

AVALON AMERICANA ACOUSTICS \$2,700-£2,000
ACOUSTICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JEFF LESCHORS



Avalon S320A Concert, D300A Dreadnought & XL340A Super Jumbo

£2,750, £2,900 & £2,900

Avalon takes up the vintage baton with a sunburst threesome paying homage to US acoustics of yesteryear *by Jim Chapman*

What we want to know

1 Who exactly is Avalon?
This Northern Ireland-maker emerged from the Lowden Guitar Company five or so years ago after a protracted divorce from George Lowden. Initially, both the Avalon and Lowden brands were marketed under the Avalon corporate banner, but Avalon became autonomous in 2003.

2 Why should we be interested in these Americanas?
There's currently a strong retro trend among acoustic manufacturers, and these vintage-influenced designs hone in exactly on that.

3 Who are they for?
Lovers of 'burst flat-tops who want hand-crafted, homegrown alternatives to the Gibsons and boutique USA makers of this world.

Over the last couple of years Avalon has been focusing more and more on its high-end UK-made production, such as the Premier Series and Custom Elites. Since phasing out the offshore-sourced Silver and Gold Series last year, this is now exclusively the case, and the company is selling direct to customers rather than going through dealers. Hitherto, nearly all Avalons were based on four long-established body styles – S (Concert), A (Auditorium), D (Dreadnought) and L (Jumbo). However, the trio of new Americanas, which as the name suggests are aimed at evoking the aura of vintage US acoustics, see these being augmented by a modified 12-fret concert, a slope-shoulder dreadnought and – an entirely new design – the XL super jumbo. Sunbursting is the main visual common denominator though it's not the same on all three models...

S320A

The first Americana to go on sale, the S320A was loosely described as a parlour guitar when

announced during last spring's Frankfurt Fair, and indeed the company had prototyped a super-compact design. In the event, though, Avalon decided to stick with the familiar 14.5in-wide 00-size concert-body format for the debut. Injecting a retro flavour into the instrument has involved more than simply applying a deep sunburst finish. The neck is adapted from a 14- to 12-fret body join, accompanied by a slot headstock carrying appropriately vintage-like Grover Sta-tite open-back tuners. The change to a 12-fret neck has meant rebracing the top and shifting the Martin-like pyramid-end bridge further back, where it now sits in the middle of the lower bouts, a positioning many people regard as where the sweet spot should be. The only physical downside to this is that players whose technique involves resting the side of the hand on the bridge may find its more rearward location feels a little awkward at first. That, however, tends to go with the 12-fret territory whatever the size of instrument.

On a body of a premium grade sitka spruce top and rosewood

back and sides, the cosmetics are tastefully simple. The sycamore binding adds rosewood purfling around the front, the same combination of woods being used for the soundhole rosette. There was discussion that the rosette may be changed to mother-of-pearl, like the dreadnought and jumbo's, but it was felt that the wood inlaying looked more in keeping with the guitar's overall appearance. A decision still to be made is whether to fit a rosewood or bone endpin as standard. While that small detail is being mulled over, all three of our samples have no button, though customers can specify what they wish, including having a second one at the heel. Up on the neck, meanwhile, the bound ebony fingerboard carries cut-diamond position markers, decoration which applies to all three Americanas, as does an ebony facing for the headstocks.

The sunburst theme has prompted the introduction of an extra finishing process to the nitro-cellulose lacquering. On



The S320A features a slot headstock



natural-finish Avalons, the final preparation involves hand-rubbing with fine-grit wet and dry, achieving a distinctive, much-admired soft-gloss look. On the dark areas of the bursting, however, it was found on the first Americana samples that faint rubbing lines remained visible – black being, as we know, a relentlessly unforgiving colour for showing up the slightest mark. What now happens is an additional rubbing back with fining cream and even finer wet and dry (up to 4000 grit), which removes these lines whilst retaining a similar patina. Compared with an early S320A we saw, the difference is significant, and the finishing now looks in very fine fettle.

Unlike the mahogany-back dreadnought and maple super jumbo, which have full body and neck bursting, the concert is only sunburst on the top. The simple reason for this is that if you try and burst rosewood it virtually

disappears against the dark hue of the timber. This in turn is why the S320A's mahogany neck is left natural, to provide a visual continuity between the two adjacent areas.

Like Lowden before it, Avalon is known for its lengthways laminated necks, and the S320A's is a three-piece all-mahogany sandwich, with the centre portion's grain rotated through roughly 90 degrees along its length for added stability. (Truss rod access, incidentally, is through the soundhole, unlike the dreadnought and jumbo which both have their access plate on the headstock.) In keeping with the fingerstyle appeal of the instrument, the neck is a semi-wide affair, 45mm across the nut, with a generous 57mm string spacing at the bridge. Thanks to a moderate-depth profile it feels comfortable and accessible even for smaller-handed players and the smooth grip is enhanced by bevelling along the edges of the

The D300A steps things up from the concert's more intimate delivery to a full-blooded performance level

fingerboard, immaculately dressed fretting, and the gentle camber, which allows an excellent buzz-free set-up. Anything much above the octave is off limits, but that's inherent to any non-cutaway 12-fretter.

