

ELECTRIC DREAMS

CELEBRATED THROUGHOUT THE GUITAR WORLD FOR THE UNCOMPROMISING QUALITY OF ITS ACOUSTICS, CAN COLLINGS PROVE EQUALLY SUCCESSFUL WITH ITS NEW LINE OF ELECTRICS? PAUL ALCANTARA INVESTIGATES...

With the exception of Gibson, few high-end guitar manufacturers have achieved real credibility and long-term success in the fields of both acoustic and electric instruments. With the benefit of hindsight, the fuddy-duddy hollowbodies with which Martin attempted to enter the electric arena back in the 1960s, today appear almost as risible as the ill-conceived line of bolt-neck flattop acoustics offered by Fender during the same decade. Moving a little closer to today, a negative initial reception ensured that the acoustic guitar that Paul Reed Smith developed with luthier Dana Bourgeois in the 1990s never made it beyond the prototype stage. All told, it would seem that it's a brave company indeed that steps outside the area in which it achieved its initial success, which brings us neatly to Collings' new line of electric guitars.

According to Doug Chandler of UK Collings importer Guitar XS, the project was solely the idea of company main man, Bill Collings. "He simply announced one day that he wanted to make an electric guitar," says Doug, "in much the same way he had decided to get into making mandolins a few years ago."

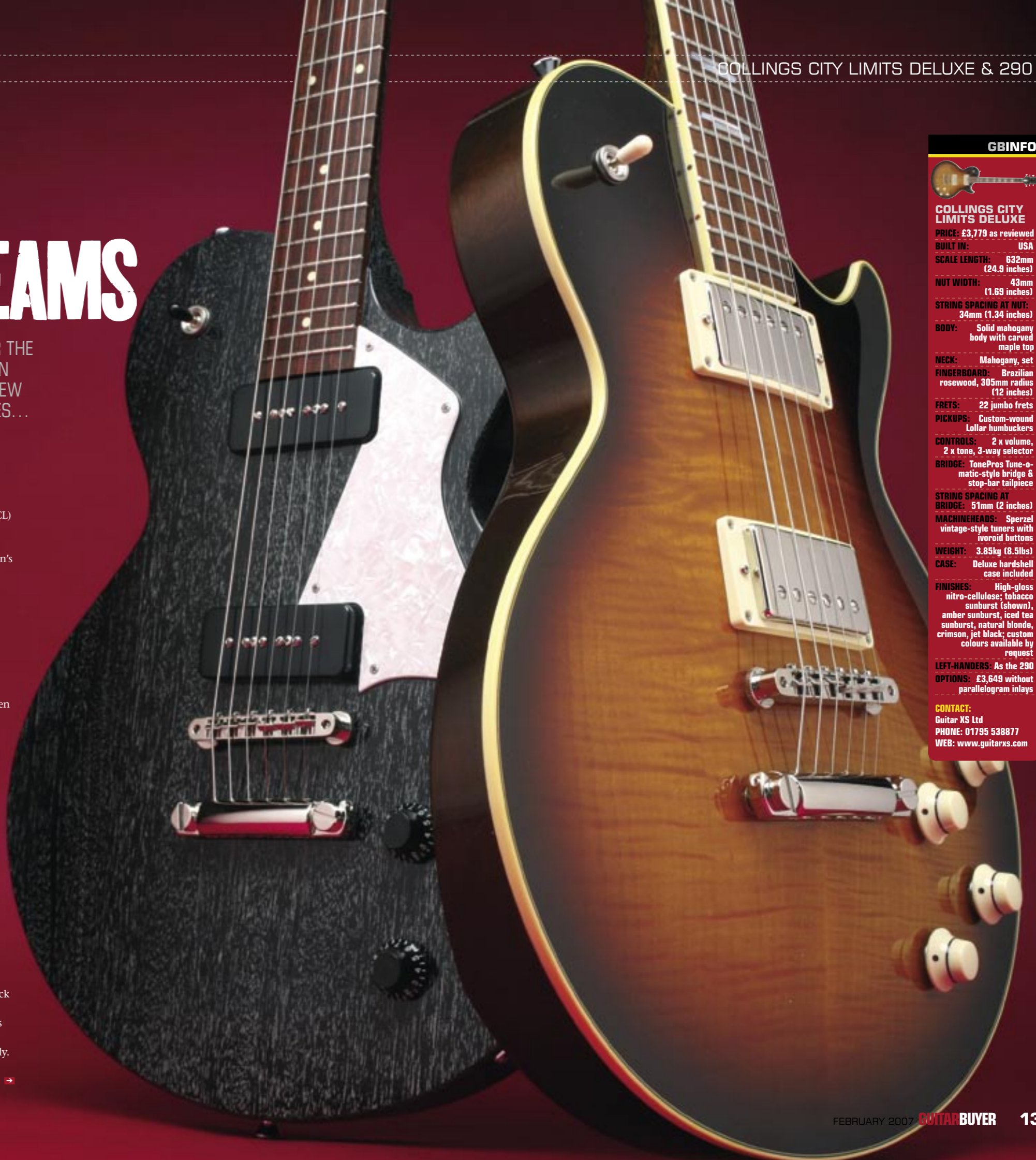
After producing dozens of hand-made prototypes, Collings arrived at the current lineup of three set-neck models: the semisolid I-35 (inspired by the Gibson ES-335), plus the two Les Paul-style solidbodies reviewed here. While each takes a classic Gibson

