

Ovation Viper

Ovation's famous design gets a solid rethink with this ultra-shallow, hybrid electro-acoustic. **Matthew Wig.**

PRICE: £1,599

THE LATERAL THINKING of Aerospace engineer and acoustic picker, Charles Kaman gave birth to the original Ovation guitar about thirty years ago. Ovation has always been synonymous with electros, although production was predominantly acoustic to begin with. Nowadays, only models equipped with a pickup make it to the UK. Truly unique and revolutionary construction and designs has led to Ovation's pivotal role in the development of the plugged-in acoustic. They created a genre of instruments in their own right, and models like the Balladeer, Legend,

Elite and Adamas have all attracted numerous loyal and illustrious devotees.

The Viper is a natural progression of a concept for Ovation. In design collaboration with solid-body experts Hamer (owned by Kaman too), this guitar is the company's most wood-heavy offering since its interesting, but not-too-successful electric models. Aimed at meeting the obvious demand for extremely feedback resistant electro-acoustics with hybrid characteristics, the Viper looks familiar. But I suspect we're in for a few surprises...

BUILD QUALITY

The instant you pick up this weighty cutaway model, you sense that the ultra shallow-bodied Viper is different from other Ovation electro-acoustics. Gone is the Lyracord back; here it's replaced by a carved mahogany body. This is a solid block with an acoustic sound chamber hollowed out from it. Cosmetically, it looks fairly similar to the regular bowl with the usual black, non slip coating, but internally it's another thing all together.

The rigidity of this hybrid construction is also reflected in the thick, solid sitka spruce soundboard. A walnut bridge is mounted over a solid column of mahogany which effectively connects it to the body, along with the soundboard, to make an incredibly stable structure. This feedback eliminating platform also facilitates a through-body string fastening design for improved sustain.

The model sports one less soundhole compared to regular Ovation cutaways. They're slightly smaller holes too, further underlying the reduction in 'acousticness' of this guitar. A significantly deeper cutaway than normal accommodates the 24 fret neck. This, along with a narrower waist and a shorter body length make the Viper distinctly more curvaceous than its brothers and sisters.

The five-piece V-profile neck sports a very attractive, hand-rubbed urethane oil finish. Mahogany makes up its bulk, but two thin strips of maple run down its central length. It seems far sturdier in its dimensions and jointing, than necks I've seen on other guitars in the same vein.

The very flat, undecorated ebony fingerboard with ivory and black binding has two octaves of well-dressed, low and wide frets. This will be a popular feature for those coming to this

SPEC CHECK

OVATION VIPER

PRICE: £1,599

ORIGIN: USA

BODY: mahogany back and sides, sitka, spruce top

NECK: five-piece mahogany and maple

FINGERBOARD: ebony

BRIDGE: walnut

NUMBER OF FRETS: 24

SCALE LENGTH: 641mm

NECK WIDTH AT NUT: 43mm

SPACING AT NUT: 36mm

SPACING AT BRIDGE:

