



Ovation VXT £1,499

OVATION VXT

PRICE: £1,499 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Cutaway Ovation electro-inspired thinline electric/acoustic hybrid

TOP: Spruce, edge-bound

BACK/SIDES:

Mahogany, chambered

MAX DEPTH: 59mm

MAX BODY WIDTH:

367mm

NECK: Mahogany, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH:

641mm (25.25-inch)

TUNERS: Individual die-cast chromed-plated

(Schaller M6 style)

NUT/WIDTH: White synthetic/43.29mm

FINGERBOARD:

Rosewood, pearl dots,

254mm (10-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium

BRIDGE/SPACING:

Fishman PowerBridge/

52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Two

Seymour Duncan '59

chrome covered

humbuckers, three-way

toggle pickup selector

switch, dedicated tone

control. VIP Microphone

Imaging 'acoustic'

preamp with electric/

acoustic centre-notched

blend control, side-

mounted output jack

(6.4mm) and rear

battery compartment

(one 9V PP3), stereo/

mono mini switch and

LED battery power

indicator. Master volume

for both electric and

acoustic output levels

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.4/7.5

OPTIONS: None

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Teardrop

burst (as reviewed), black

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Like Taylor's T5, the Ovation VXT aims to straddle the gap between the electric and electro-acoustic. Does it succeed? by Dave Burrluck

Acoustic companies creating electric guitars is becoming quite a trend in recent years. While Collings is looking to the past for its inspiration, Taylor and Ovation are looking forward with new 'hybrid' designs that combine both electric and acoustic sounds. This isn't new. In the early nineties Parker's Fly and Hamer's Duotone successfully merged the magnetic tones of the electric guitar with piezo technology to offer electric and 'acoustic' sounds on the same instrument. Numerous companies produced subsequent instruments: Fender, Gibson, Music Man, PRS, Yamaha, Peavey and more. But the 'hybrid' remained a niche – an electric guitar for players who wanted a bit of acoustic texture. Line 6's Variax brought modelled electric and acoustic sounds to the table but it was Taylor's T5, introduced in 2005, that relit the hybrid lamp providing a large-bodied thinline platform for its acoustic and electric tones. Earlier this year Fender rolled out the VG Stratocaster that again uses modelling to offer both electric and acoustic sounds, and a little later Ovation took the wraps off its VXT – the 'Variable Cross Tone'. The age of the super-guitar is with us.

Ironically, bearing in mind Ovation's standing in the electro-acoustic market, by design the VXT starts from the electric side of the fence: a large-bodied, set-neck design with chambered mahogany body, mahogany neck, dual covered humbuckers and hard-tail, through-string steel saddle 'electric' bridge.

"We had several prototypes," says Ovation's Rick Hall, "and we originally had soundholes – they didn't really add

or distract from the sound, it was more of an aesthetic thing. When we decided first and foremost that it was going to be an electric guitar we took the soundholes off. Even though it's a chambered body with a spruce top, the soundholes made it look too acoustic. We really want to appeal to electric guitar players first – it's really the icing on the cake that it does the acoustic thing."

The cleanly bound spruce top alludes to its acoustic side yet, despite the modern technology under the hood,

"We really want to appeal to electric guitar players first – it's really the icing on the cake that it does the acoustic thing" Rick Hall, Ovation

the VXT – offered only in this old-school sunburst and black – appears to hark back to the past. In fact, about the only obvious Ovation features are the headstock and the way the rear of the guitar is contoured to hint at the company's famous bowl-backs.

But seated or standing it's very comfortable and quite T5-like in feel, if a little heavier (though still lightweight) and narrower across the lower bout. Hall estimates around 50 per cent of the body is hollowed out and explains that, "the lower bout is

basically a shrunken down profile of an Ovation acoustic and the upper bout, where it curves towards the fingerboard, has been more modified."

It might have a flat top but there's something about the feel here that evokes Gibson's thin-line cutaway ES-125. The scale sits between Fender and PRS and although the bound rosewood 'board looks a little dry, the fretting is good and of a sensible medium gauge. A little more work to the ends, a good mirror-like polish and some oil on the 'board would elevate

the feel but, price-wise, the VXT sits below high-end opposition like Taylor's T5 and PRS's Hollowbody. Above all, the neck shape feels very good. It's quite a full 'C' but one that should appeal both to the fans of bigger electric necks and older-style classic acoustics. With the supplied .010-.046 gauge strings it plays really well and, via the Fishman Powerbridge with its six fully adjustable powered steel saddles, an electric-style set-up is easy to achieve.

