

Price: **£2750**

We never thought of Avalons at rootsy, downhome blues pickers, but the littlest Americana model might change all that. Review by Jerry Uwins

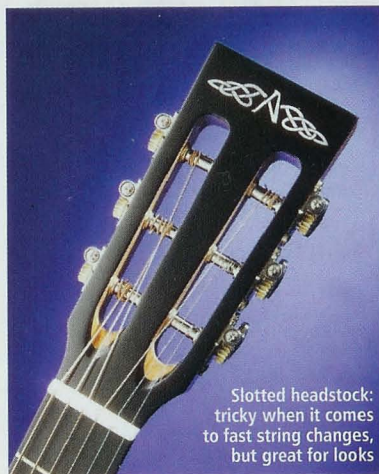
Avalon

S320A Americana Acoustic

There have been some changes recently at Avalon. As well as launching the new Americana Series, the company has phased out its offshore-built Silver and Gold Series guitars; instead, they'll be concentrating exclusively upon handcrafted production in Northern Ireland. They're also moving away from retail stockists: now the instruments are sold direct to the end-user, and you can buy online via a 'shop' section on the recently revamped Avalon website.

As the name suggests, the Americanas are aimed at evoking the aura of vintage US acoustics, and the S320A is the first to emerge. (From the first production batch, big-name customers have included Bob Geldof and James Morrison.) Later in the year it will be joined by a slope-shoulder dreadnought and a super jumbo, influenced respectively by Gibson's J-45 and J-200, though each will be distinctively Avalon in final shape and detailing, not clones. Timbers and finish will be the same on all models.

In our recent Frankfurt Fair round-up I described the S320A as a parlour guitar, but this isn't strictly accurate. In



Slotted headstock: tricky when it comes to fast string changes, but great for looks



Three-piece mahogany neck, with reversed centre section for stability

The Americana series – a slope dread, a super jumbo and this 00 – aim to evoke the aura of vintage US acoustics

fact it uses the company's 14.5"-wide concert body, placing it in the slightly larger '00' category. During development four different bodies, including smaller parlour styles, were tried out, but Avalon's luthiers ultimately voted to stay essentially with the well-established S design.

Not that it was simply a case of spraying up a sunburst top and calling it a day, because the guitar has been adapted for its retro Americana image. Most obvious is giving it a neck with 12 frets to the body, topped by a slot headstock carrying silky-smooth, open-gear Grover Sta-tite tuners. The ebony bar bridge, with its pyramid

ends, is clearly vintage Martin inspired. The effect of the 12-fret neck join, together with the guitar's full 25.5" scale length, is to locate the bridge further down the top than it would be on a regular 14-fret S-Series instrument. It sits here pretty much plumb in the centre of the lower bouts, a point at which it should be able to transmit string vibrations most freely. The only minor handling downside is that if your fingerstyle technique favours partially damping the bridge with the side of your picking hand, it will involve reaching further back than usual – which may initially feel a bit awkward. ➤

FACTFILE

S320A AMERICANA

Description: 12-fret concert-size acoustic. Made in Northern Ireland

Price: £2750 inc. case

Build: Solid sitka spruce top, solid rosewood back and sides. Three-piece mahogany neck with 18-fret bound ebony fingerboard. Ebony bridge, bone nut and saddle, chrome Grover Sta-tite tuners, no strap button

Options: Endpin powering system (eg Fishman or B-Band) – prices on request. Americana slope-shoulder dreadnought and super jumbo due later this year, both at £2750

Left-handers: Yes, at no extra cost

Finish: Low-gloss Sunset Burst top, natural back, sides and neck

Scale length: 648mm/25.5"

Neck width:
Nut 45mm
12th fret 54.5mm

Depth of neck:
First fret 21.5mm
9th fret 24mm

String spacing:
Nut 37.5mm
Bridge 56mm

Action as supplied:
12th fret treble 1.5mm
12th fret bass 2.5mm

Max rim depth: 105mm

Max body width: 370mm

Fingerboard radius:
Approximately 15"

Weight: 2.0kg/4.4lb

Contact: Avalon Guitars
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www.avalonguitars.com

