550k Audio Taper with Bumblebee tone caps)

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: No other ES-330s are currently listed. The ES-Les Paul Gold top P-90 with Bigsby VOS costs £3,099

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Classic White – VOS nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS If you don't need the centre block, this showy ES-330 is near perfect; surprisingly versatile and genre-hopping

CONS Again, it's no cheap date; it's hollow



GIBSON ALEX LIFESON ES-LES PAUL

PRICE: £3,299 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway, semi-hollowbody electric

BODY: Maple/poplar/maple laminate w/ thermally engineered Adirondack spruce bracing and thermally engineered mahogany centre block

NECK: Mahogany, Rounded "C" profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")

NUT: Bone

FINGERBOARD: Single-bound Richlite, m-o-p block inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, standard

HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic bridge (with titanium saddles) and aluminium stud tailpiece. 'Milk Bottle' Grover Rotomatic tuners – gold-plated

ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson MHS humbuckers (Alnico II bridge/Alnico III neck), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls (550k Audio Taper with Sprague Black Beauty Bumblebee tone caps)

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: ES-LPs currently start with the Studio (£2,499)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Classic White – nitrocellulose



9/10

PROS Very hollow-sounding semi in compact package; handles volume better than ES-330

CONS You might not like the Lifeson style, but don't overlook the ES-LP!