The overall finishing is very good too, and only the generic large-bodied and buttoned Schaller M6-style tuners look a little unrefined with the modern trend among high-end makers for a smaller, lighter tuner. It's a minor point. At least the guitar comes with Dunlop Strap-Lok buttons, although you'll have to buy the locking pins that fit to your strap as they're not included. Electric duties are handled by a

OVATION VXT	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED The overall design; both the electric and acoustic sounds; ease of use</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED Lack of acoustic EQ may bother some players</p>	





Two-tone: you get piezo-loaded steel saddles and covered humbuckers

The first thing you notice about the VXT is that it's so simple to use, with one less control than a Les Paul

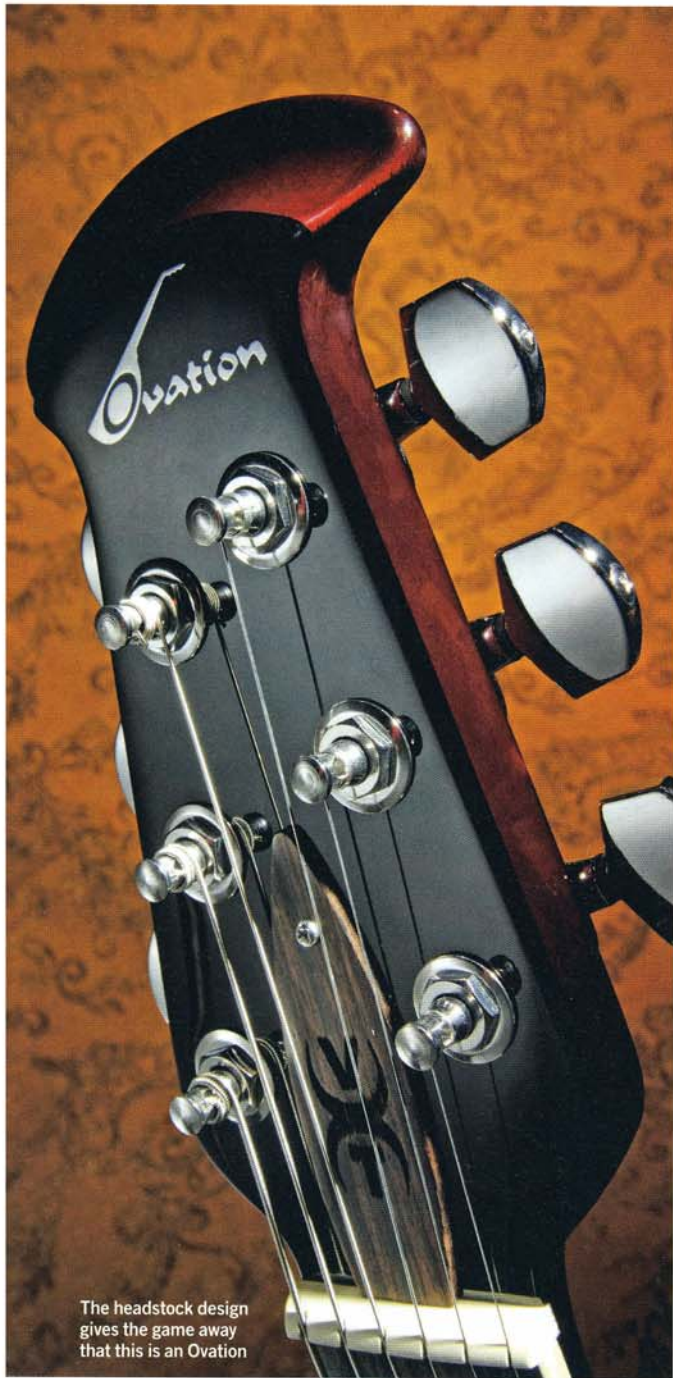
→ brace of chrome-covered PAF-like Seymour Duncan '59s – again reinforcing the classicism of the design. Unlike the T5's upper shoulder mounted controls, the VXT's controls are in a conventional electric guitar position. Along with the chrome-tipped three-way toggle pickup selector switch we get three rotaries: master volume, magnetic tone and a blend control. Fully anti-clockwise the blend voices the acoustic sound, fully clockwise the magnetic pickups, and between those extremes is mix of both. The side-mounted output jack can be

configured, via a small switch on the separate battery compartment on the back of the guitar, for mixed-mono, into a single amp or stereo into two amps. To achieve the latter set-up you'll need a stereo 'Y' lead, unfortunately not supplied.

