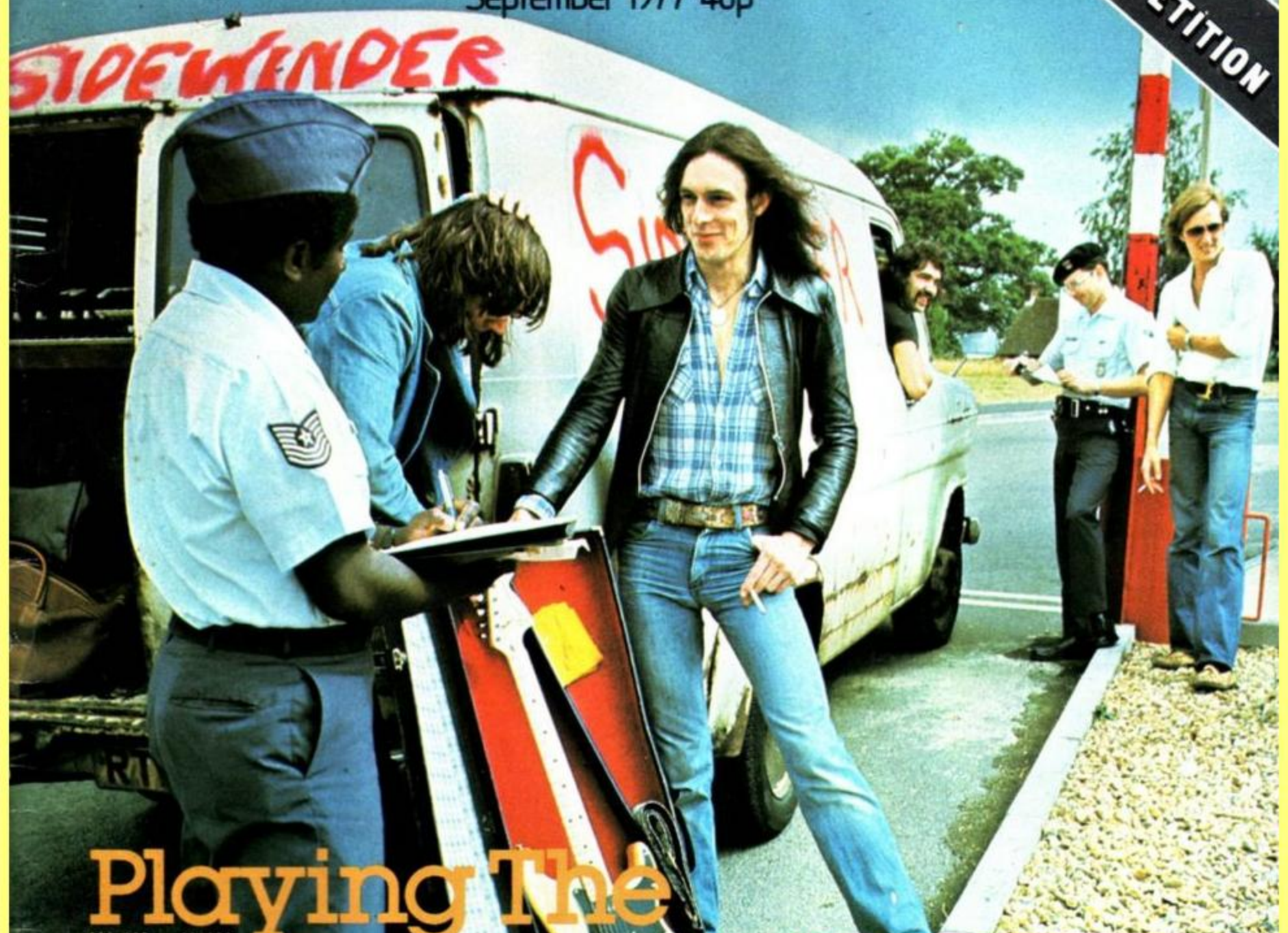


INTERNATIONAL MUSICIAN

AND RECORDING WORLD

September 1977 40p

FREE RECORD
ARP
GIANT
COMPETITION



Playing The Bases

TESTS:

- Ovation Preacher
- Peavey 260H-Standard
- Eddie Ryan Drums
- Korg Poly-2

Playing Roland Market Rep
HH Towards 2000

The Creative Answer



ROLAND STAGE PIANO



delft's GUITARCHECK

MODEL: Ovation Preacher DATE: August 1977

PRICE: £463.90 excluding VAT (U.K.)

