

Reborn In The USA

Some of Epiphone's most iconic electrics and acoustics are being built again in the USA. We examine a legendary electric and a show-stopping acoustic

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EPIPHONE FT110 FRONTIER & E230TD CASINO

£3,619 & £2,399

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What You Need To Know

1 Isn't Epiphone a 'cheap' brand?
Although Epiphones have been built in Asian countries since 1970, from 1958 until that point they were built alongside Gibson guitars in Kalamazoo. Same materials and quality but with specific hardware to mark them as separate but equal.

2 Why would I buy an Epiphone over a Gibson (or any other top make)?
There's something about this brand that talks to the discerning musician. Why follow the herd when you can join a legion of legends including The Beatles and Stones, The Kinks, U2, Paul Weller, Gary Clark Jr and more?

3 Epiphone is an interesting name...
In 1923, Epi Stathopoulos took over his Greek immigrant family's stringed instrument company. Having an eye on the banjo and guitar market and wanting to modernise, he offered a new name: 'Epi' after himself and 'phone' a derivation of *phon*, the Greek word for sound. Cool, eh?

Epiphone guitars hold a distinct place in the hearts of people of a certain vintage. Anyone who followed the pop-music TV shows of the 60s will have seen Keith Richards, Brian Jones, Dave Davies, Paul McCartney, George Harrison, John Lennon and others wielding various iterations of the E230TD Casino. And those who watched McCartney's legendary TV performance of *Yesterday* will have seen him playing his Texan acoustic. We don't have a Texan here but the more elaborate Frontier, which sat neatly alongside guitars such as Gibson's Dove and Hummingbird.

Our Casino is a visual amalgamation of two eras of the model. At its launch in 1961, it featured black plastic-covered dog-ear P-90 pickups, a dot inlaid fingerboard and the short form of Epiphone's headstock. But within a year, to coincide with

Gibson's upgrade of the ES-330 (which is constructionally an all-but-identical guitar), the headstock took on the longer 'hourglass' shape, the pickup covers became nickel, and the fingerboard inlays pearloid parallelograms. Ours has the original's black covers and short headstock but retains the upgraded markers.

Casinos were available with Epi's own vibrato unit, but in the UK they were more commonly seen with a simple trapeze tailpiece (as on Lennon's '65 model) or the popular Bigsby (such as Paul's '62 and George's '65). To confuse things further, Keef's 1962 guitar had the Epi vibrato, short headstock, black covers and parallelograms, while McCartney's (also a '62) had nickel covers, short headstock and Bigsby. The model was clearly in a state of flux.

The Frontier acoustic, meanwhile, first appeared as the FT110 as early as 1942. From introduction to 1948, it was – like this one – a square-shouldered dreadnought, before taking on the round-shouldered look from 1949 until 1957 when Gibson purchased the company. The model returned as the FT-110 Frontier in 1958, once again sporting the square shoulders we see here. Given that the Dove and Hummingbird didn't emerge until 1960,

Considering what music was created on the originals, we hope they'll be deservedly well received



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it seems that here Gibson took a lead from its new sister brand.

But enough of looking back. Let's see how our two different models fare in today's world and when played alongside the Gibson ES-335 and Hummingbird from this reviewer's own small roster of instruments.

FT110 Frontier

What a handsome thing! Built in Gibson's acoustic facility in Montana, the Frontier features solid flamed-maple sides and back. The top is solid Sitka spruce with scalloped bracing, the fingerboard Indian rosewood, with the nut and bridge saddle both in bone. It also has the excellent LR Baggs VTC under-saddle pickup with soundhole-mounted volume and tone controls.

As usual with electrified acoustics, there's an endpin jack, plus there's a second pin on the guitar's heel so the Frontier comes stage-ready. Tuners are gold-plated Gotoh takes on the Kluson 'keystone' style found on so many Gibsons – and indeed the Frontiers that the company produced.

Of course, the Frontier stands out visually due to that striking pickguard, with what Gibson calls a 'lariat and cactus' themed engraving. Fret markers are slotted rectangles in mother-of-pearl, and the



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1. The Frontier's fabulous looks make it one of the most attractive flat-tops out there. Rich sunburst, beautiful 'lariat and cactus' pickguard and reverse 'belly' bridge combine to create a stunning looking beast

2. Here's the short form of the Epiphone headstock. After 1961, most Epi models adopted the longer 'hourglass' version. Note the bullet truss rod cover, gold 'keystone' tuners and 'cloud' central inlay

