

MATSUDA M1 Skunk

We take a look at the latest offering from the Japanese-born, California-based luthier, Michihiro Matsuda. Does his M1 Skunk kick up a stink?

Michihiro Matsuda was born in Japan, but moved to the USA to learn the skills of guitar making, training first at the Roberto Venn School of Luthiery and then as an apprentice with revered maker, Ervin Somogyi. Currently based in California, Michi makes around twelve instruments a year. His craftsmanship and distinctive designs have won him considerable admiration from both players and other makers. The M1 (fractionally larger than a traditional OM) Skunk we have for review is a custom order for The Acoustic Music Company (who represent him in Europe) and was originally conceived in a conversation between Michi, Trevor Moyle from The Acoustic Music Company and Ervin Somogyi (who dubbed it the Skunk). The question is, does this skunk stink?

BUILD QUALITY

I can safely say that this guitar is quite unlike anything I've ever played before, at least in terms of its aesthetics. Its appearance is quite extraordinary. The back and sides of the guitar are made from very straight grained, dark African Blackwood, with a central portion of lighter sapwood. African Blackwood is just about the most expensive wood used in guitar making at the moment and is widely seen as an equal to Brazilian rosewood in terms of its contribution to the tone of a guitar. Fortunately, it doesn't suffer the same legal

restrictions in terms of CITES regulations – at least at the moment. This contrasting dark / light theme is carried around onto the front of the guitar, where the European spruce top is finished in gloss black, except for a central stripe, which is left natural under a clear gloss finish. Decoration is relatively simple, and takes the form of a bird's-eye maple soundhole rosette, African Blackwood bindings and maple / black / maple purfling. I've never been a fan of sharp, Florentine cutaways on acoustic guitars, but it seems to work in Michi's designs (much as it does on Mike Baranik's Meridian). The sculpted ebony bridge is silky smooth and is

home to a fairly substantial bone saddle and pins. The saddle itself has holes drilled in between the strings and I'm not clear whether this is merely decorative or intended to reduce mass.

Whatever the case, as with the rest of the instrument, the standard of finish reveals the incredible attention to detail in the construction of this guitar, an impression equally conveyed by the finely finished, sculpted bracing, which is angled to accommodate the cutaway.

The dark / light theme continues in the construction of the neck, with its two-piece mahogany construction and

central maple laminate. The fingerboard is, most unusually for an acoustic guitar, made from a simply stunning piece of bird's-eye maple. The fingerboard itself has a relatively large radius of curvature, giving it a flattish feeling,



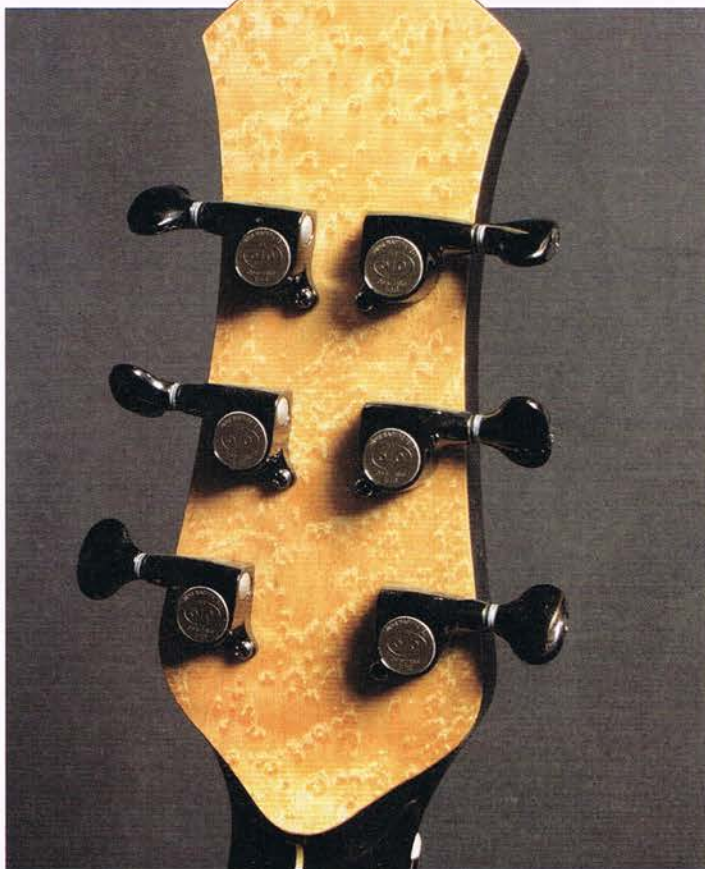
akin to a classical guitar. However, the slim, comparatively shallow neck profile and comfortable 1 3/4" nut width (approximately 454mm) make it far more friendly than many classical necks. The neck profile, combined with the 25 1/4" scale length and the setup makes for easy playability. The maple continues onto the headstock, which is edged in black and also has a rear facing of bird's-eye maple. Tuners are by Gotoh, with a 1:18 ratio and a black chrome finish. It's difficult to do justice to the unique appearance and construction of this guitar in a short description, but just take a look at those images!

