

SEXAUER FT-O-JB FAN FRET COMPANION

The understated looks of this guitar puts quality before flash. Put how does it perform? With Richard Thomas.

The name Bruce Sexauer may not be familiar to many UK readers, but Bruce has been building guitars since 1967, his motivation being to build himself a better guitar than the ones he could actually afford to buy. Over the years, he has built an incredible range of instruments, from solid-body electrics, through dulcimers and mandolins, to full-sized harps. In addition to his own designs – many of which incorporate unusual features such as asymmetric bodies and, as in the case of the review instrument, multi-scale lengths – Bruce has gained a reputation as the ultimate vintage Martin reproducer in his role as Eric Schoenberg's principal guitar maker. Schoenberg is well known for commissioning reproductions of vintage Martins, particularly OMs, and Sexauer has been making around six a year for him for over a decade. The guitar review we have is inspired by a classic Martin design, but has some distinctive features that are characteristically Sexauer.

Build And Features

Top-notch materials have been used in the building of this little O-sized guitar, and although it's relatively plain in terms of decoration, it simply oozes quality. The soundboard is a fine piece of German spruce, with simple purfling around the edge, bound with a light hardwood. I'm not entirely sure what the wood is – mahogany, yew or cherry, perhaps – but it looks good. The neat soundhole rosette features some figured maple, and a small tortoiseshell scratchplate completes the picture. A peek through the soundhole reveals the immaculately finished

interior, with Adirondack spruce bracing. One of the first things that impressed itself on me about this guitar is its sheer lightness. Although one might expect this from a guitar measuring just 13½" across the lower bout and a maximum depth of 4¼", the back and sides are made from Malaysian blackwood (a kind of ebony), which tends to have a higher density than mahogany and many rosewoods, and typically makes for a slightly heavier instrument. I've played a few guitars made from this wood and I must say that I've liked each one of them.

The mahogany neck is carved in a very ergonomic shallow D-profile, while the silky-smooth ebony fingerboard features slotted diamond position markers in abalone and perfectly finished narrow frets. The distinctive Sexauer headstock design has Bruce's simple 'S' logo and Waverly tuners. In many ways there's a very pre-war

vintage Martin vibe about the instrument, redolent of a 1930s Martin 0 I once played.

Of course, the one major distinctive feature that immediately leaps out at one is the fan-fretting. Essentially, by angling the Madagascar

rosewood bridge, the nut and the frets, the scale length varies from 25 7/16" (646.1 mm) on the low E string to 24 15/16" (633.4 mm) on the high E string. This arrangement is intended to provide the firmer, stronger bass associated with longer scale



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lengths, while giving the slightly sweeter trebles often associated with shorter-scale instruments.

Sounds

This is my first real encounter with a fan-fretted guitar and I approached it with a degree of trepidation. However, to my amazement I barely noticed the fan-fretting once I started playing. In fact, the only occasions I became conscious of it were when playing fully barred chords. I have to say that this guitar was a real revelation to play. With a set-up that was perfect, for me at least, it had effortless playability and seemingly endless reserves of volume for a small-bodied instrument. Sexauer has the following to say about this guitar on his website: 'As I expected, this guitar has terrific volume, and the treble is outstanding and sparkling, even though my multi-scale treatment has shortened the treble strings in the interest of sweetening the treble component. I spent some energy addressing the bass in this guitar, as it could have been lost, but was not.' I'd say that was a pretty spot-on assessment of the instrument. The bass was firm and distinct, without dominating the sound in any way, while those trebles sing out sweetly, in perfect balance with the rich,

warm mids. It's a very appealing sound indeed. Sure, if you want growling flatpicking bass you'll look elsewhere, but the rich yet lively tone of this guitar will put a smile on the face of many a fingerpicker.

Conclusions

This was my first experience of playing a Sexauer guitar for any length of time, and on the basis of this encounter I'm keen to try some more. As we have now come to expect from the single-luthier instruments that the Acoustic Music Company tends to stock, build quality is utterly flawless, and first-class materials are used in the guitar's construction. Of course, there's

a price to be paid for that.

At £7,495 it's hardly bargain-basement stuff, and one might consider it to be a lot of money to pay for a fairly specialised, small-bodied instrument. Nevertheless, the old saying 'you get what you pay for' certainly applies here, and what you get for your money is a simply stunning example of the luthier's art. And as for the fan-fretting or multi-scale? Much to my amazement it made total sense to me immediately – I loved it and I would definitely consider buying a guitar with this arrangement myself.

Richard Thomas



SEXAUER FT-O-JB

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Technical specification

Manufacturer: Sexauer FT-O-JB
Model: Companion
Retail Price: £7,495
Body Size: Custom 13 1/2" lower bout
Made In: California
Top: German Spruce
Back and Sides: Malaysian Blackwood
Neck: Honduras mahogany
Fingerboard: Ebony
Frets: 12 frets to body, 19 in total
Tuners: Waverly
Nut Width: 1 25/32"
Scale Length: 24 15/16" to 25 7/16"
Onboard Electronics: No
Strings Fitted: Elixir Light
Left Handers: No
Gig Bag/Case Included: TKL Case

Contact details

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What we think

Pros: Top-notch materials, build quality and tone.

Cons: Some players may be put off by the variable scale length – at least before they try it.

Overall: A beautiful guitar that will be a lifelong companion for the lucky owner.

Our Ratings Explained

5 Stars: Superb, Almost flawless.
4 Stars: Excellent, Hard to beat.
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.

Rating out of five

BUILD QUALITY
SOUND QUALITY
VALUE FOR MONEY