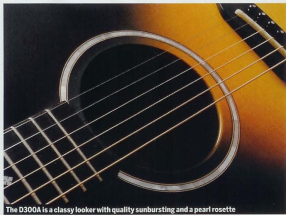
Sounds

Though not as warmly voiced as a previous S320A this reviewer has tried, it's a hugely enjoyable player. The response is taut yet supple toned, there's volume aplenty considering the body size, and the sparkling clarity and precisely balanced articulation across the strings are impressive and so well suited to fingerstyle repertoires. Add in an easy sustain and generous dynamics, and the result is a simply delightful picker.

J-200s are concerned. This is the standard Americana line-up, then, but it's not cast in stone. As Avalon's general manager Jim Black says: "The customer is king." Hence if you want to order any Americana in any of the three back/side timbers, you can and with no price penalty.

Anyway, back to the dreadnought in front of us. Along with its elegant round-shouldered lines, the guitar further emphasises its heritage influence with a beautifully finished reverse-belly ebony bridge and a headstock that has a distinctly Gibsonsque outline. This totes a set of kidney-buttoned chrome Grover Rotomatics, which may seem rather commonplace but these are top-grade ones (as are the concert's Sta-tites) not the cheaper versions that appear on so many budget boxes these days. Hardware and trim elsewhere are similar to the concert's save, as already mentioned, for the pearl rosette and the all-over sunbursting which looks fabulous with its smooth graduation from light to dark over the whole finish. The extra production time involved here amply justifies the modest uplift in price.

Though the sunbursting makes it harder to spot immediately, the 14-frets-to-body neck's construction this time is a four-way mahogany lamination. This seems somewhat arbitrary, as Avalon says it produces blanks in batches, sometimes three-piece,



The D300A is a classy looker with quality sunbursting and a pearl rosette

D300A

When the Americana project kicked off, Avalon's idea was to kit out all three models with rosewood back and sides. As prototypes were developed, however, a consensus emerged that other timbers were sonically better suited to the dreadnought and super jumbo. The upshot, as referred to earlier, is that this Advanced Jumbo-style dreadnought is mahogany backed, while the XL340A comes with maple back and sides – specifications which, by coincidence or intention, tally more closely with the Gibsons that inspired them, at least as far as post-Second World War J-45s and



sometimes four. The neck has a flatter heel profile than the concert's and there's a small volute under the peghead, but otherwise the dimensions are virtually the same as on the smaller-bodied instrument. The only discernible and very minor difference is a 'C' section that leaves a little more wood along the shoulders, giving an ever-so-slightly fuller grip even though depth remains the same. In response to a thought that some dreadnought buyers will want a neck slimmer than 45mm, Jim Black says Avalon will happily oblige - with no increase in price - as long as customers don't mind waiting a few extra weeks for the order to be fulfilled. Wider necks can be accommodated if desired too. You can't say fairer than that.

Sounds

The D300A steps things up from the concert's more intimate delivery to a full-blooded performance level. Again supple

and dynamically responsive, the sound and volume are enthusiastically in dreadnought territory, with a tonal combination of clarity and zest underpinned by a warm, resonant low end that's firmly defined without adversely dominating the sound. A most likeable aural aggregate.

XL340A

While Gibson J-200 influences are clear to see on this Avalon super jumbo, it's no attempt at being a clone. The shoulders are slightly more rounded, and the upper bouts are more slender in relation to the fulsome 17in-wide lower bouts. The moustachio'd ebony bridge hints at rather than apes the ornate lines of Gibson's open-perimetered original. When it comes to flame-maple back and sides, those on our sample aren't the most highly figured you'll come across, but caught at certain angles they fit the bill. Of our three Americanas, this is the only

one to have one or two minor finish imperfections. Rubbing lines and some matting of the finish are clearly visible on the top either side of the fingerboard, and around the back of the shoulders the edging of the dark stain, where it meets the sycamore binding, is slightly wavy. These aren't characteristics of the guitar as a whole, and the sunbursting looks as good as the dreadnought's.

With detailing and hardware otherwise identical to the D300A, it's no surprise to find the neck a ringer too - the same dimensions, profile and four-way construction. As far as this is concerned you could swap from one to the other and not know you've changed instruments. Similarly, if you want a neck with a slimmer nut width, you can order it.

