



SKY HIGH

THIS SUMPTUOUS DREADNOUGHT FROM ONE OF THE UK'S FINEST LUTHIERS HAS **DAVID GREEVES** IN SEVENTH HEAVEN

... If you're a regular reader, you'll be no stranger to Patrick James Eggle Guitars. We've been championing the virtues of these wonderful hand-built acoustic instruments from the get-go. Having made his name in electric guitars, Patrick Eggle left the electric world, and the UK, behind, moving to the US to concentrate on building high-quality flattop acoustics. Returning in 2005, he has since been turning out some exceptional instruments, also finding time to re-design the excellent Faith range of affordable acoustics.

The company's publicity material describes the Skyland model, which follows the Martin Dreadnought blueprint laid down all of 91 years ago, as the "full-bodied master of bluegrass leads", with "the rich bass and clear treble to give you the big sound you're looking for to stand out". But while most traditional dreadnoughts use rosewood for the instrument's back and sides, this guitar uses African sapele mahogany. As we discovered in last month's review of mahogany- and rosewood-backed Johnson Carolina acoustics, these woods have markedly different tonal characteristics. We're eager to find out what effect the more

mellow mahogany will have on the traditionally booming sound of the rosewood dreadnought, but first let's take a moment to appreciate how this guitar is put together.

BODY & NECK

The Skyland is a veritable feast of high quality tonewoods. Besides the Adirondack spruce top, sapele mahogany back and sides and the Honduran mahogany neck, this guitar boasts curly koa binding, aspen purfling, European spruce bracing on the top, back and sides and ebony for the fingerboard, bridge and headstock facia. And this is the standard model! One major advantage of buying a guitar that's hand-made in the UK is that it's possible to get exactly what you want (provided you can come up with the cash, of course) and a wide range of non-standard options is available, included a range of different woods, inlays and other aesthetic appointments (see box on page 62).

The book-matched Adirondack spruce top is a very fine specimen indeed. The spruce's straight grain is tightly spaced down the centre of the guitar, gradually widening towards either edge. Though this pale, plain wood is often overshadowed by the more showy maples and koas of this world, the pale silvery shimmer as

GBINFO



PATRICK JAMES EGGLE SKYLAND

PRICE: £2,399

BUILT IN: UK

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)

NUT WIDTH: 44.5mm (1.75 inches)

STRING SPACING AT NUT: 38.5mm (1.5 inches)

TOP: Adirondack spruce

BACK & SIDES: Sapele mahogany

NECK: Honduran mahogany

FINGERBOARD: Ebony, 406mm radius (16 inches)

FRETS: 20 medium

BRIDGE: Ebony with Tusq saddle

STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 55mm (2.2 inches)

MACHINEHEADS: Eggle-branded 18:1-ratio Gotoh 310, chrome

WEIGHT: 1.93kg (4.25lbs)

FINISHES: Natural gloss (shown)