3. The Frontier's nicely grained and bound rosewood fingerboard features slotted rectangular inlays in mother-of-pearl



4. A nice detail shot of the Frontier pickguard, also showing the blue label inside, which used to read 'Kalamazoo, Michigan', but now says 'Bozeman, Montana'. Also note the multiple soundhole rings
5. The Casino's white pickguard with 'E' logo in silver marks the model out from its sister model, the ES-330. Also note the Gibson tune-o-matic bridge and three-way pickup selector switch
6. Again, here we see the short-style Epiphone headstock with high-quality enclosed tuners and their simple round buttons. The dark finish also covers the neck and guitar back
7. While it's difficult to pick out in this photo, the black P-90 pickups are actually set unusually low in the body. Shims are available in various sizes should you prefer your pickups closer to the strings

body is edged front and back in multiple cream and black binding. Whereas Gibson sunbursts usually form a teardrop shape on the guitar's front and back, Epiphones follow the body's outline with an even band of colour all the way round.

Peering inside, the guitar is put together cleanly, as good as anything else out there (vintage Gibsons and Epiphones could be quite scruffy in that regard). The scalloped spruce bracing lends rigidity and flexibility without sapping the instrument of tone, as heavy bracing can do. Finish, too, is exemplary, the nitrocellulose lacquer being flat and buffed to a perfect gloss.

E230TD Casino

As mentioned in the preamble, this particular Casino is not a period-correct reissue, more a general take on the model for today. It's a regular model, not a Custom Shop build, and sits within the Epiphone USA collection. With that in mind you'll notice the thicker fingerboard binding, as seen on non-Custom Shop Les Pauls, as well as a modern version of the Kluson metal button tuners found on the originals.

Essentially an Epiphone-badged Gibson ES-330, the Casino comes with a laminated maple-poplar-maple construction with

no centre block. The neck joins the body at the 16th fret as opposed to the ES-335's 19th, which tended to put serious soloists off the model. It was perfect for rhythm, riffs and middle-of-the-neck solos, but problematic for blues-wailing or rock wig-outs. As well as physical limitations, the guitar's all-hollow nature rendered it tricky to use in big-volume, high-gain situations due to howling feedback. However, that didn't deter some very famous players; as well as the aforementioned, we can count Paul Weller, The Edge and Gary Clark Jr as Casino stalwarts – plus Barrie Cadogan, whose interview follows this review.

You can clearly see the difference between Gibson and Epiphone 'bursting here. On an ES-330 both horns would feature solid colour, whereas here the 'burst follows the body outline right round. Subtle details such as this, the white pickguard with 'E' logo, as well as the different headstock shape, were enough to give the model a personality of its own. They also made it a striking stage or TV guitar.

Other details include the trapeze tailpiece with three-stripe crossbar as opposed to Gibson's with its embossed diamond, 'bullet' truss-rod cover, gold knobs for volume (two) and tone (two), as well as a

The Frontier is a great all-rounder for almost any occasion – but on stage it will really look the business!



three-way toggle for selecting or blending pickups. The internal loom includes braided shielding wire and orange drop capacitors, all hand-assembled and loaded via the rear pickup cavity into the body.

Like the Frontier, all is ship-shape in the build and finishing departments and, despite the lack of true vintage accuracy, the guitar exudes a genuinely exciting vibe. Whether it's pure nostalgia or not is hard to say, but it has put a smile on the face of everyone who's seen it.

Feel & Sounds

Starting with the FT110, we should note that while Gibson acoustics tend to adopt the company's nominal 629mm (24.75-inch) scale length, the Frontier has the full 648mm (25.5 inches) as found on dreadnoughts such as Martin's D-28. This can lend a slightly tighter feel, but it also tends to bring a little more depth and clarity.

As in all things acoustic, the differences are subtle, but in the case of our Frontier it seems to result in an instrument of great balance and clarity of voice. The action is perfect and the neck's medium C shape feels just right – perfectly in tune with the scale length and Epiphone's choice of 0.012-gauge strings.





8. Our Casino comes with the standard trapeze tailpiece. Note the 'three bar' design as opposed to Gibson's 'raised diamond'. Originally, either Epi's own vibrato or the ubiquitous Bigsby were available

9. The Frontier acoustic's body is bound in multiple cream-white-black plastic and has the cream heel-mounted strap button. Epiphone's sunburst is dark and rich, morphing into a red-to-yellow gradation



The guitar works well as fingerpicker or strummer, the almost 44mm (1.725-inch) nut width providing all the space you need for intricate chording, and the larger body size bringing power and clarity without the low-end boom that afflicts some dreads. Certainly there's more muscle than on this writer's own Gibson Hummingbird, which has a more polite but possibly sweeter tone – the Epi comfortably trounces it in a show of strength. Rather than exhibiting bright or brash tendencies, as you might expect from maple, it offers depth, power and balance.