This is not an easy guitar for me to review. £520 seems to be a lot of money even in these days of inflating prices almost everywhere, and there are some aspects of this guitar's appearance which are far from subtle. On the other hand, if one considers only the feel and sound of the instrument, it is one of the best I have played recently. I am accustomed to producing instruments which are (hopefully) graceful pieces of sculpture as well as musicians' tools, refining shapes and outlines beyond what is strictly necessary, for my own pleasure, and to make instruments which I find visually, as well as musically, satisfying. There seem to be certain conventions in the guitar-making business, one of which is that guitars of better than average performance and higher than average price carry more, and more

complex, decorative features. There is no necessary reason for this, and I suspect, that whatever its origins, it became, for some makers, an inducement for musicians to 'trade up' to a more expensive model of guitar. (This sort of inducement is nothing new: it has existed in the motor trade almost from the beginning, and is presently rampant in the camera business). As, in many cases, the more expensive instruments might still have the same assembly and alignment problems as their plain country cousins, this always seemed to me a particularly pointless way of trading money for dreams.

This is, of course, an over-simplification, and *some* of the top-priced instruments are distinctly superior in all respects including tuning accuracy and playability. What I find fascinating is that advertising material, intended to justify the additional cost of a 'top-of-the-line' instrument over the same maker's standard models, hardly ever claims that the more expensive instrument is made and adjusted to a higher standard of playability than the middle-priced models — even in cases where it is generally accepted to be better in these respects.

One possible conclusion would be that, while some guitarists judge their instruments by one set of standards, they are influenced in their choice of a new instrument by quite different factors, which are relatively more susceptible to 'image-building' processes. I would prefer to think that there is somewhere a more encouraging explanation.

A glance at Ovation catalogues over the last few years may suggest to you that Ovation have more than a passing interest in the building of images. What I find interesting is that they seem, from the beginning, to have dismissed most of the conventions about what is necessary and/or appropriate in a particular instrument, and built guitars (and their images) in the light of their own research and ideas. It is hardly surprising that their instruments, both acoustic and electric, look and sound rather different from most others.

The Preacher is probably one of their more conventional-looking instruments, and by comparison with electrics of roughly similar shape from, for instance, Guild, Yamaha, or Ibanez, I think that the shaping of the body, scratchplate and neck joint area is cleanly cut, well finished, and lacking in the sort of sensitive and graceful shaping which I expect for over £500. I should emphasise that the workmanship is good, and the instrument is functionally adequate in these areas, but its appearance seems to have been compromised a little to permit certain manufacturing techniques. I am sure that the companies mentioned above have to work under similar economic and production constraints, but they manage to produce compromises which I find more acceptable to look at.

Apart from any aesthetic considerations, the back of the body (behind the neck joint) is bulky and square, and extends level with the 18th fret, and the back of the neck changes from rounded to 'square' between the 16th and 17th fret. This makes

access to the highest frets more difficult than necessary, and places my fairly average thumb right on a sharp corner. Under these circumstances, the large strap button on the end of the body behind the neck does little to help. The bulky body 'tongue' behind the neck joint may be necessary and you may prefer the strap button in its present position, but I really don't see why the neck rounding cannot be continued nearer the joint. This instrument has 24 frets: I wonder whether the neck-shaping jig was intended for a 22-fret neck. Two frets would just about account for the length of the 'square' bit at the back of the neck on this sample.

The Preacher has a bolted-on neck. In principle, I do not object to bolted-on necks; only to those which do not fit rigidly onto the body. Some samples of most makes of guitar using this method of attachment suffer from loose or creaky necks, and this is a point which should be examined at the time of purchase. Some such neck joints cannot, on some samples, be tightened enough to hold the neck really firmly without the danger of stripping the mounting screws/bolts, or distorting the neck. On this sample of the Ovation Preacher, the neck seems to be fixed quite firmly enough without excessive tightening of the mounting screws and, on this sample, there seems to be no disadvantage to the performance of the instrument by using a bolted-on neck. I have not examined other samples. The only significant advantage of a glued-in neck joint on this instrument would be that, with careful design, the back of the neck joint could be streamlined, and the rounded back of the neck continued for about another two or three frets, beyond the limit for a normal screwed-on neck.

