

Ovation '97 Collectors' Electro

SPOT THE DIFFERENCE: yup, the '97 Collectors' guitar from roundback kings Ovation has a new compact body design, plus a new and intriguingly tactile system of preamp control. Review by Jerry Uwins

FACTFILE

OVIATION '97 COLLECTORS' RRP: £1399 inc case

Medium-compact-body bowlback acoustic. Made in USA. AA-grade solid sitka spruce top, mid-depth fibreglass bowl. Five-piece mahogany/maple/walnut/mahogany neck with 20-fret unbound ebony fingerboard. Ebony bridge; gold-plated Schaller mini-tuners with black buttons. CP-100 under-bridge pickup; TS (touch-sensitive) preamp system – volume only.

Options: Narrow-neck version – same price.

Left-hand options: None at present.

Finish: Gloss top; oil-rubbed neck.

Contact: JHS, Salem House, Parkinson Approach, Garforth, Leeds LS25 2HR. ☎ 0113-286-5381.

Dimensions

(In mm unless stated)

	Ovation '97 Collectors'
Scale length	640 (25.2")
Width of neck	
...at nut	48
...at 12th fret	58
Depth of neck	
...at 1st fret	18
...at 9th fret	21.5
String spacing	
...at nut	39.5
...at bridge	60
Action as supplied	
...at 12th fret treble	1.6
...at 12th fret bass	2.3
F ⁷ board radius	10"
Max bowl depth	138
Max body width	352
Weight (approx)	2.16kg (4.75lbs)

To describe the '97 Collectors' as a 'parlour electro' would be misleading, but that's definitely where its roots lie.

The traditional slot headstock and 12th-fret neck join are both parlour-like characteristics; so too the body's slim, sexy lines, with a maximum width of under 14".

The parlour influence is much less apparent when you turn the instrument around. The lyrachord bowl is officially designated as 'mid-depth' but it's not far short of 5.5" deep at its fullest point – which means you still get the typical bowlback trait of the guitar hanging away from you when it's on the strap (especially if you're carrying an ale-fuelled midriff). Still, in a sitting position the instrument feels a lot more compact, and benefits from the good balance inherent to 12th-fret designs. Against a Martin 00-style guitar the Ovation's body is 15mm or so longer, giving it a kind of stretched-out look which I find quite charming.

Discreet embellishments aim for a tasteful rather than ornate result. The binding on the A-braced top is four ply, with what looks like walnut as the outer band. The soundhole rosette features maple oak leaves inlaid on a black ring; the five-piece laminated neck – itself providing incidental decoration – has a peghead faced with walnut and carries an ebony truss rod cover. The ebony

The 'stretched parlour'-sized '97 Collectors'; Ovation's most important new guitar in years?



CHECK OUT...

As a bowlback, the '97 Collectors' styling is unique, regardless of the fitted TS preamp. For alternatives around this price you'll have to look among smaller wood-body instruments. Investigate the **LAKWOOD** A14 (£1250, plus from £162 for Fishman Powerjack system), **contact** Picato ☎ 01443-437928.

LARRIVÉE offer their LS-05 or 00-05 (£1099 plus from £109 for Fishman system), **contact** FCN ☎ 01732-366421.

From Northern Ireland come **LOWDEN's**

S10 and S12 (£1095 plus from £212 for EMG system), **contact** Lowden 01247-820542.

MANSON offer the Kingfisher (from £1550) or Nightingale (from £999), with cost of electro systems on request, **contact** Manson ☎ 01647-24139.

US leading lights **TAYLOR** have their 422 (£1249 plus from £125 for Fishman system), **contact** Sound Technology ☎ 01462-480000. All prices, except the Manson Nightingale, include a case.

fingerboard overhangs the soundhole beyond the 20th fret and is bereft of front markers, but you get the all-important side dots.

Seeing the truss rod cover on the headstock is a clue that, rather than the more usual K-Bar/bolt-on system, this neck



The fibreglass bowl is mid-depth

is glued to the body with a more or less conventional dovetail joint. Ovation also use this approach on other specialist electros like the Classic and the Folklore; as I recall from a factory trip last year, this involves a special vertical jig to clamp and hold the instrument securely while the glue dries.

