

Rocked & Rated



Dean Soltero
SL

Ibanez JEM 7V

Group Test

Top dollar dream machines

It might not buy you love, but money is still the only way to get your hands on the world's finest electric guitars. TG checks out four megabucks axes that are worth a battering from a loan shark...

WORDS **HENRY YATES** PHOTOGRAPHY **JESSE WILD**

Jackson Soloist
SL2H

Gibson
Les Paul



Flip the page to
find out which
one won our
Group Test
head-to-head

Now, if we were being all sensible and mature, TG would probably advise you to lock your disposable income into an ISA, thereby ensuring you have a nest egg in retirement. But how boring would *that* be? Seeing as we're irresponsible wasters, our advice is to sink every last penny into the finest guitar available to humanity. Houses, cars and holidays come and go. A top-spec, bells-and-whistles, traffic-stopping electric, on the other hand, is a friend for life.

It's true: the guitar market of 2008 is cheaper than at any other time in history. Pitched battles between luthiers have forced prices down and quality up, with the net result that almost anyone in the developed world can now own a perfectly functional workhorse. That's all well and good – but today's Group Test ain't about the workhorses. It's all about the thoroughbreds. And, as

we quickly discovered, if money is no object, there is *literally* no limit to how sexy the hardware gets.

TG asked four of the world's top luthiers – Gibson, Ibanez, Jackson and Dean – to send us their sweetest electrics, and amazingly, they agreed. This, then, is not so much a Group Test as a schoolboy fantasy made flesh. So without further ado...

Show TG the money

Despite our excitement, TG put a bit of thought into our selection of top-dollar axes. Of course, we're aware there are plenty of esoteric custom luthiers scattered across the world, most of whom charge a bomb for their one-off instruments, but that's

not the vibe we wanted. We wanted to play the iconic models we've seen in the hands of our heroes, and find out exactly how good they are.

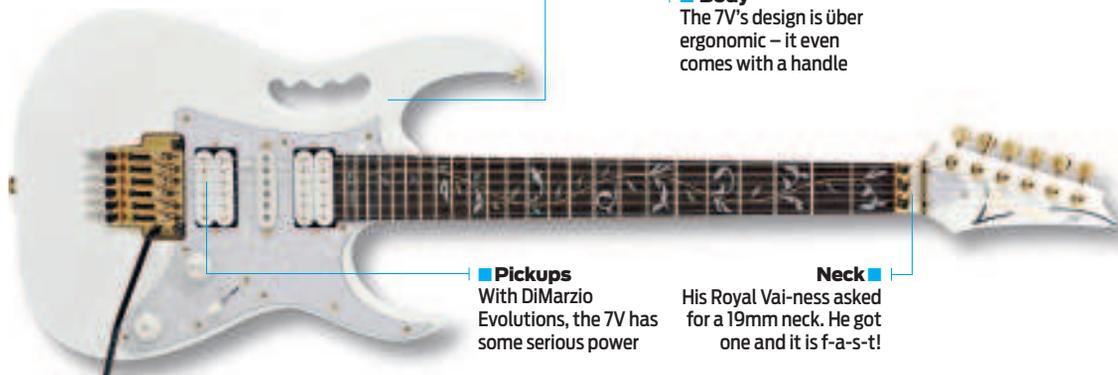
Of course, we had to have a Gibson and, of course, it had to be the Les Paul Custom (£2,500), a US-built legend whose tone is all over rock history like a rash. With the Les Paul in the bag, we set out in search of something with a little finesse, and found it in the form of Steve Vai's signature Ibanez JEM 7V (£1,899). Our trolley-dash through the upper echelons of the market concluded with the acquisition of Dean's classy Soltero SL (£1,649) and the modern classic that is the Jackson Soloist SL2H (£2,099). ■

"AS WE QUICKLY DISCOVERED, IF MONEY IS NO OBJECT, THERE IS NO LIMIT TO HOW SEXY THE HARDWARE GETS"



Ibanez JEM 7V £1,899

Stevie's wonder



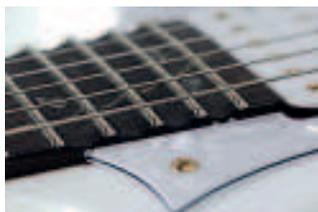
Body
The 7V's design is über ergonomic – it even comes with a handle

Pickups
With DiMarzio Evolutions, the 7V has some serious power

Neck
His Royal Vai-ness asked for a 19mm neck. He got one and it is f-a-s-t!

