

Epiphone®

review



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Les Paul Classic Plus

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Epiphone Les Paul Classic

The Les Paul copy is, of course, the time-honoured entry point to a world of glamour, fame, platinum records and Real Rock, and what we have here is an example of the breed from the only company - other than Gibson themselves, of course - who are morally entitled to make them.

The Epi Les Paul Classic boasts a three-piece African mahogany body with a maple cap. Before you get too excited, we should point out that the handsome bookmatched tiger stripe is the result of a veneer, not a solid maple cap. Never mind, underneath that pretty top layer it's still real maple, if the unspectacular type, so at least the construction should perform its designated job of brightening the guitar's tonal response.

The sunburst finish was vivid cherry red around the outer edges, graduating to a honeyed orange centre - much nicer and rather less lurid than the shading on the Epiphone Les Paul we used for our PAF shoot-out a couple of years ago. The dark gold control knobs are faithful to the original 1950's style and come set out in the familiar Les Paul pattern.

Another difference is the lack of pickup covers. Every player and their dog

removed the covers from their Gibson's in the 1960's and 1970's. The idea was to get more output, but in reality all you could hope to achieve was slightly more high-end (this occurred because metal pickup covers have a capacitive effect that rolls off the high frequency response - a bit like backing off your tone controls a little). Many early amps, such as some tweed Fenders and non top-boost Vox AC30s, could sound a little dark, so it's easy to see what prompted players to throw away the metal. Exposed pickups also look more rock'n'roll - like the top of an engine jutting through the bonnet of a 1950's hotrod. Early Gibson humbuckers could have bobbins coloured cream, black or both; here, they're black.

The pickguard, it has to be said, is dog rough. It's a bit of a mess at the pointy end, and the machining marks along the bottom edge are so lumpy, you can get some impressive guiro-type effects - a guiro is one of those rigid South American gourds that you scrape with a stick - by running your plectrum across them. However, both the chrome-plated Tune-O-Matic bridge and tailpiece are quality items indeed, and this edition of the guitar has a set of genuine "kidney" Grover machineheads instead of the reproduction plastic-buttoned Klusons Epiphone used on previous models. The tuning is stable and solid, too, and the Grovers seem to be a real improvement over the Kluson copies.

This Les Paul's budget status is betrayed by the neck construction. The original, expensive way of doing it was to carve the neck from a single piece of mahogany - a method that wastes significant amounts of rainforest, with debatable sonic benefits. So the heel on this guitar is grafted on to the neck, and the headstock is fixed via a scarf joint that extends to the third fret. The headstock shape is traditional for Epiphone, but different to Gibson's original design. It's painted black on its front and carries a gold 1950's-style "Les Paul" decal and a truss rod cover with a verticle "Gibson" brand along with the pearl "Epiphone" logo.

The rosewood fingerboard carries plastic pearl "crown" markers and jumbo frets. The rosewood isn't top quality Brazilian of course - you wouldn't expect it to be - but it's tidy enough and, like the body, it benefits from cream binding. Besides a couple of small runs and the odd fragment of stray red stain, the quality of the finish is very good. In fact it's rare to see a bad finish on Korean guitars these days, so long as you don't expect hand-rubbed nitro-cellulose. Similarly, Korean fret-work is remarkably consistent - not as clinical as the best European and American manufacturers, but hard to fault.

I genuinely admire the way that Gibson sticks to its Rhythm/Treble switch markings. It must be decades since players used neck pickups for everyday rhythm duties, and most blues players actually perform solos using the neck setting... but where would we be without our quaint traditions?

I would describe this guitar as medium-weight, and the neck is skinny and fast.

The action is set fairly low with just the right amount of neck relief to avoid an unpleasant mechanical noises, and most players will feel at home fairly quickly. The acoustic sound is balanced, clear and sustains well.

The stock pickups are serviceable enough, but nothing special. The bridge is very throaty and dark on the low strings with more congestion in the mids than a top-quality replacement PAF, but the high frequencies do sound clean and detailed. The neck pickup sounds much better, with a lovely, rounded quality and a pure bluesy tonality - but, once again, the best replacement pickups will offer better dynamic response and more overall smoothness.

VERDICT: Meet the new boss, same as the old boss? Not quite. This is a very good entry-level Les Paul built with the correct materials and finished to a high standard. I personally like the re-style, and the overall vibe is that of a modified classic with the pickup cover removal and tuner swapping already done for you. You wouldnt expect the worlds finest pickups on a Korean guitar - after all, the Americans do have to keep something back to justify their prices. As I mentioned before, our PAF pickup shootout gave us the opportunity to become familiar with this guitar and we can confidently report that these Epiphone Les Pauls are capable of producing jaw-dropping good tones with a really good set of pickups. All you need to buy in the meantime is a decent case.

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