

# Class Of Red

Travelling back into the mists of time, Yamaha revisits its 1960s acoustic guitar manufacturing heritage with a contemporary take on the classic red label FG range

Words David Mead Photography Neil Godwin











## YAMAHA FG5 & FGX3 £1,198 & £975

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### What We Want To Know

#### 1 What's the significance of the red label, then?

Yamaha's initial range of FG acoustics was launched in 1966 and came with a red label inside the soundhole. Since then, the 'red label' Yamahas have become quite sought after on the collector's market and so the company has decided to release a tribute set of guitars inspired by its initial foray into the acoustic guitar market 53 years ago.

#### 2 Are these straight reproductions?

No, Yamaha has added some twists and tweaks along the way in order to bring their historic range into the 21st century. There have been changes to the bracing, for instance, and the tops are ARE treated to simulate ageing, but the models retain their classic look right down to the distinctive headstock shape.

#### 3 How does Yamaha's Atmosfeel pickup system work?

The Atmosfeel is a three-way pickup design comprising an under-saddle piezo, an internal microphone and a contact sensor for high frequencies. The preamp controls allow the player an optimum blend over the three elements, giving them the opportunity to dial up the sound they need for live performance.

Anyone who went to buy an acoustic back in the swingin' 60s would've been met with the same problem. You either raided the piggy bank and looked at the high end of the market, which was the expensive imported USA ranges from the likes of Gibson and Martin, or you took your chances at the more affordable end of the price range. This quite often meant sundry anonymous torture devices from far-flung lands or, if you were lucky, you'd discover Yamaha's early FG range.

Arriving in the midst of what James Taylor refers to as "the great folk scare of the 60s", the Folk Guitar Range was the perfect antidote for novitiates with permanently sore fingers and tuning

fatigue. Suddenly there was hope – a range of guitars that not only sounded perfectly reasonable and stayed in tune, but were a relative breeze to play. Furthermore, 'Yamaha' was the name appearing on the headstocks of some of the prime movers of the British folk movement – Bert Jansch, for instance, was an early adopter.

After quietly celebrating the 50th anniversary of the iconic red label acoustics in 2016, Yamaha decided it was time to revisit the range, employing some modern tweaks and upgrades along the way. Remember Martin's Modern Deluxe range we took a look at in issue 447? Same idea: iconic instrument with a lot of clever new stuff happening under the hood.







1. Yamaha's understated headstock bears only its pitchfork logo, the truss rod cover reminding us of the Red Label's heritage
2. The Sitka tops of both guitars have both been ARE treated to enhance tone
3. Olde world stylised Gotoh open back tuners help ramp up the FG acoustics' vintage vibe
4. An ebony bridge with a bone saddle plus a 'wood-style' scratchplate all add to the FG5's classic Traditional Western look

## We played the FGX3 for far longer than necessary for this review out of sheer enjoyment

What we have in the test area today are two models from the reissued Red Label range, a Japanese-built FG5 and an electro-acoustic FGX3 from China. Cosmetically, the two are virtually twins on first sight, but there are a few subtle differences here and there in terms of spec that would account for the slight difference in price.

It's interesting to note that, at first glance, the word that springs into your mind here is, obviously, 'dreadnought', but Yamaha insists that this is not the case, preferring to use its original term 'Traditional Western'. In fact, the company says: "Yamaha was the first Japanese guitar brand to develop an original body shape instead of simply copying previous designs. The differences are subtle, measured in just millimetres, but the slightly wider body contributes to the warm FG sound..."

So there you have it. In fact, we compared the spec of the FG models here with Martin's standard dreadnought size and Yamaha is correct in that, for instance, a Martin has a slightly longer scale length and a mite more body depth, whereas the Yamaha has a smidge more body width and the body is a whole 3.1mm shorter... and so on. Vive la différence!