56mm

OVERALL LENGTH: 1020mm

MAX. WIDTH: 365mm

MAX. DEPTH: 68mm

WEIGHT: 4.5kgs

MACHINEHEADS: Schaller

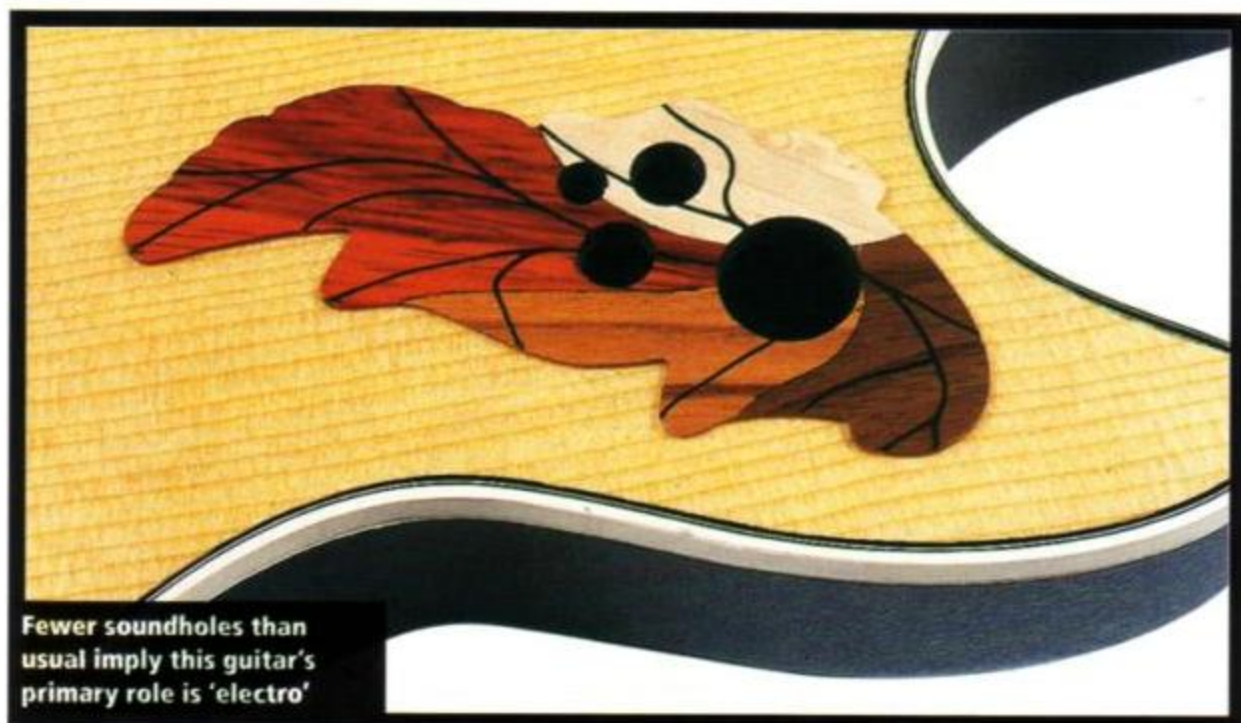
ELECTRICS: Ovation piezo pickup with specially-designed Viper preamp. Custom Thinline graphic EQ with slider controls and retractable gain pot

COLOURS: natural, black

LEFT HANDERS: no

CONTACT: JHS & Co Ltd, Salem House, Parkinson Approach, Garforth, Leeds LS25 2HR
Tel: 0113 2865381

Ovation has provided the Viper with an excellent setup: string height is sensible and the intonation is spot on



Fewer soundholes than usual imply this guitar's primary role is 'electro'

guitar from an electric instrument. This was obviously uppermost in the designers' minds when they conceived the Viper.

The body is bound with the same material as the neck, and I have to say it's a little poorly finished in places. Ovation's instantly recognisable headstock is treated to half a dozen, high-quality gold Schaller machineheads: three to each side.

The 'electro' element is served by the vibration (not pressure) sensitive Ovation piezo pickup and saddle combination. This piece of hardware, so crucial to that unmistakable amplified sound, is routed through a tweaked Viper preamp. Tuned to the particular requirements of the instrument, this features a three-band graphic EQ and a volume pot that can be popped up or down as required. This fairly basic system is squeezed into a thin assembly to fit the shallow body, and sits just above the waist on the upper side. To change batteries, you'll have to unscrew a plate at the back, next to the jack socket.

The Viper's only real decoration is the familiar leafy epaulets around the soundholes. Otherwise this is an unfussy-looking instrument. Interestingly, the strap buttons are the Jim Dunlop straplock types, so if you already have a strap with the other half fitted, you can simply lock straight on.

PLAYABILITY

If you haven't played too many Ovation – or indeed any guitars with a 'V' profile – you may expect it to feel chunky and odd. But I took to it almost instantly, finding that it fitted into my grip with what almost felt like bespoke tailoring. Shaving off wood to create the shape leaves the neck sleek, but still with depth. The apex of the V aids positive chord pressure in the 'thumb-over' grip, and also for standard barre positions.

The comfort zone is up to about the 14th fret, after which you run into the heel and body.

Considering there are a tempting, and indeed, generous 24 frets, a little more consideration to higher access would've been much appreciated. I found my wide hands didn't fit comfortably into the cutaway and the body design around this area offers little consolation.

A good action is crucial on such a long fretboard and Ovation has provided the Viper with an excellent setup. String height is sensible right up to the top, but if even that's not good enough for you, there's room for further lowering via the shims beneath the saddle. As you'd expect on a fine instrument like this, the 12th fret intonation was spot on; even the 24th fret notes were only slightly sharp. Thanks to conventional string spacing, there's no bunching of fingertips near the nut, and plenty of room at the bridge for fingerpicking.