The Powerbridge, with its six in-built piezo elements, provides the start of the acoustic sound but it's more sophisticated than that as it's processed by Ovation's VIP preamp. "The key to the realistic acoustic sound signal in the VXT is technology based on VIP, or Virtual Image Processing,"

says Ovation. "Custom recordings of world-class acoustic instruments are analysed and processed to provide a framework from which the piezo pickup output is modified. The result is a real time emulation of the recorded tones of the touchstone instrument." As we've previously reported the VIP technology is not modelling. Fishman, of course, has pioneered this with its digital Aura technology and has worked closely with Ovation to create this and the existing VIP preamps on Ovation guitars (see Behind The VXT).

SOUNDS: Instruments that offer dual sounds invariably have numerous knobs and switches. But the first thing you notice about the VXT is that it's so



The headstock design gives the game away that this is an Ovation



VXT versus T5

Ovation admits to being inspired by Taylor's T5 – what are the differences?

Taylor's T5 is available with single or dual top mounted humbuckers – the latter being the more electric sounding of the pair. It has a wider body that's slightly thinner in depth with a flat back and soundholes which can be plugged to reduce feedback. Overall, as it's hollow, it's lighter in weight and the top – spruce, maple or koa – is braced. It features shorter 632mm scale with one fret less and the mahogany neck is a bolt-on using Taylor's unique T-lock joint.

The T5 has five sounds, all analogue, ranging from acoustic to fully electric and combinations of both. Unlike the VXT, or most other 'hybrids', you can't voice both separate sounds simultaneously. So although the VXT has three magnetic pickup sounds and one digital acoustic sound you can run both simultaneously into, if you want, an acoustic amp/PA and an electric amp. The T5 also has treble and bass EQ placed on the front of the guitar on the upper bass-side shoulder. These can be used to really enhance the

sounds. The VXT only has a standard tone control for the magnetic pickups. However, as the VXT is loaded with standard Seymour Duncan humbuckers you could retro-fit pretty much any humbucker or humbucking sized P-90; Taylor's humbuckers are unique to the brand and can't be changed.

The standard T5-S version costs £1,799 with a Sitka spruce top and chrome-plated pickup and hardware; the T5-S1 (£2,099) has a maple top with gold-plated hardware – both use dot inlays. The T5 Custom, which features more fancy artist inlays, comes in three formats: the T5-C (£1,999) with Sitka spruce top, the T5-C1 (£2,449) with maple top and the koa-topped T5-C2 (£2,599, AAA option at £2,999) – all have gold-plated hardware. The dual top-mounted humbucker versions are a no-cost option and there is a wide range of colours, while metallic colours (£200) are available on selected models. The T5 12-string adds £149 to the above six-string price. Even in its standard format the T5, therefore, is £300 more expensive than the VXT, but as you can see there are a lot more formats and options compared to the two colour-only Ovation.

The VXT in mono mode creates excellent jazz voices from the full chewy depth of the neck humbucker through to hybrid electric/acoustic voices and full acoustic

→ simple to use, with one less control than a Les Paul. This simplicity means that you're playing, not thinking about what the next switch combination should be.

The electric sounds are immediately impressive. When we say it sounds like a generic twin-humbucking classic electric it's a compliment – it really does sound very classic. There's more ES-335-like spread to the sound than a Les Paul's throaty hump, but there's

enough power to drive your amp nicely with not too much to over-colour the tone. It sounds very open and really suits a range of styles. The bridge pickup produces a smooth, not over-compressed, clear, bell-like sound that is just as at home with crunchy classic rock as it is with ringing arpeggios, country twang and snappier old-school blues. The neck has silky warmth and is really well balanced output-wise with the bridge pickup, a factor in the

beautifully bell-like textures of the dual pickup voice that adds a very useable Fender snap to the guitar's range of tones. Think ES-335 and you'll get the picture.