Sounds

Comparing this with the dreadnought is interesting. On the one hand there is the superb

evenness of tonal texture across the strings that is typical of good maple-backed acoustics, and the super-jumbo construction predictably endows extra depth and vibrancy to the bass response. Less predictable, however, is that the follow-through of strummed chords sounds subtly mellower and more fluid than on the D300, something one wouldn't necessarily anticipate as a maple versus mahogany trait. It's not better or worse, just different, and in sum it's fair to say that the XL has a more complex sound. The only aspect where our sample does presently fall slightly short by comparison is in having slightly restrained dynamics, though that could simply be due to the larger table needing longer to flex in and open up. Jim Black acknowledges Avalon has experienced this initially with one or two other Americana jumbos but that playing and a settling-in period have resulted in the sound

Rivals

S320A Concert

Gibson's 1937 L-00 (c£3,800) in vintage sunburst is a Legend Series reissue of this small-body spruce/mahogany picker. The 629mm-scale, 44.7mm-wide neck is 14-frets-to-body. Priced to include sunburst-top option, **Santa Cruz's 00** (£2,999) is a 12-fretter with a 44.5mm slot-head neck; the spruce/rosewood body carries herringbone top purfling. The 12-fret **00-60** (£2,905) from **Larrivé** with a sunburst top includes a 46mm fingerstyle neck with slot headstock.

D300A Dreadnought

Gibson's Advanced Jumbo (c£2,500) is based on its first 1936 slope-shoulder dreadnought and has rosewood back and sides. The J-45-inspired **Vintage Jumbo** (£3,599) from **Santa Cruz** is spruce/mahogany and includes open-back Waverly-style tuners. **Martin's CEO-4R** (£2,149) is a special-edition J-type with a body of premium Adirondack spruce and rosewood. All the above, in vintage sunburst, are 14-frets-to-body with 43mm-wide necks.

XL340A Jumbo

Guild's spruce/curly maple **F50** (£2,279), with solid top and sides and laminated arched back, sports shell block markers and comes in various colours. **Gibson's SJ-200 Reissue** (c£3,200), in natural or vintage sunburst, is all-solid spruce/curly maple and carries 1950s-vintage detailing. The **Brook Okement** (£2,745) is priced for full sunburst and deluxe trim with a choice of all-solid body timbers or abalone top purfling. All three are 17in-wide Super Jumbos.



Flame maple back and sides for the jumbo



blossoming. Time is the watchword, then.

Verdict

Avalon is to be applauded for these Americanas. You might think that the company has trodden a well-worn path down the heritage trail, and in one sense that is the case. But along the way it has come up with an immensely attractive, generally great-sounding mini series that is instantly and distinctively identifiable, not only because of the sunburst theme but also for the choice of seductively traditional body styles. The company would ideally like the focus to be on the models exactly as reviewed here but, as a semi-custom maker producing some 400 instruments a year, it realises that some customers will want to depart from the catalogue specs – whether of timbers or neck widths – and it has the flexibility and willingness to accommodate this. And by the way, Avalon, where's that little parlour you were toying with? That'd make a fine foursome. Over to you...



Avalon S320A Americana Concert

PRICE: £2,750 (inc case)
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Concert-size acoustic
TOP: Solid sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid rosewood
MAX RIM DEPTH: 104mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 371mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm
TUNERS: Chrome Grover Sta-tite
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound ebony, 406mm radius
FRETS: 18, thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with bone saddle/57mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.0/4.4
OPTIONS: See D300A and XL340A.
Endpin electro system, prices on request
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra cost
FINISH: Gloss sunset burst top, natural back, sides and neck
Avalon Guitars 02891 820542
www.avalonguitars.com



Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Avalon D300A Americana Dreadnought

PRICE: £2,900 (inc case)
TYPE: Slope-shoulder dreadnought acoustic
ORIGIN: UK
TOP: Solid sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid mahogany
MAX RIM DEPTH: 118mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 404mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm
TUNERS: Chrome diecast Grovers
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound ebony, 406mm radius
FRETS: 20, thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with bone saddle/56.5mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.27/5.0
OPTIONS: See S320A and XL340A.
Endpin electro system, prices on request
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra cost
FINISH: Gloss sunset burst



Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Avalon XL340A Americana Super Jumbo

PRICE: £2,900 (inc case)
TYPE: Jumbo acoustic
ORIGIN: UK
TOP: Solid sitka spruce
BACK/SIDES: Solid flame maple
MAX RIM DEPTH: 120mm
MAX BODY WIDTH: 432mm
NECK: Mahogany
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm
TUNERS: Chrome diecast Grovers
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/45mm
FINGERBOARD: Bound ebony, 406mm radius
FRETS: 20, thin
BRIDGE/SPACING: Ebony with bone saddle/57mm
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.36/5.2
OPTIONS: See S320A and D300A.
Endpin electro system, prices on request
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, no extra cost
FINISH: Gloss sunset burst



Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

The bottom line

S320A Concert

We like: Looks, sounds, handling. Everything, really
We dislike: Limited up-top access, but that goes with the 12-fret territory
Guitarist says: Top-class picker neatly bridging the size gap between parlour and folk

D300A Dreadnought

We like: Ditto the concert
We dislike: Some will want a slimmer neck, but Avalon can provide that on any Americana
Guitarist says: Inspired by the most elegant dreadnought ever; ticks the right retro boxes

XL340A Jumbo

We like: Ditto the other two models, more or less
We dislike: Slight finish imperfections; dynamics have yet to blossom fully
Guitarist says: The right materials and build make this a big, smooth-sounding strum machine that has fingerstyle covered too