

FIRST TIMERS

You're looking for a great acoustic at a bargain price, but everyone says it's Mission Impossible. Ben James samples three entry-level acoustics and says: Oh, no it isn't...

So there's good news and bad. The good news is that construction techniques and presentation standards for entry-level instruments are better today than they've ever been. The bad news is that there's a potentially confusing array of brands and models to choose from. If you're thinking of buying your first acoustic and you're not sure where to start, we've scoured the market and come up with three cracking entry-level acoustics that each have something different to offer depending on your needs.

VINTAGE V400N

Vintage guitars are spec'd and distributed by John Hornby Skewes, one of the UK's largest musical instrument distributors. Their considerable clout in the marketplace has resulted in Vintage instruments being widely available throughout the country, while customers continue to benefit from excellent after-sales support.

The V400N is a 14 fret to the body dreadnought with a solid spruce top and a nato (sometimes referred to as Eastern mahogany) laminate back and sides. Nato has also been used for the shallow profile V-shaped neck. The curvy ebony bridge is home to a

compensated saddle and white dot-marked string pins. The top, back and neck are all finished with off-white coloured binding.

The simple, Martin-shaped headstock accommodates chrome tuners and the 'Vintage' logo. The nut is well fitted, which is evidence of a good standard of manufacturing. All too often it's areas such as the nut that let down entry-level instruments, but there are no such concerns here. The 20 medium-sized frets are also finished to a good standard, as is the rosewood fretboard.

A high gloss finish has been used throughout and the V400N certainly looks a smart, well-finished acoustic. A mock tortoiseshell pickguard and an uncomplicated soundhole rosette complement the all over binding, making for a well-presented guitar that doesn't look overdressed. If the natural finish (as reviewed) is not to your particular taste, the V400N comes in a rather funky 'trans blue', a Johnny Cash-like black or, for no additional cost, a sunburst finish.

When played, the V400N is well balanced and the setup is particularly good. The neck's slim profile makes for quite a fast-playing guitar and electric users will no doubt find it easy to migrate across to this particular acoustic.

Those new to guitar playing will particularly like some the extras

that come with this guitar such as a three-page (non-exhaustive) list of UK guitar tutors, a brochure containing a beginner's guide to an acoustic's anatomy, some starter lessons and a string-changing guide. They even throw in a replacement high E string and a pick!

SOUNDS

The V400N has a good overall timbre, slightly biased towards the bass register. 'Singalong' strummers will particularly like this tonal characteristic as it performs well accompanying a voice. The V400N's healthy sound projection fills a lounge or sitting room with ease and, although things get a little ragged when really pushed with a heavy pick (like most other acoustics within this price range), it's an capable all-round dreadnought.



VINTAGE V400N
PRICE: £139
BUILT IN: China
SCALE LENGTH: 642mm (25.3 inches)
NUT WIDTH: 44mm (1.7 inches)
TOP: Solid spruce
BACK & SIDES: Laminate nato
NECK: Nato
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20 medium
BRIDGE: Rosewood
STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 57mm (2.2 inches)
MACHINEHEADS: Enclosed gear, chrome
ELECTRICS: None
WEIGHT: 2.2kg (4.8lb)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, natural finish only
FINISH OPTIONS: Natural (shown), black, trans blue, sunburst
OPTIONS: V400MP (maple back & sides, £149), V400-12 (12-string, £159)
CONTACT: JHS & Co Ltd
PHONE: 0113 286 5381
WEB: www.jhs.co.uk

AGB RATINGS

VINTAGE V400N

Construction:	85%
Playability:	80%
Sound:	85%
Value For Money:	80%
Verdict:	82.50%



OZARK 3342

Ozark instruments are looked after by Surrey-based Stentor Music, a favourite with acoustic players because they offer such a wide variety of instruments. Be it acoustics, electro-acoustics, banjos, mandolins, mandolas, bouzoukis, resonators or dulcimers, Ozark have something for everyone – all within the entry- to mid-level price bracket.

But don't be fooled into thinking that these budget instruments are only for beginners. Guitar legend Gary Moore used an inexpensive Ozark resonator recently on his latest album *Close As You Get*, which is high praise indeed.

Like the V400N, the 3342 is a 14 fret to the body dreadnought.

The top is solid spruce, and the back and sides are a mahogany-faced laminate. Whereas the Vintage possesses off-white binding throughout, the 3342 is finished with a stylish black binding. A simple but elegant black pickguard augments the equally tasteful soundhole rosette.

The two-piece mahogany neck is slightly thicker than that of the Vintage, but is equally playable in every respect. The fingerboard is a nice selection of rosewood and the compensated saddle sits upon a simple bridge. Although having very similar appointments to those of the V400N, the 3342 has a clean, uncluttered feel to it – perhaps

because of the use of black trimmings.

Ozark's familiar curved-top headstock is used here, as it is throughout their range of instruments. The chrome machine heads are very similar to those fitted to the V400N and they perform very well.

In terms of its presentation, the 3342 scores well. The high gloss finish has been carried out to a high standard and it passes close scrutiny with merit. The set up is good and the 3342 feels well-built and sturdy.

SOUNDS

Although there are many structural similarities between the Vintage V400N and the Ozark 3342, their tone is quite different. Whereas the V400N has a darker, bass-heavy tone, the Ozark is brighter and has more strength to the higher register.