guitar as its point of departure, the Collings electrics are by no means slavish imitations, as we shall see.

BODY & NECK

The carved-topped City Limits (or CL) Deluxe and slab-bodied 290 share a single-cutaway body outline that is slightly different from that of Gibson's much-copied Les Paul model. For a start, the upper shoulder displays a curve that dips, Telecaster-like, as it approaches the side of the neck. Turning the guitars over reveals ergonomic contouring at both sides of the waist. The upper edge has a shallow ribcage contour, while the lower section is dressed away to accommodate your upper thigh when the guitar is played sitting down. This makes these guitars much more comfortable to play, seated or standing, without compromising their classic, clean looks. And 'clean' is very much the word here. When we first clapped eyes on a Collings acoustic over half a decade ago, we were struck by the sheer precision with which the guitars were – and indeed are still – built. The sharp headstock angles, utterly flawless internals and ultra-tidy edges everywhere elevate Collings above almost every other high-end guitar manufacturer. Likewise with these electric models, Collings displays that precision with the unique sculpted contours on the back of the guitar. They're quite unlike anything we've seen before in terms of design, though serve the dual masters of form and function equally.

Both models have a mahogany body, the CL Deluxe's capped with



GBINFO



COLLINGS 290

PRICE: £2,024 as reviewed
 BUILT IN: USA
 SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9 inches)
 NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.69 inches)
 STRING SPACING AT NUT: 34mm (1.34 inches)
 BODY: Solid mahogany
 NECK: Mahogany, set
 FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, 305mm radius (12 inches)
 FRETS: 22 jumbo frets
 PICKUPS: Custom-wound Lollar P-90-style single-coils
 CONTROLS: 2 x volume, 2 x tone, 3-way selector
 BRIDGE: TonePros Tune-o-matic-style bridge & stop-bar tailpiece
 STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 51mm (2 inches)
 MACHINEHEADS: Sperzel vintage-style tuners with plastic buttons
 WEIGHT: 3.18kg (7lbs)
 CASE: Deluxe hardshell case included
 FINISHES: High-gloss nitro-cellulose finish; black with white grainfill (shown), tobacco sunburst, crimson, orange, TV yellow, jet black
 LEFT-HANDERS: Available in 2007, 10 per cent upcharge
 OPTIONS: £1,849 without pearloid pickguard and headstock overlay