If the electric performance is very good, the acoustic sound is equally strong. It's quite simply one of the best digital acoustic sounds we've heard on an instrument of this type and illustrates, as our other tests on Fishman's Aura technology have stated, that this 'sound imaging' (or as Ovation prefers, 'microphone imaging') is producing some scarily accurate amplified acoustic sounds. The acoustic voice here is rich and wide – quite modern and dreadnought-like –



The battery compartment can be found on the back – along with an output configuration switch

The rivals

Taylor T5 from £1,799
Fender VG Stratocaster £1,539

PRS Hollowbody Spruce w/ piezo system £3,575
The T5 is hollow with a very acoustic-like appearance but with unique 'air coil' and body sensing pickups it provides five sounds, plus treble and bass EQ, that go from electro to electric. Fender's new VG Strat combines conventional magnetic pickups with modelled tones that include acoustic simulations. The tuning mode adds altered and open tunings plus a 12-string option. PRS's twin humbucking Hollowbody is an expensive option, especially with the LR Baggs co-designed piezo system, but again remains a great choice for both electric and electro-acoustic sounds.

Here's a superbly intelligent instrument that's finely built, plays extremely well but above all sounds, well, spectacular

with a studio-like crispness to the highs and defined but roomy bass (and an accurate but not over-cooked percussive thump) – and that's with electric strings (.010-.046-inch). Okay, it doesn't capture the full richness, depth and detail that you'd hear from an Aura-equipped Martin, but it's a very, very useable acoustic voice devoid of any piezo-like 'ping'.

Combining acoustic and electric sounds is where this style of guitar can produce really unique tones, but the lack of any onboard tone control for the acoustic voice means that this duality is possibly better created in the stereo mode with a dual amp set-up. In mono we felt a little reduction of the crisp high would benefit many of our experiments, and you can't help thinking that even a small trim-pot on the back of the guitar to facilitate this would be helpful. That said, when

plugged into a Fishman Loudbox with a little brilliance reduction on the amp, the VXT in mono mode creates excellent jazz voices from the full chewy depth of the neck humbucker through to hybrid electric/acoustic voices and full acoustic. It's also worth mentioning that having a stage acoustic with a conventional volume control in the conventional position is so user friendly. There are a wealth of sounds here, and the default electric and acoustic sounds are just the start. Unlike the T5, of course, you can voice both electric and acoustic sounds simultaneously, and it's when you start working with a dual amp set-up, especially with different processing, that you begin to realise the potential.

Verdict

It's certainly been an interesting year, thus far, for the electric guitar.

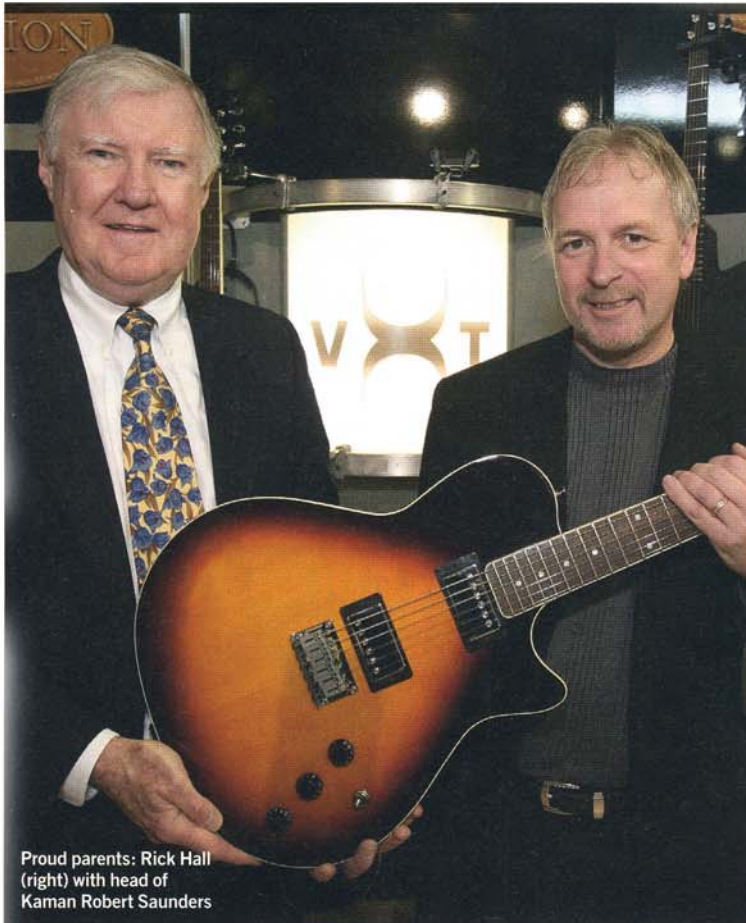
Ovation's VXT is one reason. Here's a superbly intelligent instrument that's finely built, plays extremely well but above all sounds, well, spectacular. The classic 'bucker voices of the '59s really suit the almost jazz-era style of the guitar. But don't be fooled, the VXT rocks out very nicely with more than a little of the ES-335 about it. The acoustic sound is special too, and the guitar is so manageable we wouldn't be surprised if some players use it as a default electro and ignore the magnetic pickups. But, by design, it is a hybrid and its dual voices can be voiced individually or together for some genuinely new and interesting tones limited only by your imagination.

