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FULL CIRCLE

CAN THE IMPRESSIVE RUN OF NEW ELECTRIC MODELS FROM COLLINGS CONTINUE? **PAUL ALCANTARA** TAKES THE 360 FOR A SPIN...

INFO



COLLINGS 360
PRICE: £3,000 as reviewed (base price £2,350)
BUILT IN: USA
SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.9 inches)
NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.69 inches)
STRING SPACING AT NUT: 36mm (1.4 inches)
BODY: Honduras mahogany with carved quilt maple top (optional)
NECK: Honduras mahogany, glued-in
FINGERBOARD: East Indian rosewood, 305mm radius (12 inches)
FRETS: 22 medium
PICKUPS: 2 x custom Jason Lollar mini-humbuckers
CONTROLS: 2 x volume, 2 x tone, 3-way selector
BRIDGE: TonePros Tune-O-Matic-style bridge & stop tailpiece, nickel
STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 52mm (2 inches)
MACHINEHEADS: Sperzel enclosed, nickel with vintage-style buttons
FINISH: High-gloss nitrocellulose lacquer; Iced tea sunburst (shown), see Collings website for full list of options
WEIGHT: 3.3kg (7.25lb)
CASE: Deluxe Ameritage hardshell case
LEFT-HANDERS: No
OPTIONS: Quilt maple cap (shown, £650), maple cap (£475), maple neck with rosewood fingerboard (£180); see Collings website for full list of options

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Today, there are players out there who view Collings Guitars of Austin, Texas primarily as a manufacturer of premium quality electric guitars – no small feat for a company that spent its first 32 years building acoustic instruments!

With its acoustic line, Collings built on the designs from Martin and Gibson's golden pre-war era and, in a sense, the company has successfully repeated this approach with its electric guitars. The City Limits, 290 and I-35 models – all stunning and highly desirable guitars – each owe a debt to classic Gibson guitars from the 1950s.

With its quirky offset body outline and mini-humbuckers, the 360 therefore represents something of a break with tradition for Collings. However, this latest addition to the range is still firmly rooted in the old-fashioned values Collings holds dear: high-quality tonewoods, traditional construction methods and meticulous attention to detail.

BODY & NECK

Lifting the Collings 360 from its case, one is immediately struck by the quality of the timbers used: lightweight Honduras mahogany for the body and neck and highly figured quilted maple for the fully carved, bookmatched top. The latter is a £650 upgrade – the standard model has an all-mahogany body, though still with the same stylish top carve.

The quilted maple used to cap the one-piece mahogany body on our review sample is very fine indeed, displaying a '3D' quality, its grain pattern subtly shifting as the guitar is held at different angles. The effect is

further enhanced by a gorgeous 'iced tea sunburst' – just one of over a dozen finish options – and both body and neck are finished in high-gloss nitrocellulose lacquer.

Like the above-mentioned City Limits and 290 models, the 360 has an upper shoulder that dips, Telecaster like, as it approaches the side of the neck. The heel has been shaped to follow the curve of the body and this, in combination with a deeper than usual cutaway, goes some way to improving upper fingerboard access (always a compromise on a single-cutaway guitar).

"When Bill Collings started thinking about the 360, he took a 290, cut it in half, then glued it back together with the treble side shifted back half an inch or so. The idea was to take the classic singlecut look and provide better access to the high frets by moving the cutaway in," says Collings's Steve McCreary. Details include a generous ribcage contour, individually recessed control knobs and cream plastic pickup surrounds that are also inset into the top.

"Bill Collings loves tight tolerances and well-fitted components, so we had Jason Lollar redesign the standard P-90 cover to fit the mini-humbuckers," McCreary explains. "The inset pickup surround provides a clean, streamlined approach that accommodates the 360's low neck set angle. This approach also allows us to install P-90s if preferred. The same pickup cavity works for both pickup types."

Like the body, the one-piece mahogany neck is unbound. It is topped by a chunky East Indian rosewood fingerboard that is inlaid with a series of small ivoroid dots. All

22 medium frets are immaculately installed, profiled and polished.

Though at a glance the 360's unbound headstock appears similar to that fitted to the company's other electric guitars, closer inspection reveals that it has been subtly offset to match the body shape – very cool.