Overall, the build of the Viper may show leanings towards the solid-body electric and it does sit snugly against the torso. However, it's much more acoustic in feel than some of its rivals in this field, so its integrity as an Ovation is certainly intact.

The controls of the graphic EQ are easy enough to access mid performance, should the

Also check out

PEAVEY ECOUSTIC ATS

Price: £699

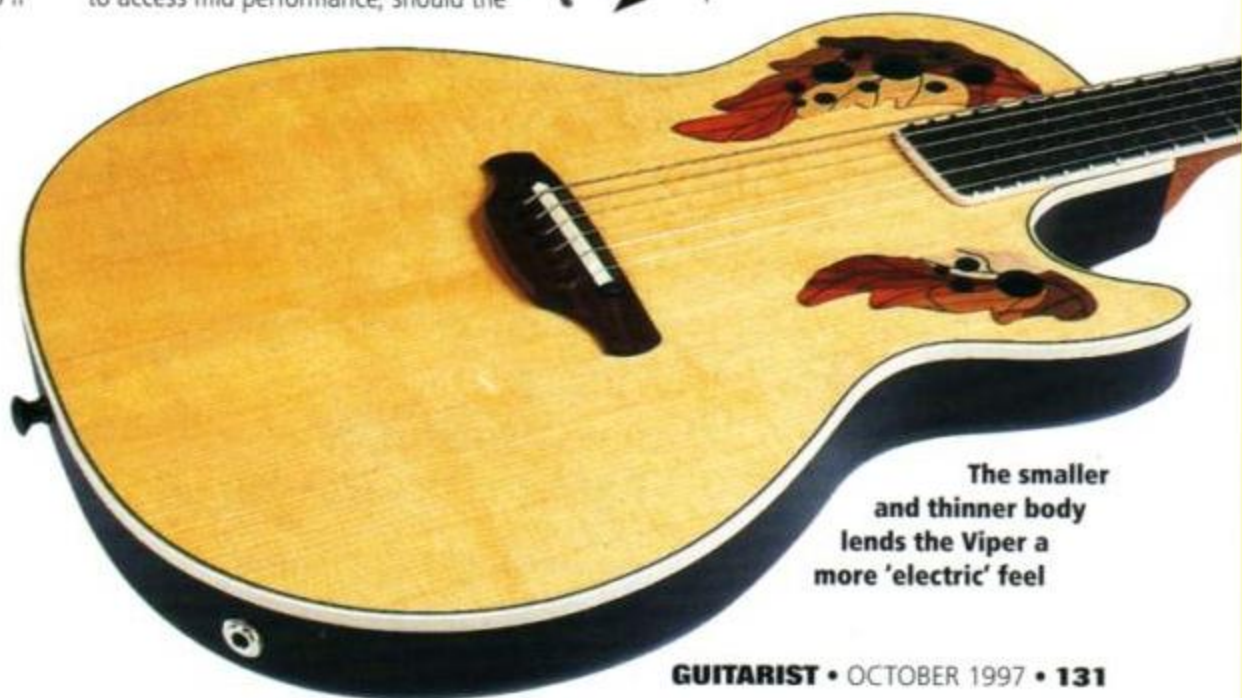
Reviewed: June 1997

What we said: "For use in a very loud band it's ideally prepared to compete for volume, and in that battlefield is a very worthwhile purchase. The tremolo bridge is no gimmick either, rather it's a useful and ingenious addition to the list of this instrument's innovations. You could well develop a style around an unusual guitar like this."

Verdict: Innovative yet useable: this guitar is functional in the best sense of the word.

Contact: Peavey (UK) Ltd

Tel: 01536 461234



The smaller and thinner body lends the Viper a more 'electric' feel

Also check out

GIBSON CHET ATKINS SST

Price: around £1,100

Reviewed: November 1996

What we said: "Set flat, and going into a PA, the tone is extremely authentic; the dynamics of the guitar resemble a true acoustic with absolutely none of that high-end tizz that mars some electros. Its elegant but radical looks and virtually flawless sound never fail to generate comments. I'd recommend the SST as highly as any I've tried."

