

What's Old is New (And Hip!)

The Eastwood Ichiban

FORTHEPASTSEVERALYEARS, Eastwood Guitars founder Mike Robinson has been producing some very cool reissue axes, and with great success due not only to the rarity (and thus, escalating values) of the originals, but the quality and reasonable cost of his reproductions.

Until recently, Robinson's focus was funky oddball 1950s and '60s brands like Airline, Teisco, Mosrite, and Burns. Then one day Robinson's brother made a wall clock using an old Teisco body that he had flipped around because the clock's mechanism easily tucked into one of the routs on its backside. After several months of looking at that clock in his shop, inspiration struck Robinson; it occurred to him that the reversed Mosrite shape would make a cool body for a new guitar (much like Semie Moseley's shape was inspired by a flipped-over Fender Stratocaster). So, with a little modification and development a few prototypes, Eastwood had its first proprietary model, the Ichiban, which is Japanese for "number one."

We recently welcomed the chance to peruse two Ichibans, one in Metallic Red with a vibrato tailpiece, the other in Pearl White with a stop tail.

The Ichiban, like all Eastwoods, is an Asian import. If you've had occasion to play any of the plethora of higher-grade guitars from that region, you know that they are instruments of very commendable quality, almost always priced in the \$500 to \$800 range. Such is the case with the Ichiban; its body is solid Eastern Mahogany (a.k.a. Nato) with a German carve top (just like a vintage Mosrite) and contoured back, and is bolted to a 24³/₄"-scale maple neck with bound rosewood fretboard, Mosrite-style fret markers, and an Italian-style six-in-line headstock.

The Ichiban produces sound via two alnico-magnet mini-humbuckers con-

trolled by master Volume and Tone knobs and individual on/off slider switches. Other than their finishes, the only variation between our test Ichibans was their hardware and pickguards; the model with vibrato employs a unit very much like that on a Fender Mustang/Jazzmaster, and a three-ply (white/black/white) 'guard with white-capped knobs. The other guitar uses a traditional stop tailpiece and

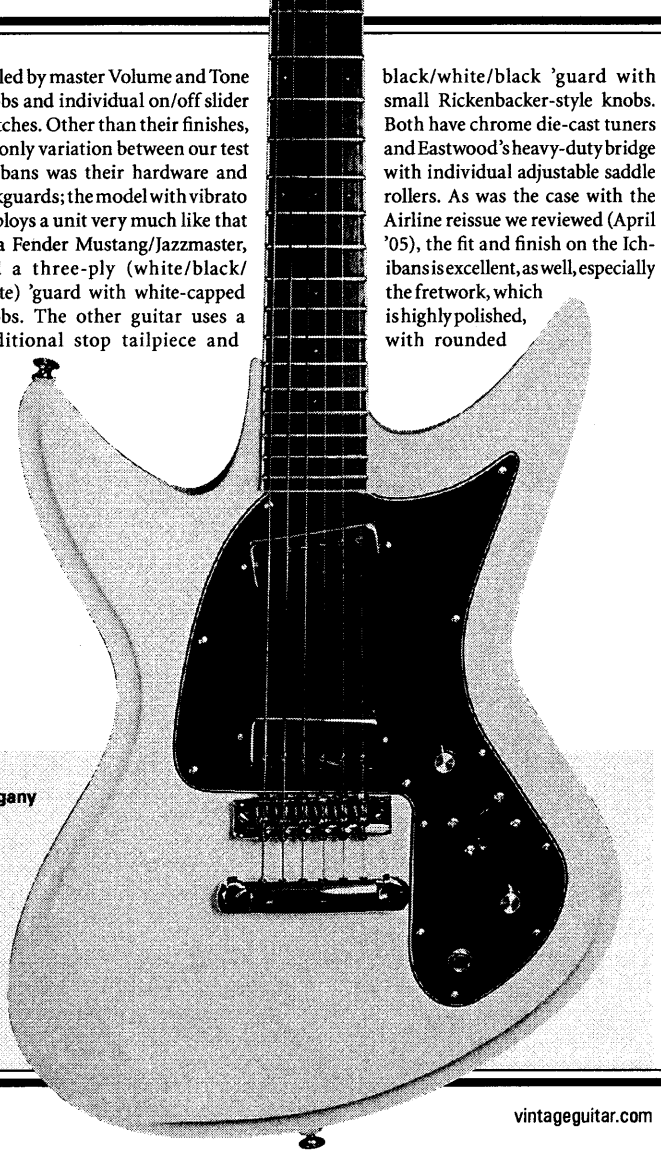
black/white/black 'guard with small Rickenbacker-style knobs. Both have chrome die-cast tuners and Eastwood's heavy-duty bridge with individual adjustable saddle rollers. As was the case with the Airline reissue we reviewed (April '05), the fit and finish on the Ichibans is excellent, as well, especially the fretwork, which is highly polished, with rounded

EASTWOOD ICHIBAN

Features: Solid German-carved Eastern Mahogany body, maple neck with 24³/₄" scale, bound 12" radius rosewood fretboard with mini dot markers, Alnico mini-humbucking pickups, optional vibrato with adjustable chrome roller bridge.

Price: \$599.

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ends and no tool marks. The finishes, neck joints, nuts, and hardware were all nicely executed.

In virtually every respect, these guitars have a high-quality feel, and arrived with super-low buzz-free action and spot-on intonation. The slim satin-finished necks and flat 12"-radius fretboard felt comfortable and played fast, and the contoured back not only makes the guitars lightweight (approximately seven pounds) and very comfortable to play whether sitting or standing. The flip-flopped body, with its extended upper treble bout, makes access to the uppermost frets a bit tricky, but not impossible. And although the slide

switches are very retro, they're a tad cumbersome for quick, on-the-fly application, and the placement of the Volume knob leaves it prone to being bumped during a player's more aggressive moments. On the other hand, it's very convenient for doing volume swells.

We tested the tone of the Ichibans through two all-tube combos; a 50-watt Crate V5212 and a Carvin Bel-Air 212. Going in, we expected the guitars to sound somewhat dark, given their humbucker/mahogany make-up, and their scale length. But both readily produced very nice high-end spank through the clean channel of either amp. With both

pickups on, the tone was lush, bright, and full, without the harshness you get from some humbuckers. The mini-humbuckers were always meaty enough to deliver a good overdrive tone with a fair amount of gain, articulate mids, thumpy low-end, and no annoying squealing or feedback. The neck pickup's subtle slant toward the bridge adds clarity to the lower strings. The pickups' smaller coils and lighter magnetic pull allowed us to get the bridge pickups right up to the strings for strong, solid

crunch through the overdrive channel of the Crate. And the tremolo was very smooth, and stayed in tune even with repeated use. The combination roller bridge and "slippery" plastic nut allowed the strings to move freely.

Like all of Eastwood guitars, the Ichiban utterly drips retro vibe and '60s funk. But its cool aesthetics and vibe shouldn't overshadow the fact that it's an excellent-playing and versatile-sounding professional-quality instrument. — *Phil Feser*