Back in 1986, Steve Vai found an unexpected parcel under his Christmas tree; it turned out to be a prototype sent to him by Ibanez. Vai loved it, and hooked up with the Japanese giant to design the JEM.

The sizzle: The original JEMs made the world choke on its coffee, and the spec is still impressive. Vai's influence is everywhere on the 7V, from the elongated Strat stylings of the alder body and the scalloped top



frets, to such cosmetic fripperies as the monkey-grip and Vine Of Life fret inlays. We've also got a five-piece maple/walnut neck shaped to his preferred depth of 19mm, an Edge Pro tremolo and a trio of DiMarzio Evolutions.

We say: Instantly identifiable on the shelf, the 7V is equally assertive when you plug in. The body is a like a 'go-faster' Strat, with deep cutaways that let you cruise freely across the two octaves while waggling the highly responsive trem. The neck is a little fatter than you might expect, but this is an ergonomic player and quickly feels like an extension of your arm.

Vai's pickup switching system is still one of the JEM's trump cards. Select each pickup individually – unlocking warmth

and character at the neck, a classy singlecoil snap in the middle, and a beefy sneer at the bridge – and try the more unusual voicings in positions 2 and 4, where the middle combines with the inner coil of each humbucker.

So, yes. We loved the 7V. And Steve ain't getting it back...

SUMMARY

For: Ergonomic design, cool features
Against: Divisive scalloped frets



TG says: It's a JEM...

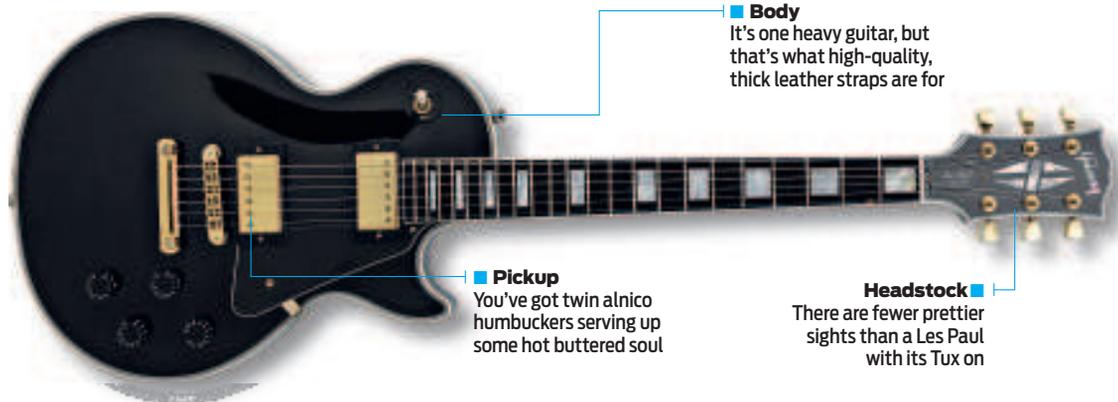
At a glance

Ibanez JEM 7V

BODY: Alder
NECK: 5-piece maple/walnut, bolt-on
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, with Vine Of Life inlay
SCALE: 25"
PICKUPS: 3x DiMarzio Evolution (2x humbucker, 1x singlecoil)
CONTROLS: 1x tone, 1x volume, 5-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Gold Gotoh tuners, Edge Pro bridge
FINISH: White [pictured]
CONTACT: Headstock Dist Ltd 01215 086666
WEB: www.ibanez.com

Gibson Les Paul £2,500

Back in black



Body
It's one heavy guitar, but that's what high-quality, thick leather straps are for

Pickup
You've got twin alnico humbuckers serving up some hot buttered soul

Headstock
There are fewer prettier sights than a Les Paul with its Tux on

You may find your tongue is hanging out. Don't worry – that's a perfectly natural reaction to seeing the Les Paul Custom. This is the top model in the LP line, and therefore one of the sexiest guitars on earth.

The sizzle: To change the format of the Les Paul would be as sacrilegious as cutting Slash's hair. Gibson hasn't. Now, as in the 50s, you'll find yourself sweating beneath a monster mahogany



body, squeezing out riffs on a set mahogany neck. Gibson does stress this LP Custom doesn't have the historical appointments of the 50s original, but unless you're one of those weirdos who

can date a guitar by looking at it, you'll neither notice nor care.