First Impressions

Without question a fab compact picker, with played-in maturity from new

THE COMPETITION

GIBSON 1937 L-00

Legend Series reissue of an all-time classic small-body flat-top. Spruce/mahogany, 14-frets-to-body, 24.75" scale, and Avalon-inspired vintage sunburst finish

RRP: around £3800

BROOK TORRIDGE

This 12-fret slot-head 00, priced for deluxe trim and a sunburst front, includes wood bindings and abalone front purfling. Good choice of body timbers, too

RRP: £2495

SANTA CRUZ 00

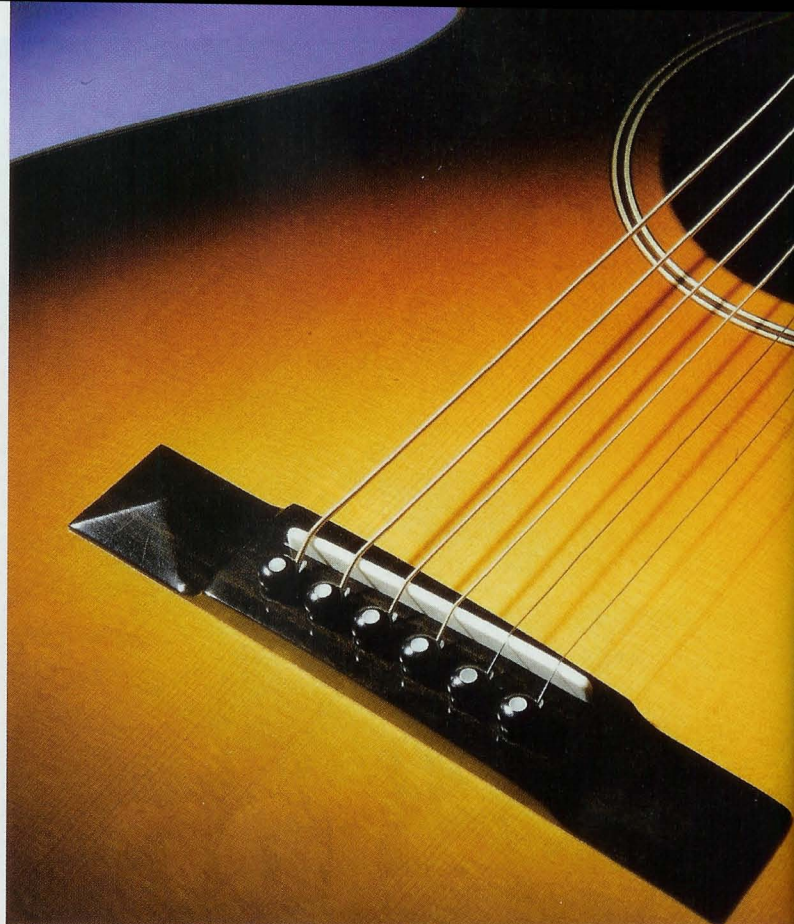
Again a 12-fretter with slot-head neck, it's done in herringbone-bound spruce/rosewood. Price includes sunburst-top option

RRP: £2999

The S320A has a premium-grade sitka spruce top and rosewood back and sides, attractively bound with sycamore plus an inner rosewood purfling around the front (the rosette's rings are of the same woods, but may be changed to mother-of-pearl – already the choice for the dreadnought and jumbo). Another alteration may be to substitute bone bridge pins for the pearl-topped ebony ones in order to match the saddle material and the colour of the binding, and also to fit a bone bottom strap button. Our sample doesn't have one. These are just minor points of aesthetic work in progress.

More important is the finish. Avalon's hand-rubbed low-gloss look is rightly admired, but it didn't work wholly successfully on an early sample we saw. Black is a ruthlessly unforgiving colour that shows up everything, and Avalon's steel-wooling lines were clearly visible on the upper bouts and around the perimeter of the sunburst when viewed against the light. The company was aware of this, and the fronts of all Americanas are now given a final treatment with finessing cream (like a mild T-Cut) to eliminate these hairline striations and achieve an absolutely smooth lustre. From the look of this guitar, the problem has been solved.