The fingerboard is made from good quality Ebony, and should take a lot of use without wearing noticeably. Also, the frets are securely fitted and seem to have been individually dressed with a fret-shaping file, to make them all the same shape after the usual levelling processes. This is a tedious and unpleasant job which must be done by hand, and few companies seem to be willing to go to such trouble. With the low action supplied on this sample, there is a slight buzz on the top string at the 13th, and particularly the 14th fret. It appears that the tops of the frets have not finally been lapped level, but only given a superficial polish. There remains a slight roughness on top, and this sample will need some playing in before the frets are really smooth. This applies to many new guitars, but a final lapping process would make the frets instantly playable, and remove the buzz at the 14th fret. A slightly higher action would remove the buzz, as also would a visit to a good repairman after purchase.

Apart from this small problem, the neck feels very nice indeed. It is slim at the back, and the curve of the back is blended into curved sides on the fingerboard, removing the usual sharp edges. This also is a tedious operation for the maker, but well worth doing in terms of playing comfort in the final instrument. This neck feels something like good Fender necks which have been refretted several times and have gradually



acquired smooth, rounded edges to the fingerboard. As far as I know, only Ovation and Microfrets amongst the larger makers deliberately shape their fingerboards in this way. I believe this rounding-over is one of the reasons why some old guitars are said to feel better than new ones. If applied to a new guitar, it requires that every fret end is individually dressed level and de-burred. On my sample, this also has been done — and done well!

I regret that I am finding increasing numbers of Schaller machine heads, particularly those with the larger gear-boxes, which are not quite up to standard. In this case, the bottom E machine has some slack in the mechanism and needs more care in tuning than should be necessary.

Although the wiring inside the body is not done with screened cables, all inside walls, from the pickups to the beginning of the jack sockets (this model has mono and stereo outlets), are lined with foil which is a perfectly satisfactory alternative. There has been no skimping — the screening extends even into the more inaccessible corners. The selector switch is one of the miniature types, but of relatively strong construction. It might break, if hit directly and hard, but in other respects is better than the older and larger types which tend to become noisy. It certainly appears to be more robust than some similar miniature switches intended for hi-fi equipment and mixing desks. There are tone and volume controls for each pickup, which all turn easily and work smoothly in proportion to the numbered settings.

The body and neck are made from Mahogany, similar to what is here sold as Peruvian or Chilean, and they are finished with bright hard Polyester lacquer. The standard of finish over the whole guitar is very good.

That covers most aspects of the Preacher, except for the bridge, pickups and overall sound: all three are unusual! For sound assessment, I used my standard "demo" amp — Peavey Pacer — with the tone controls set in the positions which seemed to allow the greatest range of sounds from the guitar: Channel 1: Vol 5, Treble 4½ to 5, Mid 5, Bass 4½ and Master Vol to taste, in this case about 5 to 7.

The pickups on this guitar are of twin-coil, humbucking construction and the 12 polepieces on each pickup are actually the magnets. Unless there is a lot of empty space inside the covers, the pickups are much deeper than usual. I suspect that the magnets are fairly long — Alnico magnets work better when they are several times as long as the width of the pole faces — and the windings probably cover most of their length. This is also supported by the resistance of the windings, which is 18 k for the bridge pickup and 19 k for the fingerboard pickup. This is nearly twice the resistance of an ordinary humbucker, and considerably higher even than that of one of the recent "super" pickups.

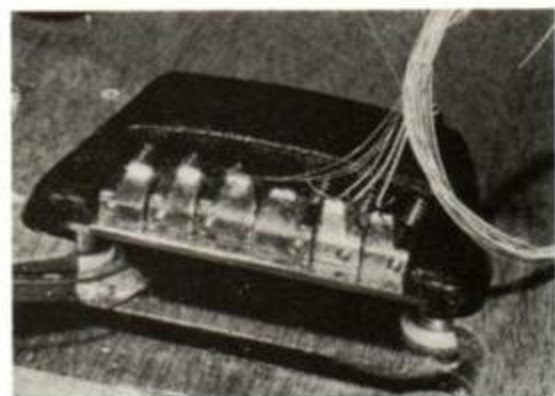
Resistance is no absolute guide to the number of turns on a coil but, as most companies use about the same gauge of wire and similar shaped bobbins, it makes an interesting comparison. (I am presently working on a device which will directly measure the efficiency of a pickup and will make it possible to include output ratings in Guitar Check for the benefit of high-output fanatics. For the moment, I am using the new Ibanez artist pickups as a standard of comparison as they seem to have the highest output consistent with a conventional "old fashioned" sort of humbucker tone.) One normally expects a higher coil resistance to indicate more turns, more Middle and Bass, and less high Treble or

"edge" on the tone. This is only applicable, with any accuracy, to similarly constructed pickups of the standard 'Gibson Humbucker' type.