Verdict: Suited to strumming or Chet-style picking, the SST combines superb build quality with uncompromising acoustic tones.

Contact: Rosetti Ltd
Tel: (01376) 550033

GODIN A6

Price: £755

Reviewed: July 1997

What we said: "By retaining the most important acoustic construction fundamentals, this guitar manages to sound as full-bodied and real as any traditional model. Ultimately, it's also going to be a lot better behaved at volume. The transducer-based sounds are among the best I've heard."

Verdict: The Godin A6 is an amazingly playable, great sounding electro-acoustic that has taken a concept to its natural conclusion.

Contact: EMD International
Tel: 01865 341597



situation arise. In practice you probably wouldn't have call to adjust these more than once in a gig, but I found that the retractable gain pot was not only fiddly, but quite flimsy in its popped-up position. Personally I'd prefer another slider, or even better, more rigid construction in the first place.

Ovation's familiar headstock sports gold Schaller tuners



SOUND

You can't expect to generate a great deal of acoustic tone from a structure aimed primarily at resisting the persuasive vibrations of its own amplified sound. So you won't be astounded by the natural output of the Viper, although a conservative quantity of fairly bright, lively tone is nevertheless produced. The mentality behind Ovation's quietest electro-acoustic to date, is that its acoustic properties exist to enhance the trueness of the pickup's tone. Looking at it from this more electric viewpoint, any acoustic sound at all seems a veritable practice-friendly bonus.

Plugging in and turning up to a healthy volume sees a familiar characteristic of these more solid electros emerge. Whopping great bass is what I mean, and the Viper is no exception here. If you find this is too much, it can be rolled off effectively by the graphic equaliser's well-tuned bass control. It's ultimately better to have too much bass to start with than not enough. More amazingly, the Ovation piezo system seems to reproduce truly usable middle frequencies (as apposed to the kind you perpetually try to EQ out).

The upper ranges of the acoustic sound also remain unharmed throughout the treacherous transducer route. Even with the treble control on maximum, a realistic brightness is achieved rather than that well-known quality similar to razor blades scraping down glass. The huge benefit of this good tonal balance is that you can use the EQ solely for creating some quite credible tone characteristics, rather than correcting deficiencies.

Many options present themselves with this guitar; you could go for a convincing, natural acoustic sound, a mellow jazzy thing or a highly contoured 'bright with bottom end' modern sound. The Viper even offers the classic Ovation sound settings in the booklet that comes with this model. It displays some healthy sustain, too. This particular piezo remains excellent at capturing the finer nuances of the acoustic tone.

VALUE FOR MONEY

This is possibly the Viper's greatest weakness. It seems that more and more electro-acoustics with semi-solid bodies are entering the market, to cope with the increase in demand from electric guitarists

who wish to employ an acoustic sound. Moreover, they want an instrument with easier playability than a more traditional, acoustic-based design.

Ovation has some stiff competition in this particular field. At £1,599 this is by far the most expensive model I've come across with just a single active transducer system. Players who've always loved Ovarations for their style, their sound and their quality may accept this kind of price as par for the course. I've little doubt that, with its solid and expensive timbers, considerable design research, first-class electrics and fine finishing, that this guitar is worth every penny. But somehow I feel you might just get more for your hard-earned from a less mighty manufacturer. However, putting a price on the unique prestige of coming out on stage with an instantly recognisable and highly credible brand of guitar is tricky, and that kind of beauty remains largely in the wallet of the beholder.

VERDICT

The love-hate relationship that Ovation guitars experience in the guitar-playing community is well known. The Viper may well exist as the kind of supermodel to persuade many into the lovers camp; if not, it's still probably the instrument that a lot of established Ovation disciples have been waiting for.

Vast experience and knowledge means that highly individual ideas are injected into the cross-breed to achieve a meaningful and unique guitar. With a good working marriage of classic, tried-and-tested features and contemporary innovations, you could literally blow audiences away with a high-powered acoustic assault. Those of you in a position to meet the substantial price tag will get treated to an exceedingly well-executed exponent of the new generation of electro-acoustics. ■

BUILD QUALITY ●●●●○

PLAYABILITY ●●●●○

SOUND ●●●●●

VALUE FOR MONEY ●●●●○

VERDICT: The Viper retains the classic Ovation electro-acoustic tone while sporting sleek, solid bodied dimensions.