



Epiphone Masterbilt DR-500RA £1,070

EPIPHONE MASTERBILT DR-500RA

PRICE: £1,070 (inc hard-sided gigbag)
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Dreadnought body acoustic
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid Indian rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 122mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 397mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 650mm
TUNERS: Individual open-g geared vintage-style gold Grovers
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white-bound, with M-O-P diamond inlay markers
FRETS: 20, medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Rosewood with bone saddle/53mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.1/4.7
OPTIONS: DR-500R (£850) – similar, but with no abalone edge purfling; DR-500M (£560) – no abalone edge purfling and solid maple back/sides
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Natural matt-satin (as reviewed)
Rosetti
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Old headstock on new shoulders: Epiphone rekindles a 1930s vibe for its new Masterbilt acoustics by Matthew Wig

During Epiphone's pre-buyout 1930s heyday as an independent company vying with Gibson (Gibson's parent company bought Epiphone in 1957) for supremacy in the archtop (f-hole) jazz guitar market, its premier high-end models were known as the uniquely spelt Masterbilt line. Taking inspiration from this glorious era, the acoustic engineers at Gibson/Epiphone in Nashville have concocted an all-new Masterbilt Series.

In reality, the distinctive headstock is the only obvious reference. While several original Masterbilt archtops featured an asymmetrical 'offset notch' headstock outline from the start (1931), proportions and inlays varied between models, while logo and inlay styles also generally evolved over time (as they do). Taking the overall headstock style of a late 1930s Epiphone Broadway and using the simple 'stick pin' inlay from the Epiphone Zenith of the same era, we get what you see here.

The new Masterbilt catalogue, however, swaps archtops for standard flat-top acoustics, with steel-string dreadnoughts, J-45 style jumbos and wide-necked small-body/OM-type models plus standard classical and cutaway electro nylon-string models. Satin finishes are used throughout the line, but there is a small-body model with a Vintage Sunburst option. Electro versions featuring LR Baggs' Element pickup system are not currently available in the UK.

Following the lead of Epiphone's classiest acoustics, the Elitist line, in terms of fastidious build details and tight quality control, we note Chinese

rather than Japanese manufacture here, delivering a more economical and arguably generic range that covers the £550-£1,100 price points.

Masterbilt DR-500RA

Like the Blueridges we saw in issue 259, this guitar delivers punishingly high standards for its price. Inside it's clean and glue-free, with a very neat mahogany kerfed lining strip, flat rosewood side braces and relatively slim, deeply scalloped soundboard bracing in the traditional layout.

Despite the dullness of the overall flat grain-filled matt sheen, the external detailing is extremely tidy. The top is a uniformly orange-hued slice of Sitka spruce (maybe stained a little) with tight but slightly wavy grain. There's some lateral feathery figuring too, but a matt finish never really does this much justice.

Body purfling is uncannily similar to the Blueridge BR-183's, with Style 45-

type 'all round' abalone (including back and side borders). Its black/white flanks cut very clean lines – especially noticeable around the top's perimeter and rosette – and the hundreds of small abalone pieces are generally neatly inlaid. On close inspection you find the odd gap, skew-whiff inlay and flawed shell pieces, but the only real giveaway is that, while the rosette is aesthetically matched up, the edge purfling looks a bit patchwork – like odds and ends of shell have been used. In addition to the perimeter purfling the back gets a multi-coloured wood marquetry centre strip. Binding is white (well, creamy white) plastic throughout, with a matching tapered inlay at the sides' end-joint.

The neck is a one-piece shaft/headstock with a separate heel section and is traditionally dovetail jointed. A concealed concession to vintage Masterbilt methods is the use of traditional hot hide glue for the neck joint, which isn't exactly veggie friendly. But it is authentic and, for dovetail joint necks, is easily softened by heat should a reset ever be required. A modern inverted L-shape neck block offers improved stability to this joint. Fingerboard, frets and inlays are all impressively well finished and cleanly



DR-500RA	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Desirable 'modern retro' looks; clean, reliable construction