CONTACT: Guitar XS Ltd
 PHONE: 01795 538877
 WEB: www.guitarxs.com

GBINFO



COLLINGS CITY LIMITS DELUXE

PRICE: £3,779 as reviewed
 BUILT IN: USA
 SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9 inches)
 NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.69 inches)
 STRING SPACING AT NUT: 34mm (1.34 inches)
 BODY: Solid mahogany body with carved maple top
 NECK: Mahogany, set
 FINGERBOARD: Brazilian rosewood, 305mm radius (12 inches)
 FRETS: 22 jumbo frets
 PICKUPS: Custom-wound Lollar humbuckers
 CONTROLS: 2 x volume, 2 x tone, 3-way selector
 BRIDGE: TonePros Tune-o-matic-style bridge & stop-bar tailpiece
 STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 51mm (2 inches)
 MACHINEHEADS: Sperzel vintage-style tuners with ivoroid buttons
 WEIGHT: 3.85kg (8.5lbs)
 CASE: Deluxe hardshell case included
 FINISHES: High-gloss nitro-cellulose; tobacco sunburst (shown), amber sunburst, iced tea sunburst, natural blonde, crimson, jet black; custom colours available by request
 LEFT-HANDERS: As the 290
 OPTIONS: £3,649 without parallelogram inlays

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FINISHING TOUCHES

IT'S THE LITTLE DETAILS THAT MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

■ The high standard of build and finishing make the City Limits Deluxe truly deserving of its name.

Besides the high-gloss nitrocellulose lacquer finish and mother-of-pearl inlays, the volume and tone knobs and pickup surrounds are specially made by hand from a 'grained

ivoroid' material. The same stuff is used for the truss rod cover and the meticulously applied binding on the body, neck and headstock. The Sperzel tuner buttons are ivoroid too, and the Brazilian rosewood veneer that fronts the headstock is a final touch of class. It's definitely for those who appreciate finery.

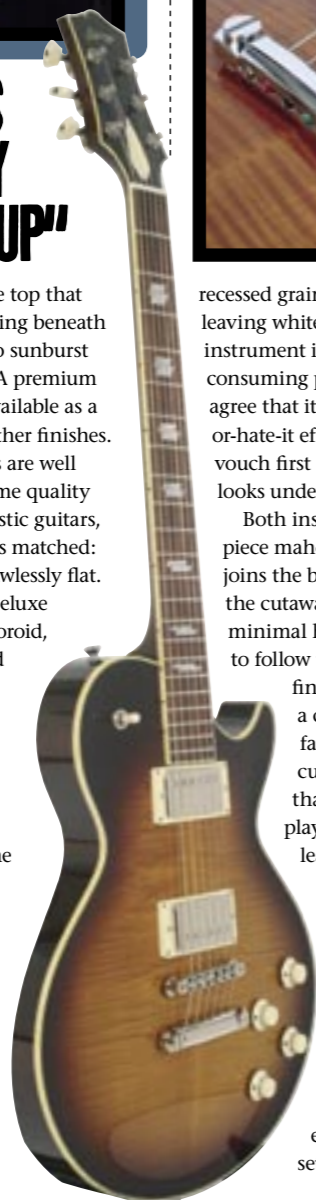


"COMPLEX OVERTONES AND THE OPEN QUALITY OF A VINTAGE PAF PICKUP"

a carved, flamed maple top that looks absolutely stunning beneath its immaculate tobacco sunburst nitro-cellulose finish. A premium quilted maple top is available as a £175 upgrade, as are other finishes. Collings' nitro finishes are well known for their supreme quality when it comes to acoustic guitars, and here that quality is matched: incredibly thin and flawlessly flat.

The top of the CL Deluxe is bound in grained ivoroid, the same material used for the headstock and fingerboard binding, tuner buttons, truss rod cover, knobs and pickup surrounds, which adds a welcome aesthetic warmth to the guitar, certainly much easier on the eye than stark white plastic.

The unusual finish on the 290's body is achieved by applying white grain filler to the already black-painted wood. Removing the filler from all but the



■ Pearl inlays are classy but understated in the CL Deluxe's Brazilian rosewood fingerboard



■ TonePros hardware is the appropriate upmarket choice



■ Those lovely lines: Collings' precision continues even here

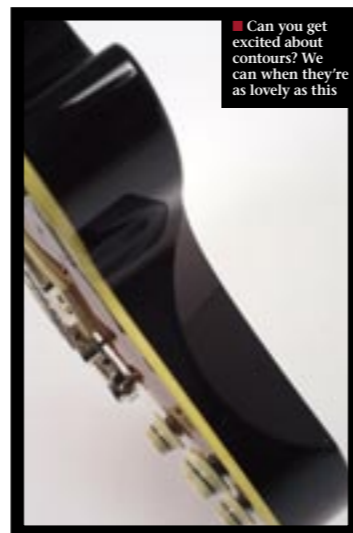
recessed grain of the timber without leaving white streaks all over the instrument is a skilled and time-consuming procedure. You'd have to agree that it creates a unique, love-it-or-hate-it effect – we love it, and can vouch first hand for how great it looks under stage lighting.