CASE: Hiscox

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra charge

CONTACT: Patrick James Eggle Guitars
PHONE: 01691 661777
WEB: www.eggle.co.uk

■ A simple rosette surrounds the Skyland's soundhole

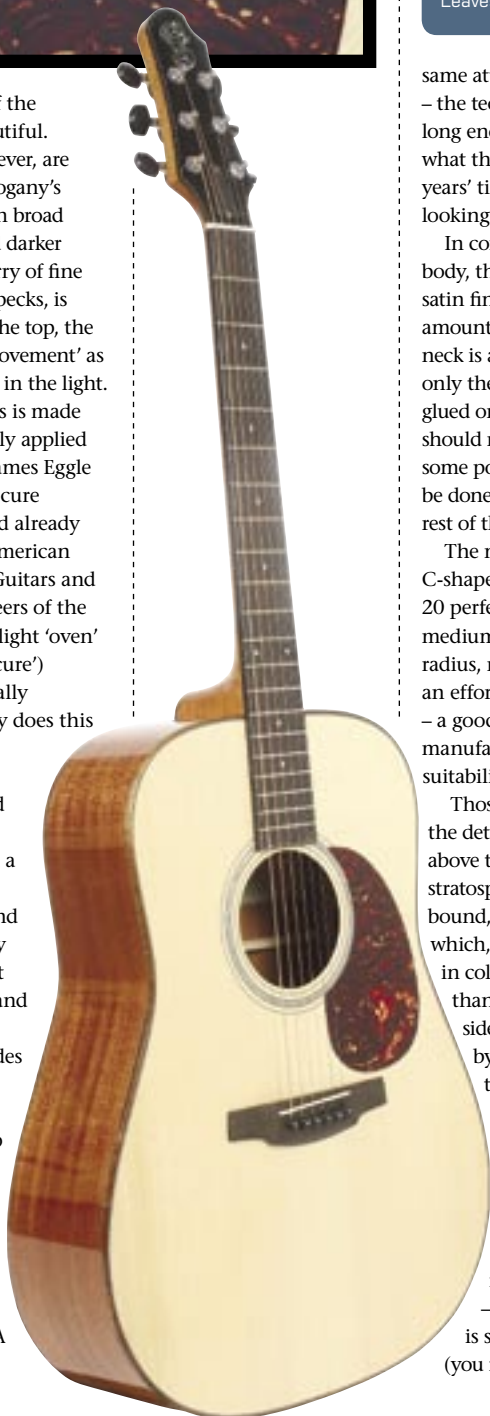


the light catches the top of the Skyland is really quite beautiful.

The back and sides, however, are simply stunning. The mahogany's complex grain pattern, with broad vertical strips of lighter and darker wood criss-crossed by a flurry of fine horizontal lines and dark specks, is almost hypnotic and, like the top, the back and sides have real 'movement' as you turn the guitar around in the light.

All this woody loveliness is made possible by an immaculately applied clear gloss finish. Patrick James Eggle Guitars is now using a UV-cure process, a finishing method already employed by several top American builders including Taylor Guitars and Tom Anderson, both pioneers of the technique. An ultra-violet-light 'oven' is used to quickly dry (or 'cure') consecutive layers of specially formulated finish. Not only does this reduce drying time during production over more conventional solvent-based finishes (if necessary, the finish can be completed in a matter of days instead of weeks), but it enables an end result that's very even, very shiny and very thin – great news from both aesthetic and sonic standpoints.

According to Eggle, besides the practical advantages afforded to the builder, the UV finish is thinner (by up to 25 percent) and harder than nitro-cellulose, but it's also more flexible, meaning that the finish won't crack if the guitar is exposed to extremes of heat or cold, as nitro will. A UV finish won't age in the



YOU PAY YOUR MONEY...

...YOU TAKES YOUR CHOICE OF OPTIONS AND UPGRADES

■ The guitar we're reviewing here is the Skyland Standard model, and a wide range of additional options is available.

Not all involve a surcharge – you can opt for a Sitka spruce, European spruce or Western red cedar top for the same price – but others do, including the choice of figured maple or Brazilian rosewood for the back and sides (£500 and £1,200 respectively – ouch!). A range of cosmetic options is also available, with gold hardware and an abalone border around the top of the guitar among the items on the menu. A particular favourite is the 'Falling Leaves' fretboard inlay option, pictured

here – a beautiful, delicate and highly individual touch that will set you back £200. But if you're buying the best, why not go the whole hog?



same attractive way as nitro-cellulose – the technique hasn't been around long enough for anyone to really know what these guitars will look like in 20 years' time – but it will certainly stay looking shiny and new for a lot longer.

In contrast to the highly polished body, the neck has been given a tactile satin finish that provides the right amount of grip with no stickiness. The neck is attached using two bolts, with only the fingerboard extension actually glued on. This means that if the neck should need repairing or resetting at some point down the line, it can easily be done with minimal impact on the rest of the instrument.

The neck has a comfortable C-shape profile which, together with 20 perfectly levelled and polished medium frets and a flat 406mm radius, makes moving around the neck an effortless and enjoyable experience – a good thing too, given the manufacturer's spiel about the guitar's suitability for bluegrass pickin'.

Those are the basics, but it's really the details that elevate the Skyland above the ordinary, up into the stratosphere of the superb. The body is bound, front and back, in curly koa, which, though similar, is subtly lighter in colour and more highly figured than the mahogany of the back and sides. The koa binding is bordered by purfling consisting of a very thin veneer of pale aspen (an American wood from the willow family) and black and white fibre, five-ply on the front and three-ply on the back and sides. More aspen traces the outline of the fingerboard and headstock – a neat, classy effect. The rosette is similarly simple and restrained (you feel like Eggle & Co. could just

as easily blow us away with an avalanche of abalone), with just a single circle of inlaid mother-of-pearl, bordered by fine black and white concentric circles, made up of more aspen and fibre. The Patrick James Eggle logo inlaid in mother-of-pearl in the headstock in just about the only bit of really showy decoration on the Skyland, and, like the simple 'slotted diamond' mother-of-pearl fret markers, it's immaculately done.