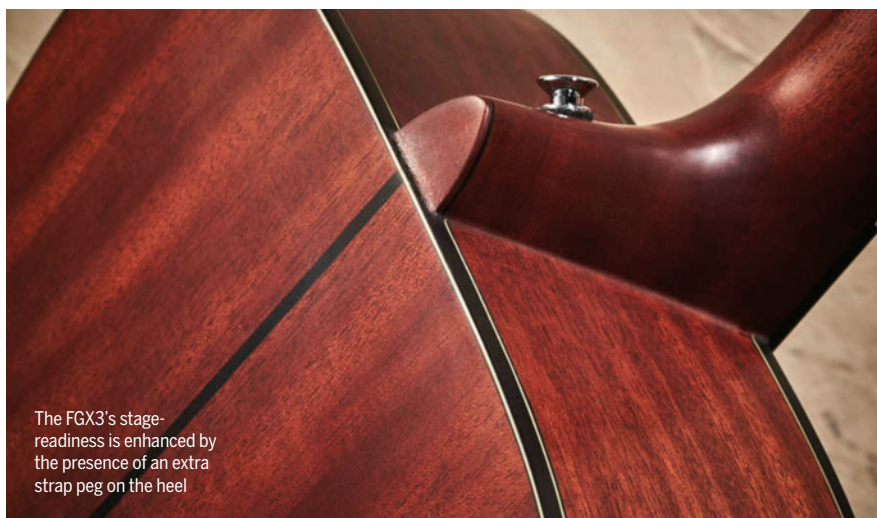


We'll take a look at which build features the FG5 and FGX3 share before we start exploring the subtle variances between them. To begin with, both have Sitka spruce tops, which Yamaha tells us is sourced from either Canada or Alaska, and both have been subjected to Yamaha's Acoustic Resonance Enhancement – ARE for short – which is the company's take on the practically universal torrefaction process where the wood is heated, and, in the company's own words: "The ARE process gives the instrument a rich, vintage-quality tone, producing a sound like you've been playing it for years."

Both guitars have solid mahogany backs and sides and it must be said that all-solid wood construction at this kind of price point is something we're seeing less and less today, so kudos to Yamaha on this alone. Necks continue the mahogany theme, both are scarfed just under the Gotoh tuners and finish with the slight V-shape at the top of the headstock, which was a characteristic of those early FG models. In fact, reference is made to the red label lineage via the truss rod covers, which bear the words "Since 1966". In both cases, the fretboards are ebony, with 20 well-seated medium frets with pearl dot position markers in the accustomed places.

So, apart from the fact that the FG5 is made in Japan and the FGX3 hails from China, what are those subtle differences we referred to earlier? On the FG5 the nut and saddle are both bone, whereas the FGX3's

**The Atmosfeel pickup system uses a three-source combination for the very best plugged-in voicing**



The FGX3's stage-readiness is enhanced by the presence of an extra strap peg on the heel

are urea. The 5's pickguard is designated as being 'wooden type', the 3's is some sort of black plastic material – we told you the differences were subtle. The bridge pins on the FG5 are ebony, the FGX3's white-dotted ABS – and, of course, the latter also has Yamaha's Atmosfeel fitted, whereas you'd have to step up a little in price to have that luxury on the FG5, the electro-acoustic FGX5 retailing at around £300 more. One thing that strikes us as odd is that the FGX3 has the extra strap pin on the heel, whereas the F5 doesn't. Just because it hasn't got a pickup doesn't mean you would want to play sitting down all the time, so we'd like to have seen a little parity in this case between the two models.

Apart from those minor discrepancies, these two are virtually twins – although, cosmetically speaking, the FGX3 top and back/side timbers look a little lighter in hue, but this could easily be something that varies slightly from one individual instrument to another and is, therefore, of little significance.

## Feel & Sounds

Both guitars come fitted with Elixir Nanoweb Light Gauge 80/20 strings – weighing in at a perfectly adequate 0.012 to 0.053 – and so the next thing is to hear what these instruments sound like.

Picking up the FGX3 first, we notice that the action has been set on the high side of medium and, while this might not be of any concern to someone who just wishes to bang out their rendition of *Wonderwall* at the local open mic night, fingerstylists who often trespass up the dusty end of the fretboard might want to fettle things a little to make such manoeuvres a little more comfortable under the hand.

The onboard electrics make the guitar feel a little heavier than the FG5 – around 0.45kg heavier, in fact – but the general feel is good. The finish on both instruments is referred to by Yamaha as being 'semi-gloss', but, by all accounts, could easily be dubbed 'satin' to our eyes. It gives an appropriate played-in feel, nonetheless. A few initial noodles reveal a good combination of treble



5. Yamaha's Atmosfeel pickup system features a piezo sensor in the bridge, a microphone and a high-frequency sensor controlled via three rotaries on the upper bout

6. The combination of a Sitka spruce top with mahogany back and sides is a tried-and-tested formula for a great-sounding acoustic guitar – and the FGX3 certainly delivers



5



6

and bass, the former perhaps a little on the light side, but no cause for concern to our ears. Chords have an appropriate amount of shimmer; using either fingers or a pick, single notes ring out clearly. The 44mm nut width is just about perfect for fingerstyle and it's true to say that we played the FGX3 for far longer than necessary for this review, out of sheer enjoyment. And that says a lot about an acoustic guitar, because some of them you just want to be shot of as quickly as possible. Not the case here.