Both instruments have a one-piece mahogany set neck, that joins the body at the 18th fret on the cutaway side. Although the minimal heel has been shaped to follow the body curve, upper fingerboard access remains a compromise. This is a fact of life with single-cutaway solids, and one that Gibson Les Paul players have long since learned to live with.

The necks of both guitars have a generously rounded profile that brings to mind the Baker B1 reviewed back in *GB* issue 22. The Baker had just about the nicest neck we have encountered on a new set-neck guitar, so it's

praise indeed to confirm that these Collings necks feel every bit as good.

The CL Deluxe comes with a Brazilian rosewood fingerboard (as did vintage Gibsons and early PRS guitars) that is inlaid with classy looking pearl parallelograms. These fancy inlays are a £130 upgrade – mother-of-pearl dots are fitted as standard. Up-charging for features like this on a three-and-a-half grand guitar suggests that Collings is extremely confident in the quality and



■ Can you get excited about contours? We can when they're as lovely as this



■ Painted black, then applied with white grain filler, then a top gloss coat: smart



■ Both guitars have 12-inch radius boards: the same as a Gibson Les Paul

sheer desirability of its workmanship.

The 290's slightly less exotic East Indian rosewood fingerboard is inlaid with grained ivoroid dots. Needless to say, the standard of fret work on both guitars is exemplary.

For the headstock of its electrics, Collings has chosen the asymmetrical profile used by the company for its SJ acoustic model; we'd say it looks suitably upmarket and, more importantly, visually balanced with the bodies of the guitars. In the case of the CL Deluxe, the headstock is faced with Brazilian rosewood with the Collings logo inlaid in pearl. The 290, meanwhile, sports a snazzy pearloid headstock veneer and matching pickguard. This is another upgrade, costing £175; an ebony headstock overlay and black/white/black laminated pickguard are fitted as standard. The thickness of the headstock is actually tapered, which increases the break angle of the string as it passes over the nut. This is

achieved with an additional piece of CNC programming that a larger manufacturer might well have viewed as an unnecessary added cost.

HARDWARE & PARTS

According to Collings, after trials with all the leading brands, TonePros hardware (nickel on the featured guitars – gold hardware is available at a £120 up-charge) and Sperzel tuners were chosen as the best available to do the job. Once the guitar has been set up, the Tune-o-matic-style bridge and stop-bar tailpiece can be locked securely in place with integral allen screws. The solidity of this system improves tone and sustain by eliminating 'play' between the parts.

Both the CL Deluxe's humbuckers and 290's P-90 style pickups are custom wound for Collings by US boutique pickup guru, Jason Lollar (www.lollarguitars.com). Doug Chandler comments, "All of the usual suspects were also given a thorough



■ A volume and tone per pickup is the simple, obvious choice of controls

FINISHING SCHOOL

THESE HIGH-GLOSS LACQUERED BEAUTIES ARE A SIGHT TO BEHOLD

■ Like Collings' highly prized acoustic guitars, these electrics feature a thin nitro-cellulose lacquer finish.

While polyesters, polyurethanes and acrylics are the expedient finishing choices of many of the world's guitar manufacturers, Bill Collings prefers nitro-cellulose. He feels this comes closest to the 'no-finish' tone that all guitar

makers strive for. Nitro-cellulose is a complete pain to work with, requiring a multi-coat application process that's extremely time consuming, along with lots and lots of sanding and buffing. The result, however – when done as well as this – is a beautifully flat, thin natural finish that is time proven to age gracefully. Truly stunning stuff.



"YOU'D HAVE TO AGREE IT CREATES A LOVE-IT-OR-HATE-IT EFFECT"

test, and even after choosing Lollar, dozens of units were wound in order to fine tune the tone that Bill wanted."