We say: Contrary to popular opinion, the Les Paul is not a perfect design. Pick this baby up and you'll notice it's vertebrae-bendingly heavy, less accommodating than modern shred axes and pretty expensive.

If you're not a penny-pinching, pigeon-chested metallor though, this guitar is a slice of heaven. Strap up and you'll feel like Jimmy Page. Fret a note clean

and it rings out like a buttery bell. Crank the overdrive and you'll bring in a fat swagger that sustains for decades. Pull out those bending blues licks and the audience will eat out of your hand. As long as it's in tune, it's impossible to sound bad on this guitar. Worth every penny.

SUMMARY

For: Unbeatable kudos, monster tone
Against: Heavy, not as fast as some



TG says: Splurge in style

At a glance

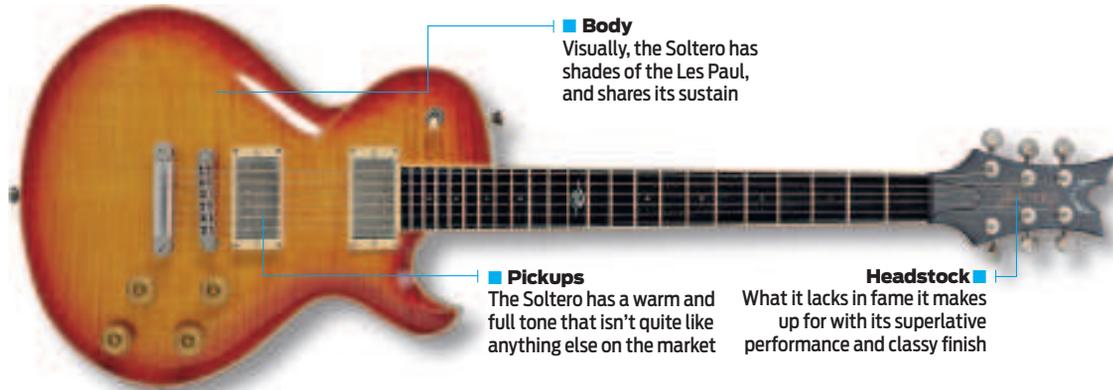
Gibson Les Paul Custom

BODY: Solid mahogany with carved maple top
NECK: Mahogany, one-piece, set
FRETBOARD: Ebony, with pearl block inlays
PICKUPS: 490R and 498
SCALE: 24.75"
HARDWARE: Grover metal tulip tuners, Nashville tune-o-matic bridge and stopbar
CONTROLS: 2x volume, 2x tone, 3-way pickup selector
FINISH: Ebony [shown], Heritage Cherry Sunburst, Wine Red, Alpine White
CONTACT: Gibson Customer Services 00800 44427661

"THE SOLOIST IS THE ULTIMATE CHOICE FOR VIRTUOSI, LAPPING UP ALL OF YOUR TECHNIQUE"

Dean Soltero SL £1,649

Got the green for a Dean?



Body
Visually, the Soltero has shades of the Les Paul, and shares its sustain

Pickups
The Soltero has a warm and full tone that isn't quite like anything else on the market

Headstock
What it lacks in fame it makes up for with its superlative performance and classy finish

At a glance

Dean Soltero
BODY: Solid mahogany with flame maple top
NECK: Mahogany, set
FINGERBOARD: Ebony fingerboard, abalone inlays
SCALE: 24"
PICKUPS: 2x DiMarzio custom humbuckers
CONTROLS: 2x tone, 2x volume, 3-way selector
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic bridge and stop bar
FINISH: Trans Cherry Sunburst [shown], Trans Black, Trans Brazillaurburst, Trans Amber
CONTACT: Bill Lewington 01268 413366

Our man at UK distributor Bill Lewington gave it to us straight: "The metal thing is all good," he says, "but the Soltero is the future for this company – and you can quote me on that."

The sizzle: We could have asked Dean for a US Soltero (£2,879), but we settled for the Japanese SL. As one of the few Deans to feature curves rather than spikes, and with a Les Paul-ish combination of mahogany body,



flame maple top, set mahogany neck and twin custom DiMarzio humbuckers, this is a traditionalist's guitar.

We say: The fact the Soltero is more of a plucky contender

than a history-steeped legend does put it at a psychological disadvantage. Maybe that's why it works so hard. There's no denying the quality, with the smooth and shallow neck making weeping rock solos roll off your fingers, the mahogany body bringing in depth and sustain, and the Japanese build quality equalling most US axes.