I'm prompted to query whether Ovation have quite got the neck pitch right – on this sample, at any rate. There's a turndown to the fingerboard from the point where it meets the top, something made more obvious by the fact that a 12-fret neck join means more board sitting over the table than on a 14th-fret neck. There's no sinkage of the front itself, so it's logical to suggest there should be a tad less pitch on the neck; the healthy amount of break angle over the bridge saddle could certainly handle such an adjustment.

Our particular '97 Collectors' has a 'wide neck' specification (there's also a 'narrow' version with a standard 43mm nut width), so the broad expanse of board that awaits you shouldn't come as a shock. This is pretty much the full ragtime monty – a shade under 48mm across the nut and with 60mm string spacing at the bridge. If this sounds like

picker's nirvana but alarmingly substantial for everyone else, Ovation have profiled the neck to a very shallow section. There's a lot less wood to grapple with than you'd think.

The result never pretends to be anything but a specialist neck but it's surprisingly quick to adapt to, and feels more natural



Binding and inlays are subtle rather than ornate

the longer you play it. I was initially surprised to find the fingerboard had a quite pronounced 10" radius, but gradually realised that the already shallow neck would probably feel unfeasibly, skinnily plank-like with a board any flatter. One thing I would have appreciated, however, is lighter strings – the mediums fitted aren't very bend-friendly and will steepen the familiarisation curve for those trying this

type of neck for the first time.

To the casual eye the '97 Collectors' doesn't look like an electro at all, but inspection reveals a screw on the underneath of the upper bout which secures the battery holder, plus a row of progressively larger 'icons' marked on the side of the upper bout and into the waist.

Undereath these icons lies the control end of Ovation's new TS (touch sensitive) preamp – a thin, flexible circuit board with proximity sensors that line up with the icon marks. This, believe it or not, is your volume control. Touch the icons to adjust the volume: smaller means quieter, larger means louder. Completing the system is an audio PCB mounted internally down by the output jack socket-cum-strap button.

So, save for the small hole drilled for the battery holder, the '97's body has been left intact – yet it includes a powerful active system with innovative on-board control of gain adjustments. There's a trade-off, though: no on-board EQ control. Instead, it's preset as a mid-dip 'smile' curve.

SOUNDS

So how does it sound? Bloody good, as it happens. The amount of 'smile' on the treble side is a little eager to my ears, but tweaked to taste on the backline the result is an impressive, open, high quality tone – the kind of sound most electro players will want to dial up anyway. Such is the intrinsic quality that once you've made minor adjustments to whatever outboard EQ arrangement you use, you're unlikely to much miss the convenience of having this sort of thing on-board.

The '97 Collectors' is pretty delightful as an acoustic, too, with plenty of punch, a commendably full bottom end and a vibrant warmth and openness in the midrange that you won't necessarily hear either on some full-size Ovations – or even some small and medium-size traditional all-wood instruments.

Performance-wise, the only potential problem with the sensor icons is the ease with which you can accidentally kill or boost the volume by touching them with your chest as you bend over, say, to twiddle with your backline or a stomp box.

VERDICT

In my book, this Collectors' is one of Ovation's most important launches for years. It proves beyond doubt that the company can deliver power, punch and tonal integrity in a smaller suit of clothes. And if there are moans in the market – which I doubt – about the absence of on-board EQ, then surely this neat proximity-sensing technology can be adapted to address that side of the system too (though the touchie-feelie thing

could start getting a bit out of hand).

Earlier this year, Ovation boss Bill Kaman said that prototypes of 12-string, classic and multi-soundhole Elites had already been made, but that Ovation had 'no plans to add any other models in the foreseeable future'. Having seen and played this guitar, I'd suggest they draw up such plans and get cracking. In my crystal ball I see this parlour-evocative design dotted strategically throughout the various ranges and doing rather well, with or without the TS system. Time will tell. G