Above all it's well priced. Whether you want to add a little acoustic into your electric sound, or vice versa, or explore the combined sounds, we can't think of any guitarist who shouldn't try this guitar. It really is that good. **B**

Ovation VXT

Guitarist RATING





Proud parents: Rick Hall (right) with head of Kaman Robert Saunders

Behind the VXT

Guitarist talks to Ovation's Guitar Product Manager, Rick Hall

Why come out with an Ovation electric in 2007?

"This has been a project that we've had on our timetable for about five years. Originally it was to take our Viper – a solidbody electro-acoustic – and add magnetic pickups. But as we started to experiment with that we were also looking at the VIP technology on our acoustics – we decided then it was a perfect opportunity to upgrade the whole thing."

Were you influenced or inspired by Taylor's T5?

"Oh, yes. Taylor has done more to make the hybrid market high profile than anyone else. You get sounds with hybrids that you can't get with other guitars. The T5 was a big influence on us but we just took a different tack. The T5 started with an acoustic and added an electric. With the VXT, we started with an electric and added in an acoustic.

"But I think with the T5, and now the VXT, there is a new avenue. It's something people need to pay attention to because there are unique sounds that aren't obtained through either standard electric or acoustic guitars."

Can you clarify exactly what Fishman's involvement is with the Ovation VIP technology?

"For the past two years, we've been working very closely with Fishman on dedicated Ovation systems. So when we originally did the VIP we used the Ovation Op-Pro preamp and added in the digital technology. We recorded Ovation guitars [to create the sound images] and tweaked things until we got what we liked. The system on the VXT was totally new and again we worked closely with Fishman. We started with the Powerbridge and had to get that to work with the sound images – how do you take electric strings and get them to sound like acoustic strings? We then took the VIP system that we have on our acoustics and sort of boiled that down into an electronics board that would work in an electric and enable us to put the humbucking pickups through the same system."

With the Fishman Aura and previous Ovation VIP technologies a sound image is overlaid on the piezo output of an acoustic guitar. The VXT isn't an acoustic guitar, so how does it differ? The actual acoustic sound we hear is quite modern and dreadnought-like, is that correct?

"The sound is still generated from the guitar but we had a choice of dozens of

sound images we made from Ovations. Each one worked a little differently on this guitar. For example, a centre soundhole Custom Legend and an Adamas – they sounded completely different on the VXT. So we ended up basically with a deep-bodied non-cutaway Ovation, basically a jumbo – that's the sound image you're hearing. But you're right, it's more like a dreadnought."

Ovation is a brand of Kaman and Kaman also owns Hamer Guitars – did they help on this project too?

"Right from the beginning we've had the expertise and input of [Hamer founder] Joel Dantzig. The way the neck is set, for example. It's a little different to the way Hamer does it but, like Hamer, we get this really amazingly tight-fitting neck joint – Joel has been really helpful with all that. We moved a big part of the Hamer crew into Ovation to train our staff. They have been a tremendous help, not only in the production but also in the design of the guitar. It really was a joint effort."

Fishman is leading the way by offering downloadable sound images. Shouldn't the VXT have that facility? We all have a different idea of what a 'good' acoustic sound is and surely, like iTunes, we should be able to download the sound that suits our ears and our equipment?

"That's in the future, for sure. A couple of the early prototypes were more complicated and we could have done those types of things. The reason we went with this configuration to start with was that we thought that anything that's the least bit complicated or confusing could hinder the sales. There's already a lot for the player to get their head around: it's a hybrid and it's an Ovation! So we made it as simple as we could. Once we get it off the ground and people start seeing what it can do then we'll take it further upmarket and add in some of these things. What you've mentioned as far as being able to download a specific image is so easy for us to do but it'll most likely be on the second generation."

And there's potential for a lower cost version, a Celebrity VXT perhaps?

"Yeah, we'll be looking in both directions: up and down. The current VXT is probably the middle ground. We're already looking at the possibility of doing an archtop and using more figured front woods in the future, different pickup combinations and taking the imaging further. Conversely, we might go with maybe a bolt-on neck and simpler electronics. We need to go in both directions, but this is the launch pad."