Plugging in, the LR Baggs Element VTC (Volume, Tone, Compression) doesn't disappoint. The straight Element is a fine under-saddle system, but with the low-frequency compression provided by the VTC, an extra level of acoustic 'truth' is revealed. This is a great all-rounder for almost any occasion – but on stage it will really look the business!

Moving on to the Casino now, and Gibson really has got its neck shapes right at the moment. The Casino features a medium C profile and medium jumbo frets, plus the slightly wider binding means you're less likely to fall off the edge with over-enthusiastic vibrato. Again, like the Frontier, the action is spot on out of the box.

It's great fun to try all those well-worn riffs, chords and solos and the guitar's

A guitar like this is so versatile it could excel at any style from pop to blues to jazz

hollow body provides a pleasing amount of acoustic volume. With a nut width a tad under 43mm (1.687 inches), the neck is easy for open-position chords and licks, and provided you don't need to access the 20th fret, it's a joy to play – although it's surprising what you can do when access is limited, just ask a certain Mr Hendrix.

Compared with an ES-335 that we have on hand, the Casino is a different animal altogether. The black 'dog-ear' P-90s sit a long way from the strings and the temptation would be to fit some P-90 shims to alleviate this. They are readily available in different thicknesses. That aside, the Casino remains a powerful guitar brimming with the well-known P-90 honk that can scare those not used to the pickups but delights those who are – and know how best to employ them.

A guitar such as this is so versatile it could excel at any style from pop to blues to jazz: the bridge pickup, with the tone rolled back and the tiniest bit of drive added, is vintage blues heaven; switch across to the neck and



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it's glorious jazz territory. Of course, no-one would buy a guitar like this for rock, so the fact that it's not cut out for such excesses is just as well. Compared with the oh-so-sophisticated ES-335, this is earthier – dare we say more 'organic'? Anyway, it's easy to see why so many top players have chosen it.

Verdict

Whether or not the prestige of the Epiphone brand has been compromised by 40 years of offshore manufacture, who can say? But no matter, these are legendary instruments in their own right. And when you consider what music was created on the originals, we hope they'll be as well received as they deserve to be.

The classy-looking Frontier would look great slung around the neck of any superstar, fingerpicking a singer-songwriter number in the studio or bashing out a bluegrass rhythm. It's exceptionally well made and plays great, plus it sounds polished and well rounded, whether plugged in or not. The Casino is a very well-built example of its breed. It looks great and sounds epic, even with those low-slung pickups (which some prefer as they can sound sweeter that way), and would suit almost any situation.

All that aside, we're delighted Gibson is once again building top-quality Epiphone-branded guitars in the USA. **G**

10. You can see the slightly thicker fingerboard binding here with characteristic fret-end 'nibs' and single parallelogram markers in pearloid. Frets are medium jumbo and the Indian rosewood 'board is beautifully grained



EPIPHONE FT110 FRONTIER

PRICE: £3,619
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: 14-fret dreadnought acoustic
TOP: Solid Sitka spruce, scalloped bracing
BACK/SIDES: Solid flamed maple
MAX RIM DEPTH: 118mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 405mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
TUNERS: Gotoh 'keystone', gold plated
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.82mm (1.725")
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood, bound, with split rectangle inlays, 12" radius
FRETS: 20 medium
BRIDGE/SPACING: Indian rosewood with bone saddle/54mm
ELECTRICS: LR Baggs Element VTC, with soundhole volume and tone, endpin jack
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 1.70/3.74
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, £3,610
FINISHES: Vintage Sunburst, Antique Natural



9/10

PROS Fabulous-looking, big-sounding acoustic with balanced range of sophisticated tones, both plugged and unplugged

CONS Hefty price tag if you believe Epiphone to be Gibson's 'sub' sister brand



EPIPHONE E230TD CASINO

PRICE: £2,399
ORIGIN: Nashville, Tennessee
TYPE: Double-cutaway hollowbody electric
BODY: Maple-poplar-maple laminate
NECK: Mahogany, medium C profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.56")
NUT: Bone
FINGERBOARD: Indian rosewood, bound with pearloid parallelograms
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Epiphone tune-o-matic bridge and trapeze tailpiece, enclosed tuners with round buttons – nickel plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson P-90 'dog-ear' pickups, twin volume and tone controls, 3-way selector, orange drop capacitors
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.54/5.6
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, £2,399
FINISHES: Vintage Burst (as reviewed), Royal Tan



9/10

PROS It's back and built in the USA; great range of tones, distinctive from its ES-330 sister (and perhaps more desirable due to solid gold heritage)

CONS Very little to report, although some might want to put height shims under the very low mounted pickups