■ **WE DISLIKED** No gloss option for a top-of-the-range model like this





Solid Indian rosewood back and sides are another sign of the Masterbilt's class



The headstock echoes a 1930s Epiphone Broadway

The rivals

Blueridge BR-180	£799
Martin D-16RGT	£1,139
Takamine NV360S	£1,399

Similarly decorated, the Blueridge differs in its ebony fingerboard/bridge, abalone diamond/snowflake fingerboard markers, carved dart headstock, rosewood headstock veneer with fancy pearl/abalone design and gloss finish. Martin's non-abalone encrusted equivalent has a herringbone rosette, Spanish cedar neck, black Micarta fingerboard/bridge, enclosed chrome tuners, abalone dot fingerboard inlays and gloss top. Takamine doesn't extend the abalone purfling all over, but offers a 'bear claw' spruce top, abalone snowflake fingerboard inlays, ebony fingerboard/bridge and a gloss finish

→ executed, with a squarely seated nut at the top. Original Masterbilt headstocks didn't have the truss rod cover, but these vintage-style Grover tuners are copies of the original Sta-Tite machines except with higher ratio gearing for a smooth, solid tuning experience.

It's a plain yet tidy traditional bridge with a typically bare yet silky finish, a snugly slotted saddle and a set of abalone dotted white plastic pins.

Body and neck are sprayed after assembly so there's pooling either side of the heel, but the finish is very even, with subtle visible evidence of a thorough rubbing down so there are no pimples or rough areas on the matt surface. Though a different lacquer formula is applied and the finishing is not so intensive, the results look somewhat similar to Lowden/Avalon's satin coat.

Our only concern with this review model is a slight bulge on the bass side behind the bridge. Only time will tell how serious this proves, and it may be an isolated flaw.

Neck width is typical for a dreadnought, and this particular neck is given a regular 'C'-profile cross-section. However, the shaft's depth tapers quite significantly from 21mm (first fret) to 25mm (10th fret). We don't get optimal string spacing for twiddling your fingers about, but it delivers cosy chord fingerings.

The mahogany's satin finish is beautifully dry and silky (that 'talcum powder' sensation), even though it's rapidly rubbing up to a shine, while the fingerboard and frets offer a similarly impressive low friction environment.

Notes spit out of the soundhole with some attitude when you dig in a little and it has the perfect tonal balance for a big old strumfest

Like many modern factory-built acoustic guitars, neck geometry is very precise. Not only is the neck ideally aligned for correct saddle clearance, but the fingerboard's evenness and the frets' consistent profiling will ensure predictably clean fretting with all typical action set-ups (like the one we find here). Fingerboard distortion around/beyond the body joint is remarkably minor considering the traditional dovetail joint, and string height at the 12th fret isn't low enough here to notice anyway.

Intonation on the high frets is also particularly sweet sounding, making for a very technically and musically reliable performer.

SOUNDS: Well, Epiphone has really come up trumps here; the DR-500RA is an utterly convincing dreadnought with a meaty, warm, vintage kind of tone – just what you want really. Overall it's the impressively earthy, woody sound that attracts, with no hint of any wearing treble or over-zealous harmonic 'zing'. Strike an open low E and the soundbox quakes with deep, resonant bass, but like all good dreadnoughts this is augmented by a thick, energetic mid-range with a slight honk to its voice. The treble response is crisp and slightly edgy, with just enough presence to deliver a defined click when you pluck, but not enough to sound scratchy. On the unwound strings there's a good balance between

a thick fruity chime and cutting attack, and there's a full character to even the highest notes.

If you want sweetness and sustain then this isn't really the model for you, but if you're looking for an excellent plectrum-style acoustic then look no further. Notes spit out of the soundhole with some attitude when you dig in a little and it has the perfect tonal balance for a big old strumfest. Sure, it's a little boomy in the bass for gentle fingerpicking, while its responsive, resonant nature comes at the expense of dynamic headroom compared to the best dreadnoughts, but this guitar just makes you want to play every song you know, which is an exceptionally good sign in this reviewer's considerable experience.

Verdict

While not quite matching the exceptional value of the Blueridge acoustics we keep referring back to, this Epiphone dreadnought is another successful example of US design and Chinese manufacturing. The balance is just right, with all the key elements of construction executed to high-end standards while only less crucial details smack of economising. Most importantly, the DR-500RA sounds like a much more expensive guitar than it is; and that's including a bucketful of abalone into the bargain. Judging by this example, the new Masterbilt Series could prove to be Epiphone's most impressive and well-judged acoustic venture yet. **G**

Epiphone DR-500RA

Guitarist RATING