As such we found the 3342 to be particularly well suited to fingerstyle playing. With comparative ease, syncopated melodies and solos sung out cleanly while a good mid-range underpinned the output.

“THE OZARK IS BRIGHTER AND HAS MORE STRENGTH TO THE HIGHER REGISTER”

AGB RATINGS

OZARK 3342

Construction:	85%
Playability:	85%
Sound:	80%
Value For Money:	80%
Verdict:	82.50%

OZARK 3342
PRICE: £130
BUILT IN: China
SCALE LENGTH: 640mm (25.2 inches)
NUT WIDTH: 44mm (1.73 inches)
TOP: Solid spruce
BACK & SIDES: Mahogany-faced laminate
NECK: Mahogany
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20 slim
BRIDGE: Rosewood
STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 55mm (2.1 inches)
MACHINEHEADS: Single die-cast enclosed
ELECTRICS: None
WEIGHT: 2.75kg (6lb)
FINISH: Natural gloss
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, 3342L (£148)
CONTACT: Stentor Music
PHONE: 01737 240226
WEB: www.ozark-acoustic.com

STAGG SW206CETU-VS

Stagg instruments are distributed in the UK by EMD Music, a company with a good reputation for entry-level and starter instruments.

The somewhat cumbersome model name of SW206CETU-VS (doesn't exactly roll off the tongue, does it?) relates to Stagg Western (their designation for acoustic guitars), 206 is the range, Cutaway, Electro with onboard Tuner in Vintage Sunburst finish. The name might be clumsy, but the product is reassuringly sleek and stylish.

The SW206CETU-VS is a folk-bodied instrument and, as such, has smaller proportions than the dreadnoughts above. The top is a spruce-faced laminate, while the back, sides and 2-piece neck are catalpa. Because of its similarities with pine, catalpa is widely used in furniture and cabinet making. Catalpa doesn't have the resonance of spruce but it is strong and stable – important properties for woods used in acoustic guitar manufacture.

Rosewood has been used for both the fingerboard and the bridge while an off-white soundhole rosette sets a tasteful contrast to the exotic violin sunburst finish. The Venetian cutaway makes access right up to the 21st fret easier, while a sleek shallow 'C' profile neck facilitates speedy movement around the fretboard.

Whereas the Vintage and Ozark are 'dry' acoustics, ie they are not fitted with any onboard electrics, the Stagg boasts a 3-band preamp. This would be particularly appealing to anyone wishing to 'plug in', either for performing through an amp or for home recording. Stagg has made this latter option as easy as possible by including an XLR socket in addition to the more standard 1/4" jack.

The preamp unit takes its feed from the undersaddle transducer

STAGG SW206CETU-VS

PRICE: £129.95
BUILT IN: China
SCALE LENGTH: 650mm (25.6 inches)
NUT WIDTH: 44mm (1.7 inches)
TOP: Laminate spruce
BACK & SIDES: Catalpa
NECK: Catalpa
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20 medium jumbo
BRIDGE: Rosewood
STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 55mm (2.2 inches)
MACHINEHEADS: Die-cast, nickel
ELECTRICS: Undersaddle transducer & side-mounted preamp with 3-band EQ & built-in dual-mode chromatic tuner
WEIGHT: 2.4 kg (5.3lb)
FINISH: Vintage sunburst (shown), black, cherry burst, natural, pink, trans blue, trans red, white
OPTIONS: SW206CE/12 (12-string in black or vintage sunburst, £149)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, black or natural only (£135)
CONTACT: EMD
PHONE: 01293 862612
WEB: www.staggmusic.com

and its controls are simple and easy to use. Centre-indented sliders control Presence, Bass, Middle and Treble while a notched rotary control cares for the Volume. A Mode button switches between standard automated and manual chromatic tuning. When in automatic mode, standard open E tuning is employed, but if you wish to venture into open or drop tunings, simply switch to manual tuning mode. The tuner's LED display and Battery Check button complete the pre amp's features. The SW206CETU-VS scores highly for including this level of onboard electronics on what is, in fact, the cheapest guitar of our trinity.

SOUNDS

When played, the SW206CETU-VS doesn't have as full a sound as either the Vintage or the Ozark instruments, but you wouldn't expect that from what is a smaller-bodied guitar. What you get is a decent and balanced output but with all the onboard features thrown in. Whether it was strummed with a pick or played fingerstyle, the SW206CETU-VS handled the task at hand very capably. The action was a little higher than we'd have liked, but that's easily and inexpensively remedied by a technician.

CONCLUSION

It's not possible to end this comparative review with an outright winner. Individually, they each have a lot to offer and it depends on your intended use for the instrument as to which one would suit you best. We have seen that the Vintage, with its solid top, performs well with the most voluminous and full tone, whereas the Ozark has less power but more clarity and sparkle. The Stagg is a different proposition altogether with a host of on-board features for the player not intending to remain unplugged. All of these acoustics come in at around £130, which is indeed evidence of how much your acoustic pound will get you these days. **ACOUSTIC**



AGB RATINGS 3

Stagg SW206CETU-VS

Construction:

75%

Playability:

70%

Sound:

80%

Value For Money:

95%

Verdict:

80%