The impression that the Soltero is built for soul – not speed – is consolidated by the DiMarzio 'buckers. Designed specifically for this range by Larry

DiMarzio and Dean Zelinsky, it supplies a uniquely fat voice that is warm, dark, woody and alternately sweet as a bell and dirty as a tramp's underpants (depending where the gain dial is pointing). If you can overcome the issue of kudos – and, no, it's not as cool as an LP – you'll find much to love in the Soltero.

SUMMARY

For: Classic rock tone, soulful feel

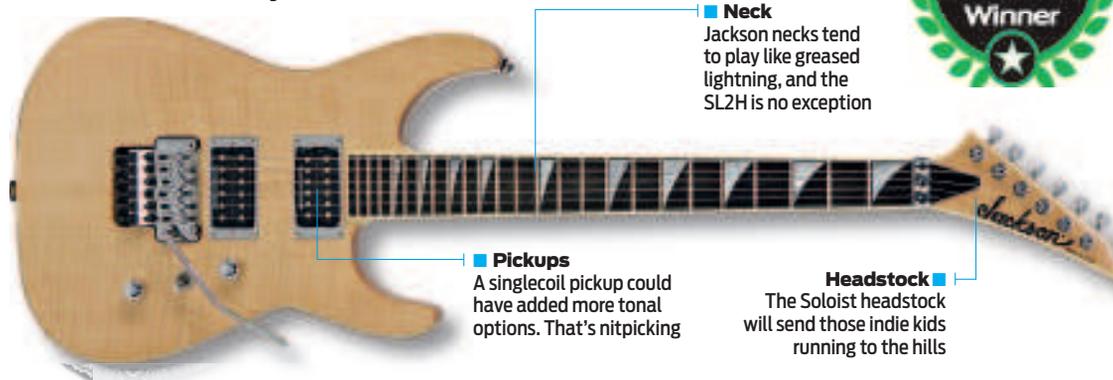
Against: Not the biggest name

★★★★★

TG says: Ace sound for your pound

Jackson Soloist SL2H £2,099

Show me the money!



Neck
Jackson necks tend to play like greased lightning, and the SL2H is no exception

Pickups
A singlecoil pickup could have added more tonal options. That's nitpicking

Headstock
The Soloist headstock will send those indie kids running to the hills

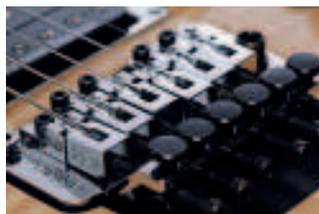


At a glance

Jackson SL2H
BODY: Alder, with flame maple top
NECK: Quartersawn maple, neck-thru-body
FINGERBOARD: Ebony, compound radius, with MOP shark fin inlays
SCALE: 25.5"
PICKUPS: Seymour Duncan '59 SHIN, JB TB4
CONTROLS: 1x volume, 1x tone, 3-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Chrome
FINISH: Natural [shown], choice of 26 more
CONTACT: Fender GBI 01342 331700
WEB: www.fender.co.uk

Given that Jackson started as a spare parts firm, it makes sense that the Soloist fused the best bits from existing models into a pioneering new metal axe. This 80s superstrat is ageing surprisingly well.

The sizzle: Built in the US of A, the SL2H boasts a svelte alder body, furnished with flame maple top and bisected by a quartersawn maple thru-neck. Hardware and pickups are just



as sexy as the timber, with twin Seymour Duncan humbuckers promising high-output mayhem and a genuine Floyd Rose double-locking tremolo wobbling obligingly at the bridge.

We say: The Soloist was born from endless conversations with guitarists in Jackson's Custom Shop, and that's probably why it feels like a player's axe. The SL2H handles like a dream, with the body slim in all the right places, the cutaways and thru-neck getting you right up to the teeny frets, and the speed of the profile giving TG an entirely false representation of our technical ability. It's the ultimate choice for guitar virtuosos – a guitar that laps up every nuance of your

technique. That's why they called it the Soloist.

The Soloist may not have the raw character of the LP, but it's born to rock, and offers the most glorious metal tones when you make the 'buckers angry. Blame it on our inner 80s rocker, but we had to hand it the gold medal.

SUMMARY

For: Stunning playability, metal tones

Against: Not for non-metallers

★★★★★

TG says: Pricey, but worth it