The S320A's neck is attached by a glued, tapered dovetail and is fashioned from three laminations of mahogany, the centre portion being rotated roughly 90 degrees along its



The guitar responds deliciously well, with a tone that's warm and sweet yet clearly and precisely articulated

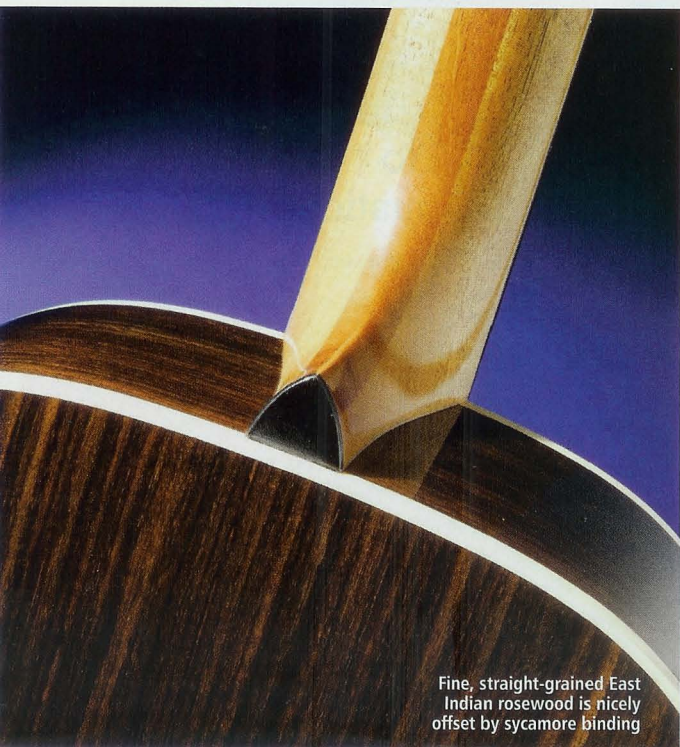
length to provide opposing grain for added strength and stability, though there's a truss rod installed anyway under the ebony fingerboard. The very pretty pearl, celtic 'A' logo on the ebony-overlaid peghead is cut and inlaid totally by hand at the factory, not bought in pre-formed.

On a picker style of instrument like this, Avalon could easily have opted for an uncompromisingly broad fingerboard, but it has wisely chosen a semi-wide fingerstyle format, with a nut width of 45mm and string spacing at the bridge of just over 55mm. With an evenly-rounded moderate-depth profile it plays beautifully, and the sense of comfort and slick accessibility is enhanced by careful bevelling along the edge of the fingerboard's binding and by immaculately-dressed fretting. The fretboard's gentle camber helps, too. Of course, you'll be struggling for reach much beyond the octave, but that goes with the 12-fret territory.

all, there's a sense of suppleness in the dynamics, sustain and picking response that conveys a built-in-from-new maturity and richness. It's an excellent sonic pot-pourri.

VERDICT

This Americana debut is a smasher. Build quality is up to Avalon's usual exemplary standard, and the guitar successfully conjures up a pre-war air without either going over the top on cosmetic detailing or slavishly following any other maker's original design. Along with all this is a quality of sound that ranks with the very best 00-style instruments we've tried. The company says we shouldn't rule out it adding a smaller, true parlour model to the Americana Series in due course. That's good news, but meanwhile the compact-handling, maturely voiced S320A will do very nicely indeed.



Fine, straight-grained East Indian rosewood is nicely offset by sycamore binding

SOUNDS

Whether or not the more rearward bridge position has anything to do with it, there's no doubt that the guitar responds deliciously well. Volume is generously forthcoming for the body size – it's probably helped by the instrument's relatively deep sides – while the tone is warm and sweet yet clearly and precisely articulated. Above

FINAL SCORE

Build Quality	19/20
Playability	18/20
Sound	20/20
Value for money	16/20
Vibe	19/20

TOTAL92%

Good for... warm, clear, mature tones in a handsome retro livery

Look elsewhere... if you need the added up-top access of a 14-frets-to-body design