HARDWARE & PARTS

Faced with ebony and inlaid with the Collings logo in pearl, the headstock is fitted with a set of nickel-plated Sperzel tuners, complete with vintage-style cream plastic buttons.

The bridge hardware consists of both a nickel-plated TonePros Tune-O-Matic-style bridge and a separate stud tailpiece. Once the guitar has been set up, both of these items can be locked securely in place with an Allen key, promoting both tone and sustain while eliminating annoying buzzes and rattles.

Fitting a pair of mini-humbuckers would appear to be something of a gamble on the part of Collings. We'll state upfront that we love these pickups, but their association with the Les Paul Deluxe and, by extension, 1970s Gibsons in general has unfortunately led many players to regard them with suspicion.

"The mini-humbucker allows us to step into a tonal realm that our other models do not," says Steve McCreary. "They provide a response that's a little closer to Fender while still allowing a broad range of versatility."

Like all pickups fitted to Collings electrics, these mini-humbuckers come courtesy of US manufacturer Jason Lollar (www.lollarguitars.com). His standard unit is fitted at the bridge, with a custom-wound version in



DETAILS

AN EXPERTLY MADE GUITAR WITH A WIDE RANGE OF TONES



■ The Tone Pros Tune-O-Matic bridge and stop tailpiece can be locked in place with an Allen key



■ Like the pickup rings, the control knobs are individually recessed into the 360's carved top



■ The unbound headstock is shaped with a subtle offset, mirroring the 360's sleek body shape



GBVERDICT

COLLINGS 360 GOLD STARS

- ★ Superb build quality and materials
- ★ Excellent setup
- ★ Stellar sounds

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

With its mix of sweetness and snarl, it can handle almost any style

GBRATING



the guitar's neck position.

The 360 has what Collings describes as '50s-style wiring. "We attach the tone circuit to the wiper, or output, of the volume pot instead of the input side, where the pickup comes in," Collings explains. "This makes the tone circuit less sensitive – it helps maintain clarity by not bleeding off the highs as the volume decreases."

SOUNDS

Weighing in at 3.3kg (or 7.25lb), the Collings 360 is noticeably lighter than the average Gibson Les Paul. Balance, whether played on a strap or seated, is excellent and like all other Collings guitars that we have reviewed, the guitar plays great straight out of the case. Its one-piece mahogany neck has the rounded profile associated with Gibson's coveted 1959 Les Paul – generously proportioned but eminently playable.

The combination of top-grade materials, no compromise build quality and tried and tested design features (the neck tenon extends deep into the neck pickup cavity just as

on a 1950s Les Paul) results in an instrument that resonates freely.

Plugged into an early 1960s Fender Super Amp, those mini-humbuckers deliver a sound that's brighter than a full-size humbucker, yet a tad more sophisticated than a P-90. At moderate volume levels, the pickups speak with a voice that's sweet and bell-like, unsullied by the muddy bottom end that occasionally afflicts their full-sized counterparts.

Drive the amp a little harder and the sound breaks up nicely, with a snarly top end that's reminiscent of the singing Tele tones produced by country/blues master, Roy Buchanan. Judicious use of the tone and volume controls delivers a broad palette of classic sounds and it soon becomes apparent just what a versatile instrument the 360 is. While it can sound polished and classy, it's the grittier tones that are perhaps most enjoyable – there's almost an illicit thrill in finding that such a refined and luxurious instrument is so willing to explore more complex, steamy and raw tonal territory.

GBCONCLUSION

SURROUND SOUNDS

■ With the 360, Collings has added something genuinely different to its range. Rather than offer the same basic tone package dressed up in new clothes, the company has – successfully in our opinion – come up with a guitar that combines the girth of a Les Paul with the clarity and bite of a Telecaster.

That this has been achieved without gimmicks – no extra pickups, push-pull pots or ersatz single-coil tones – reflects an intuitive understanding of the electric guitar that goes well beyond a quick change of hardware or electronics. The company's build quality is as legendary as its consistency. To quote Steve McCreary, "Collings spends much more time trying to remove the 'luck' aspect from the process". Built using top-notch materials and expensive US labour, Collings guitars don't come cheap, but we reckon that they are worth every penny of the asking price. **GB**