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Words: Chris Corfield / Photography: Olly Curtis

BUDGET RELIC ROUND-UP

You don't have to spend a fortune to get a battle-worn look. These artfully distressed axes deliver vintage vibes



There are few things within the guitar world that divide opinion like a ready relic. To some, pre-distressed guitars represent everything that's wrong with today's players. You see, genuinely distressed – or 'road-worn' – guitars have their visual aesthetic on account of them having being battered around for decades. They've earned that look. To think you can walk into any guitar store and buy a (brand new!) model that's been made to look as if it has those same battle scars is, quite simply, preposterous. Right?

With that in mind, allow us to introduce four real purist-botherers. The LTD TE-254 and Vintage Icon V6 look familiar enough as far as Strat and Tele homages go, and an aged semi-acoustic in the shape of the Washburn HB36 won't be too controversial, but what's this propping the list up? The Cort Sunset gains instant points for looking, at the same time, like every other and no other guitar you've ever seen. So, yes, the four models we're talking about here won't be to everyone's taste. Much like tennis or almond milk. But there's value to be had in this price bracket, regardless of a few artificial scratches and scrapes. Let's take a look...



LTD TE-254

£429

A tastefully aged Tele-style rocker

Looks awful familiar, this guitar?

Yep, the TE-254 does bear a certain resemblance to a Telecaster, but it has enough of its own quirks and characteristics to make it quite an interesting proposition in its own right.

What kind of quirks?

Well, for starters, the ESP Designed neck humbucker gives you a wider range of tones than you'd get from a regular Tele. We found the pickup warm and inviting, but were then reassured that we could slip back into regular Tele territory quickly thanks to the more



traditional single coil in the bridge. The ash body was also appealing, although colossally heavy, too. Normally seen on guitars far higher up the price scale, the wood here provided a really zippy attack, which we loved.

Does the distressing work?

From a distance, there's a definite vintage vibe going on here. The rubs and scrapes all look pretty legit, and the wood's natural grain shines through nicely. Up close, however, it loses a bit of its appeal. The gradation between paint and wood is perhaps too clinical to really fool anyone.



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES:

Ash body, maple neck, 22 frets, 647mm (25.5") scale, ESP Designed pickups, flat-mount bridge

FINISH:

Distressed 3-Tone Burst

CONTACT:

Sound Service GmbH
esp guitars.com

VINTAGE ICON V6

£349

Vintage by name...

How did they get this past the copyright lawyers?

How cynical of you. The Vintage V6 Icon line is actually, in its own right, a lot older than you might think. Over time, it has carved itself quite a nice niche, largely thanks to solid build, quality hardware and a reliable set of highly-usable tones. Ignore the name on the headstock and you could quite easily put the V6 in the same company as, for example, Squier's Classic Vibe line-up.

How does it sound?

Delightful, actually. The trio of Wilkinson single coils, long-time



favourites of the modding crowd, provide the right levels of spank, while the bridge and vintage tuners work nicely to keep everything in check.

Has it aged well?

Of the four, this guitar's ageing effect provoked the most controversy. From the front, the wear is subtle and the matte finish of the body works pretty well. But whoever thought smearing a greasy engine-oil finger between the frets to approximate wear was a good idea needs to have a long look at themselves. And then work out a better way to execute that particular effect.



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES:

Alder body, maple neck, 22 frets, Wilkinson WVS vintage voiced single-coil pickups, Wilkinson WVC bridge and WJ55 locking tuners

FINISH:

Distressed Boulevard Black (as reviewed), Distressed Laguna Blue

CONTACT:

JHS; jhs.co.uk

CORT SUNSET TC

£369

Have we met before?

So it's a Les Paul Junior and Tele combo?

Er, yes. The Duncan Designed P90-1 neck pickup delivers the fatter growl you're after for higher-gain action. Set clean it gives a warmer, more rounded tone, even going as far as to deliver a bit of traditional Tele twang. Versatile in sound, then.

What's the quality like?

It feels pretty robust, it's compact and has a reassuring weight without ever feeling overly heavy. The bolt-on hard maple neck houses a nicely-finished fretboard, and the vintage



Kluson-style tuners are reliable and precise enough. Our review model could have been better set up, but that's something that's easily sorted.

What about the distressed finish?

It's nicely done actually: matte throughout in Worn White Blonde (it's also available in Worn Butter Blonde), which means a worn paint effect showing off the attractive ash grain. There's a smooth blend to the distressed sections, unnoticeable to the touch. Perhaps slightly inconsistent though. And, if they're going to distress it, give those frets a rub down, too.



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES:

Ash body, bolt-on hard maple neck, 648mm (25.5") scale, 22 frets, Duncan Designed P90-1 and TE-103B pickups

FINISH:

Worn White Blonde (as reviewed), Worn Butter Blonde

CONTACT:

Proel;
cortguitars.com

WASHBURN HB36

£599

A classy hollowbody with retro appeal

This looks large and awkward...