The Preacher's pickups differ from the standard type, in that the poles are the magnets, and there are neither magnets nor iron shunt plates underneath the pickups joining the lower ends of the magnets. The implications of this form of construction are quite interesting and I shall try to cover this in more detail in a later article. In this particular case, the output level is somewhere between standard humbucker and Ibanez 'Super 90'. Treble losses however, are significantly lower than in these two pickups, and with the fingerboard pickup at maximum treble, the Preacher sounds remarkably like an Ovation acoustic with built-in bridge pickup. It might be worth consideration by those bands whose sound levels are too high to permit the use of the Ovation acoustic.

This "acoustic" sound seems to contain harmonics up to the limits of hearing without the artificial excess presence which comes from turning up the treble on the amp: it is definitely a hi-fi sound rather than a Clapton Blues sound. (I have an ancient Gretsch solid which has a similar quality, but a fairly low output by modern standards. It is not for sale!) I think the Preacher will be more successful for producing 'clean' sounds than for muffled distorted blues sounds. The pickups are sensitive to tapping their covers, but do not seem to cause 'howling' feedback at high sound levels.

The bridge is similar to that used on the Breadwinner, but using (apparently) solid brass string saddles. The screws adjusting string lengths and intonation are offset to one side of the saddles, so that string pressure holds the saddles firmly onto the bridge base. There seems to be no rattle-



producing instability about any of the saddles. There is no individual adjustment of string action and I feel this is an important omission, if you are aiming at a minimum action. If you are less dependent on an absolute minimum action, the factory-set string heights seem to be satisfactory. The entire bridge is supported on two pillars in the front of the body and one screw through the back. It can be adjusted to raise or lower overall action, and tilted to make the bass side strings higher than the treble, or vice versa.

The saddles are actually supported on the bridge base, which is a sheet of hard brass about 2mm thick. This rests on the support pillars at each end and is slightly flexible towards the middle. I think it is this slightly flexible bridge which is the cause of the most unusual aspect of the Preacher's sound. If you play a note on one string, there is a tendency for other strings to "ring" in sympathy. This gives a quality to the tone a little like a good semi-acoustic. It also makes the whole instrument body slightly microphonic (sensitive to handling noises). It also makes the Preacher react to controlled and deliberate feedback situations more like a semi-acoustic than a solid. I have neither enough time, nor enough experience of playing in this style to say whether this feature is controllable in practice, or whether it is a desirable addition to a solid guitar. It would be interesting to know Ovation's intentions in using this particular type of bridge. The Microfrets company, which I believe may no longer exist, used to claim similar properties for their range of 'solids' which were considerably hollowed out inside, and were also slightly sensitive to handling noises.

Two remaining points are: The axis of the neck is in line with the body, not tilted back, as in for instance, a Les Paul guitar. This makes the instrument feel rather different. You may prefer it, dislike it, or not notice. Also, one can do interesting things with this guitar and the small MXR 6-band equaliser. I would suggest the fingerboard pickup on full volume and full treble, and the following settings on the equaliser. (All settings either fully up or fully down, and reading from left to right.)

Setting 1. Up Down Up Down Up Down
Setting 2. Move first 'up' slider to fully 'down'.
Setting 3. Down Up Down Up Down Up

People buy guitars for different reasons and I find it difficult to draw generalised conclusions about this instrument. It has a good neck, and an unusual tone which would be useful to a recording musician who wants another sound in his tool bag, and can make such a guitar earn its keep. My own opinion — and it is no more than that — is that I do not see how this guitar, in its present form, justifies a price of £520 including tax. It has a similar price to some other American imports, and while some aspects of it are excellent, I feel that its design process has not yet reached completion.

Scale length 630 mm
String spacing at bridge 53 mm
String spacing at nut 35 mm
Fingerboard width at nut 43 mm
Action as supplied 1 mm treble/0.9 mm bass.

There is a buzz on the 13 and 14th frets but, with this low action, it is remarkable the instrument works at all.
Lowest action without buzzing 1.2 mm treble/1.5 Bass.