Electronics comprise the standard Gibson configuration: individual tone and volume pots for each pickup, plus a three-way selector switch mounted on the guitar's upper shoulder. Generations of guitarists have grown up with this setup, so it's a safe choice.

SOUNDS

The CL Deluxe and 290 arrived expertly set up so that they play perfectly, straight out of their cases. There are no buzzes, rattles or intonation issues here. Strummed acoustically, both guitars sound alive and resonant with a natural sustain that rings on and on. Hold the lightweight 290 pressed against your body and you can feel the string vibration through the entire guitar.

The Lollar humbuckers fitted to the CL Deluxe capture the complex overtones and open quality of a vintage PAF pickup with a clear, bell-like top end and a tightly focused bass. With an excellent string-to-string

DETAILS

AMAZING GUITARS IN TERMS OF BUILD QUALITY, TONE AND FEEL. LOTS OF MONEY, NATURALLY



■ Go on then, just find fault here. Inlays, binding and frets are simply superb



■ Jason Lollar supplies the pickups for these guitars. P-90-style single-coils grace the 290



■ The extremely classy peghead has a beautiful shape and tapered thickness



GBCONCLUSION

COLLINGS' ELECTRIC DEBUT TURNS INTO A COMMAND PERFORMANCE

■ **These are two simply stunning instruments, impossible to fault in terms of design, build, playability and tone. But now we come to the crunch: if you had all that cash burning a hole in your pocket, would you buy the Collings City Limits or a single-cut custom shop guitar with the venerable G-name on its headstock?**

These Colling guitars sound magnificent and are built to a standard that few other manufacturers are capable of matching, but despite this, we suspect that many punters would still choose the more established brand. So it's likely that Collings electrics will become the choice of the cognoscenti, discerning players who rate tone and performance over brand-name magic. Of course, should a Collings electric end up in the hands of a big name star – which we're absolutely sure it will – then all that could change... **GB**

GBOPINION

COLLINGS 290

GOLD STARS

- ★ Great feel
- ★ Great tone
- ★ Relatively affordable

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Anyone in search of gutsy roots rock, country, punk or blues tones

GBOPINION

COLLINGS CITY LIMITS DELUXE

GOLD STARS

- ★ Fabulous build quality
- ★ Tone to die for
- ★ Great playability

BLACK MARKS

- Expensive, but you do get what you pay for

IDEAL FOR...

Serious rock, blues or jazz players who really appreciate the finer things in life

balance, complex chords sound detailed and articulate, while single-string passages have a smooth, fluid quality that compliments the guitar's inherent sustain.

The CL Deluxe's neck pickup naturally sounds a tad darker than the bridge unit, but there's little evidence of the muddy bottom end that frequently afflicts lesser humbuckers in this style of guitar. By the same token, the bridge pickup, though more aggressive, remains warm and full-bodied with absolutely no trace of harshness. Using the individual volume controls to balance one pickup against the others yields a myriad of subtle tones. All of the classic rock sounds are present and correct, with none of the heavy-handed,

overbearing mid-range of some modern Les Pauls.

P-90 style pickups have enjoyed a renaissance in the last decade, with players re-discovering their trademark 'single-coil on steroids' growl. The Lollar P-90s fitted to the 290 don't disappoint. The tone is certainly less 'polite' than that of the CL Deluxe, but still very versatile. This guitar could handle virtually anything you throw at it, from indie, to blues, to rockabilly, to punk. I compared the 290 with a vintage Gibson solidbody equipped with similar pickups and it has to be said that the Collings comes extremely close to capturing that guitar's tough but sweet vibe. It's a very different tone and response compared with humbuckers, and this is a perfect example of the breed.

GBRATINGS

COLLINGS CITY LIMITS DELUXE

BODY & NECK	★★★★
HARDWARE & PARTS	★★★★
PLAYABILITY	★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★☆☆
GBVERDICT	★★★★

GBRATINGS

COLLINGS 290

BODY & NECK	★★★★
HARDWARE & PARTS	★★★★
PLAYABILITY	★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★☆☆
GBVERDICT	★★★★