SOUND QUALITY

There's no doubting that this guitar has a truly unique appearance, but how does it sound? This is the second African Blackwood Matsuda that I've played and the tonal characteristics of this one resemble those of the first. The overall tone has a dark richness too it that I see in many African Blackwood guitars, particularly

in the bass and lower-mids, with a slightly piano-like quality that I really like. Those bass tones are a thing of joy and Michi has managed to achieve that delicate balance of richness and darkness, without ever veering into muddiness. There's plenty of separation and despite the sustain, the sound never blurs, ensuring that bass lines remain clean. At the risk of sounding clichéd, I'd describe the trebles as singing and fat (like a Wagnerian soprano!), ensuring that the darkness I mentioned earlier never dominates. I recently played an African Blackwood Sobell Martin Simpson model that took my breath away in terms of its tone. This Matsuda, whilst retaining its own distinctive sound and not quite as powerful, has a similar tonal spectrum. Fingerpickers will love it as it presents a tonal palette that ranges from dark, commanding bass to shimmering, yet substantial trebles that are capable of punching their way through the darker undertones or floating above with a slightly





The Skunk has a contrasting light / dark theme with bird's-eye maple here



The neck's maple continues to the headstock, edged in black

ethereal quality. Make no mistake about it, this may be an unusual looking guitar, but it's a serious instrument.

CONCLUSION

I must confess that I was highly sceptical about this guitar when I first saw a picture on the internet. Its black finish and

maple fingerboard reminded me, rather alarmingly, of a cheap and decidedly cheerless 80s acoustic owned by an acquaintance, which has all the tonal potential of a cereal box strung with fishing line. With that in mind, my heart sank a little when I was asked to review this guitar and I admit that my thoughts ran along the lines of, "Trevor, what were you thinking?" In reality, however, I was completely blown away by this guitar. It has stunning playability

and tone. I was prepared to hate the appearance, but it looks incredible. When I was playing the guitar, another highly regarded American luthier came along and said, "You know, I don't think any luthier, other than Michi, could really have pulled that off". I can't comment on what other luthiers may have made of it, but I'd say that Michi has most definitely pulled it off. At the beginning of the review I asked the question, "Does this Skunk stink?" The short

answer is "No". Come to think of it, that's the long answer, too. Put your preconceptions aside, play it and prepare to be amazed.

Richard Thomas

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Top notch quality of construction; with playability and tone to make you smile for a decade.

Cons: The aesthetics won't appeal to everyone

Overall: An extraordinary instrument, both in terms of its appearance and tone.

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality ★★★★★
Sound Quality ★★★★★
Value for Money ★★★★★

5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless.
 4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat.
 3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
 2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.



MATSUDA M1 Skunk

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Manufacturer: Matsuda
Model: M1 Skunk
Retail Price: £12,995
Body Size: Custom
Made In: USA
Top: European Spruce
Back and Sides: African Blackwood
Bridge: Ebony
Neck: Mahogany
Fingerboard: Bird's-Eye and Ebony Maple
Frets: 20
Tuners: Gotoh 1:18
Scale Length: 25 1/4"
Nut Width: 1 3/4"
Stings Fitted: High Quality USA-Made
Onboard Electronics: No
Left-handers: N/A
Gig Bag / Case: TKL Case

CONTACT DETAILS

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