A word or two about the Atmosfeel pickup/preamp combo installed here. Rather than just a straightforward under-saddle piezo, Yamaha has used a three-source combination in order to wheedle out the very best plugged-in voicing it could. The three components comprise a piezo in the bridge, an internal mic and a treble sensor under the soundboard. The three controls on the preamp allow the player to blend all three to taste, making the Atmosfeel far more versatile than many systems on the market at present. It's all

powered by a single AA battery that has been squirrelled away in a compartment under the end pin/jack socket. It works, too. Mixing the voices from the various components is easy and instinctive – it took us literally seconds before we found a sound that was absolutely spot on through our AER Compact 60 amp. Yamaha is definitely on to a winner with this system.

Over to the FG5 now and we noticed a very subtle change in feel. It's a difficult one to describe, but this instrument just feels a little more comfortable under the fingers – more sleek, more grown-up and mature, somehow. Once again the action is slightly higher than we'd like, but it's a jot lower than on its sibling. Sonically, we're met with a similar response: a good spread of trebles and basses, both fingerstyle and strumming being ably accommodated. The frets have been finished slightly better here with a good final polish, which might be another factor in the slightly better feel of the FG5 – but this would be simple to put right on the FGX3.

## THE RIVALS

In this price range, you'd be looking at Martin's lower end, although you wouldn't get the all solid woods with the Grand Performance GPX1AE, but it's cheaper at around £649. Moving up the Martin range you could look at the all-mahogany 000-15M at £1,349. Ibanez delivers the goods with its AE Range, such as the AEWC300 for £455, and the Vintage range is generally very worthy if you're on a tight budget. We particularly enjoyed the Gordon Giltrap signature models at £489 for the standard and £659 for the deluxe version, for instance. Other than that, the Faith and Taylor Academy ranges are well worth checking out.



Vintage VE2000GG Gordon Giltrap Signature Model





**7.** The spec of both guitars is very similar, the principal difference between the two is that the FGX3 (pictured here) is made in China and its stablemate in Japan

**8.** A separate version of this FG5 model, the FGX5, is available with Yamaha's excellent Atmosfeel pickup system installed

## Verdict

The original red label Yamahas have become sought after on the collector market and, if these two reissues are anything to go by, it's easy to see why. Pitched in the lower-mid price range, they would both keep a beginner to semi-pro happy for years as they are both eminently playable and the Atmosfeel pickup system is top-class for anyone wishing to venture out into the nether regions of live performance, too. All in all, they're both good all-rounders that will suit many tastes and playing styles, so we'd like to say a hearty welcome back to these iconic instruments and, who knows, if you come across one, you might want to have a red label day of your own. **G**



## YAMAHA FG5

**PRICE:** £1,198 (inc case)  
**ORIGIN:** Japan  
**TYPE:** Traditional Western acoustic  
**TOP:** Sitka spruce with ARE treatment  
**BACK/SIDES:** Mahogany  
**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 118mm  
**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 412mm  
**NECK:** African mahogany  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 634mm (24.96")  
**TUNERS:** Gotoh open gear  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Bone/44mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Ebony, small dot inlays, 400mm (15.75") radius  
**FRETS:** 20  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ebony/54mm  
**ELECTRICS:** No  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 2/4.4  
**OPTIONS:** FGX5 (with Atmosfeel pickup) costs £1,418  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Yamaha's Red Label Series includes the smaller bodied FS5 (£1,197), FSX5 (£1,418), FSX3, (£976) & FS3 (£798)  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISH:** Semi-gloss (as reviewed)

# 8/10

**PROS** Well made, versatile, all-solid woods acoustic pitched at a satisfying price point

**CONS** The action could be set slightly lower – but not by much



## YAMAHA FGX3

**PRICE:** £975  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**TYPE:** Traditional Western electro-acoustic  
**TOP:** Sitka spruce with ARE treatment  
**BACK/SIDES:** Mahogany  
**MAX RIM DEPTH:** 118mm  
**MAX BODY WIDTH:** 412mm  
**NECK:** African mahogany  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 634mm (24.96")  
**TUNERS:** Gotoh open gear  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Urea/44mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Ebony, small dot inlays, 400mm (15.75") radius  
**FRETS:** 20  
**BRIDGE/SPACING:** Ebony/54mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Atmosfeel 3-way pickup/preamp system w/ Mic Blend, Bass EQ and Master volume controls  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 4.85/2.2  
**OPTIONS:** The acoustic FG3 model costs £798  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See FG5  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISH:** Semi gloss (as reviewed)

# 8/10

**PROS** A good-sounding acoustic with a powerful pickup system for slick performance

**CONS** That action, like on the FG5, could be set lower