You can of course opt for further decoration, but we like the more understated elegance of the Standard model's appointments. The highest levels of craftsmanship are there for all to see if you look closely, but the guitar doesn't feel the need to shout about it. In fact, the closer you look, the more you find to admire – even the plastic tortoiseshell-effect pickguard is gently bevelled around its edge. This meticulous attention to detail continues inside the guitar. The bracing is carefully shaped and sanded smooth and there's not a single splinter or speck out of place. And that is not hyperbole – it really is that clean.

SOUNDS

If one word describes the sound of the Skyland it is 'balanced'. Pick up this guitar expecting the usual dreadnought mixture of booming bass and clanging treble and you're in for a shock. This is undoubtedly due, in part, to the use of mahogany for the back and sides rather than rosewood. Rosewood is more dense and rigid than mahogany, and produces pronounced low overtones. By contrast, mahogany is more balanced in tone, favouring the mid-range if anything.

If you're used to rosewood-backed dreads, you'll probably expect a bit more volume and sustain than the →

DETAILS

SIMPLY AN OUTSTANDING INSTRUMENT IN EVERY RESPECT



■ An ornate mother-of-pearl logo inlay adorns the unusually shaped headstock



■ The Skyland's nut and compensated bridge saddle are made of Tusq, a synthetic material



■ A bolt-on neck joint means that any future repairs or resets will be relatively painless



GBOPINION

PATRICK JAMES EGGLE SKYLAND

GOLD STARS

- ★ High quality materials and uncompromising construction
- ★ Gorgeous looks, with so many meticulous details
- ★ The most balanced, versatile dreadnought you're likely to hear

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Serious acoustic players looking for a peerless all-round acoustic, especially for recording

Skyland offers up too. That's not to say that this guitar is deficient in either respect – it just doesn't offer the exaggerated response that we're used to from this shape of guitar. But sit down and play it for a little while, and you can hear that appealing, authoritative dreadnought voice coming through.

It's when you then pick up another acoustic for comparison that you really realise just how special the Skyland is. The string-to-string volume balance and note separation are simply first class, and chords sound remarkably clear, open and articulate. That's not just about what this guitar is made of – it's about how it was made, and the attention to detail that's so obviously gone into its construction has clearly paid off. The bass is there, the mid-range is there, the treble is there – all in perfect balance with one another. How often can you say that about a dreadnought?

All of this makes the Skyland an ideal candidate for the recording studio. While a boomy, bass-heavy dreadnought might sound great when you're busking for your supper on a street corner, this is what you want in

your hands when you're sitting in Abbey Road, laying down your album.

Another key facet of this guitar – again, perhaps better suited to the subtleties of the studio than the street or the stage – is its fantastic dynamic range. While single-note runs and chords will cut through loud and clear, just as Eggle suggests, the Skyland responds especially well to lighter picking and strumming. There's a depth of character and tone here – an additional quiet voice, if you like – that many acoustics simply don't have. Strumming really hard, on the other hand, is not quite so satisfying, and while this guitar is remarkably well-developed for a brand-new instrument, we feel it has more to give in this area and will hopefully continue to open up over time.

GBRATINGS

PATRICK JAMES EGGLE SKYLAND

BODY & NECK	★★★★
PLAYABILITY	★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★
GBVERDICT	★★★★

GBCONCLUSION

AN EXCEPTIONAL INSTRUMENT THAT JUSTIFIES ITS HIGH PRICE

■ **If you've made it this far, it should go without saying that this is a top-quality instrument, easily the match of anything made anywhere in the world today. All that remains is the ever-knotty question of price and value for money. The Skyland is not cheap, but is it worth it?**

We'd respond by asking, in all seriousness, is that relevant? When you fall in love with a beautiful-sounding, beautifully made instrument, the question you ask yourself is no longer "Does this offer value for money?" but "What can I sell to afford this?". The bottom line is that an instrument of this quality will sound as good as you do. Though it will flatter to an extent, the Skyland will sound as musical, as complex and as nuanced as your playing can be – you'll never find that the instrument is holding you back or limiting your ability to express yourself. If £2,399 is what that costs, we'd say that it's worth it. **GB**