No, sir, the HB36 is an easy player. With a relatively flat neck, it's equally suited to chords or scale runs, too.

Is it versatile?

Yes! Even though it's a semi, with the maple centre-block there's ample sustain balanced against minimal, controllable feedback, even at higher volumes. The two humbuckers give surprising definition, even with overdriven chords. The bridge humbucker is great for mid-gain blues through to high-gain rock: defined without



being sharp and with necessary depth. Set clean, there's a brightness leading to 60s jangle. Engaging the neck humbucker brings a real jazz-friendliness, too. Single notes have warmth while more complex chords retain their clarity.

Vintage or beaten up?

Vintage. Off-white binding around the body and neck, vintage matte dark sunburst and distressed bronze hardware all make for a classy finish, while the block inlays on the ebony fingerboard are precise and look the part. The neck feels slightly artificial on first impression, though the matte finish affords easy movement.



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES:

Spruce top, flame maple back and sides, maple neck, 628mm (24.75") scale, 22 frets, two Washburn humbuckers, distressed bronze hardware, tune-o-matic bridge.

FINISH:

Vintage Matte

CONTACT:

Sound Technology;
washburn.com



HEAD TO HEAD

Beaten, scratched,
marked and retro-fied...

It doesn't take a giant leap of faith to conclude that these guitars have a similar sort of player in mind. And, by nailing their colours to the vintage mast in a big way, the four guitars on show here are taking a bit of a risk. To succeed, they need to demonstrate that they have their own character, and can be useful, regardless of their unique visual identities.

Take the Vintage V6 Icon, for example. Without its scrapes, you've effectively got a pretty standard entry-level Strat-alike, on paper. Thankfully, Vintage can call upon the skills of Trev Wilkinson to ensure that, no matter what the body and neck are like, the pickups and hardware are at least of a decent standard. The same goes for the LTD TE-254, which is a largely well-made and versatile instrument. And, despite the LTD traditionally being more closely associated with heavier styles of music, the only indicator of this comes in the slight cut at the TE-254's neck heel joint.

THE CORT GIVES OFF A REAL PAWN-SHOP VIBE, WHICH IS WHAT THEY ARE ALL GOING FOR...

As an aside, while this isn't a heavy guitar genre-wise, it is a beast in terms of sheer weight and it's certainly not one for the faint-hearted.

The Washburn HB36 is an interesting guitar, more perhaps in the context of its competition. Pitching itself against the Epiphone Dot, for example, you can see enough small touches to convince that this is a higher-grade guitar than the Epi. But could its faux-vintage aesthetic count against it with some players?

Finally, the Cort Sunset TC deserves special mention. By attempting to meld the best parts of a Les Paul Junior with a Telecaster, Cort has given us something, which is at the same time derivative and different. It gives off a real pawn-shop vibe which, let's be honest, is exactly what each of the guitars on offer here was going for. It could be argued that only the Cort truly achieves that, offering genuine character in a quirky package.



The LTD: firmly rooted in Tele territory



The Cort's shape has an undeniable resemblance to Fano's pricier SP6

FINAL VERDICT

Which budget relic is the right one for you?

One question kept coming up while reviewing this quartet: are these guitars designed to hang on a wall, or are they there to be played? If it's the latter, then they need to offer more than a natty paint job. Overall the Vintage V6 Icon and LTD TE-254 succeed because there's always room for a workhorse Strat or Tele, even if it's one where you don't get to give it the workhorse vibe yourself. The Washburn HB36 scores highly on a number of

fronts, too, but we wonder if its aesthetic is somewhat limiting. It's truly nailed the bourbon-barrel Americana thing to a tee, but is that what the wider world is going to want? And the Cort Sunset TC ticks a lot of boxes; it's interesting to look at for sure, yet the P90-1 pickup gave it a unique tonal flavour the other guitars couldn't match.

It's said that once you go past the £100 mark, you'll struggle to find a bad guitar. Sure, they vary massively in terms of quality,

tonality, desirability and any other variable you can think of. But, objectively speaking, you just don't get outright bad guitars in the way you used to. Case in point: these guitars on display here are meant to look battered, bruised and unloved. But even here we find four very capable, versatile and fun instruments. The question is whether you would enjoy these guitars because of their road-worn looks, or in spite of them. Either way, you're in for a treat.

LTD TE-254



TOTAL Guitar
BEST VALUE FOR MONEY

VINTAGE ICON V6



TOTAL Guitar
BEST ALL-ROUNDER

CORT SUNSET TC



TOTAL Guitar
BEST BUY AWARD

TOTAL Guitar
BEST FOR STANDING OUT

WASHBURN HB36



TOTAL Guitar
BEST FOR JAZZ

SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

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	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
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	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★