

GUITAR BUYER
BEST BUY!SO CO
SO GOOD

A JAZZ GUITAR WITH ATTITUDE OR THE ULTIMATE IN ROCK 'N' ROLL SOPHISTICATION? PAUL ALCANTARA ENJOYS SOME SOUTHERN COMFORT

GBINFO

COLLINGS SOCO
DELUXEPRICE: £4,799
(as reviewed)

BUILT IN: USA

SCALE LENGTH: 632mm
(24.9 inches)NUT WIDTH: 43mm
(1.69 inches)STRING SPACING AT NUT:
36.5mm (1.4 inches)BODY: Semi-hollow
mahogany with carved
flame maple top & alder
centre block

NECK: Mahogany, set

FINGERBOARD: Brazilian or
Madagascar rosewood,
305mm radius (12 inches)

FRETS: 22 wide/medium

PICKUPS: 2 x Lollar 'Low
Wind' Imperial PAF-style
humbuckersCONTROLS: 2 x volume,
2 x tone, 3-way selectorBRIDGE: TonePros
Tune-o-matic-style bridge
& stop tailpiece, nickelSTRING SPACING AT
BRIDGE: 52mm (2 inches)MACHINEHEADS: Sperzel
Vintage tuners with cream
plastic buttons

WEIGHT: 2.7kg (6lbs)

FINISHES: Tobacco
sunburst (shown), amber
sunburst, iced tea
sunburst, blonde, crimson,
jet black; high-gloss
lacquer (custom sunbursts
or colours available)CASE: TKL deluxe hard
shell case includedLEFT-HANDERS: Not yet,
available soonOPTIONS: Base price
£4,349; shown here –
parallelogram fingerboard
inlays £130 (pearl dots as
standard), deluxe flared
headstock £225,
black/white top purfling
£95; not shown – gold
hardware £120, premium
quilt maple top £175CONTACT:
Guitar XS
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WEB: www.guitarxs.com

Having garnered an excellent reputation as a builder of flattop acoustics, Collings' decision to cross the divide and launch a range of electric guitars several years ago was seen as a bold step. However, by applying the same high standards and meticulous approach, Collings has soundly proved the doubters wrong with a range of truly excellent electrics – the City Limits, 290 and I-35 have all received our strongest recommendation.

The SoCo Deluxe – named after South Congress Avenue in Collings' native Austin, Texas – is the latest addition to the range. While it shares some design elements with the semi-solid I-35, the SoCo's stylish single-cutaway outline conjures images of early rock 'n' roll and the jazz boxes of the swing era. Our expectations are high and, at this sort of price, the SoCo needs to deliver. Let's find out how it performs.

BODY & NECK

At a glance, the Collings SoCo Deluxe appears to be a conventional thinline semi-solid, an impression reinforced by the grained ivoroid binding around the top and back of its body. In this style of guitar, the top, back and sides are traditionally formed from laminated wood (usually maple) and then glued together, as was the case with the daddy of all semi-solid guitars, the Gibson ES-335.

In fact, the SoCo is constructed

from solid woods. The back section is carved out from a 1.25-inch-thick piece of mahogany, which is routed so as to leave a wall around its perimeter just under a third of an inch thick. The fully-carved, solid figured maple top, complete with elegantly shaped f-holes, looks absolutely gorgeous beneath an immaculately executed vintage-style tobacco sunburst finish. Unlike Collings' acoustic guitars, which have a polyurethane finish on the neck, the company's electrics are finished all over in nitrocellulose.

Like a Gibson ES-335, the SoCo has a separate centre section of solid wood that is glued to the back of the body. This is a block of alder that varies in thickness so that it matches the internal radius of the top and back. A series of longitudinal slots cut into the centre block are intended to open things up and introduce a little more 'air' into the structure, the accompanying reduction in weight being viewed as a side benefit.

We asked Collings' General Manager Steve McCreary to explain the thinking behind this element of the design. "We wanted to start with the basic semi-hollow sound," he says. "It's a versatile platform that is appropriate in a variety of playing styles from rock to blues to jazz. The carved solid maple top is much livelier than a laminated top and we had to tone that down some with the [centre] block, but not so much that the guitar sounded like a hollowbody. With the materials that we use, the guitar can become like a small car with a big

engine and the centre block design helps us to keep that under control."

We also wanted to know whether the decision to go with a single-cutaway body outline, as opposed to the double-cutaway I-35, was purely cosmetic. "It was basically a style issue," Steve confirms. "We thought it would look cool and give us something a little different. However, any time you make a change to a guitar's shape or weight, there will inevitably be some small tonal variations. In terms of sound, the difference between the SoCo Deluxe and I-35 are subtle. The neck on the SoCo is set deeper into the body so it is a little more rigid and the extra mass of the optional larger headstock [as featured on the review guitar] may affect the sound in the same way that a heavier set of tuners does."

The SoCo's upper shoulder follows a Telecaster-like curve while the deep cutaway provides ample access to all 22 frets. Neck and body meet at the 17th fret (on the treble side) with a sloping 'heel' that is formed by allowing the mahogany back section to overlap the neck. The end result, which appears neat and attractive, is an example of the fastidious attention to detail that we have come to expect from Collings.

Those familiar with vintage Gibsons will find the SoCo's C-shaped one-piece mahogany neck immediately familiar. It really is the perfect neck profile for this style of



COLLINGS ON COLLINGS

BILL COLLINGS GIVES US HIS TAKE ON THE SOCO DELUXE

■ "All the things that we've put together for the SoCo have been done for tonal reasons. We've tried to learn from the best of the older instruments and then add what we've experienced over the last 35 years of guitar building.



does not guarantee a great guitar. However, if we carve the maple cap that best suits its mahogany body, select and properly slot an alder centre block, select and match the right neck weight and fingerboard mass for each individual

instrument, then we can get what we want out of the guitar. We're still aiming for that classic semi-hollow sound, but with more dynamics. Basically, we're trying to build a more functional and better-looking mousetrap!"

"Semi-hollow plywood guitars have defined the voice of lots of players and we love those guitars, but we wanted to come at the design from a different angle by using very acoustically 'live' solid woods. We learned early on that good wood alone



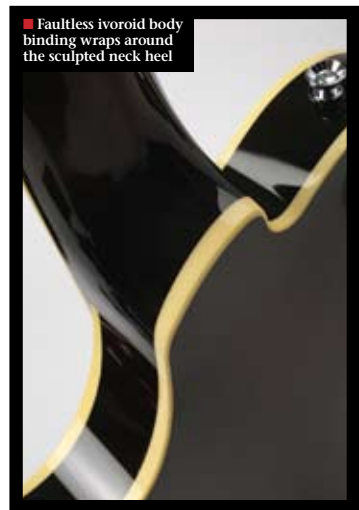
■ The SoCo Deluxe is fitted with classy nickel-plated TonePros bridge hardware

playing area, this approach will make refretting easier should that ever become necessary.

The SoCo comes as standard with an asymmetrical headstock similar to that found on the I-35. Here, however, it is seen with what Collings refers to as its 'Deluxe Flared Headstock' (a £225 upgrade), the same headstock in fact that is fitted to the City Limits Jazz model. Faced with ebony (depending on finish colour, some guitars get a Brazilian rosewood facing) and multiple bound in white/black/white ivoroid, it is inlaid with the Collings logo in pearl and fitted with a set of Sperzel Vintage tuners complete with cream plastic buttons. "We've used the larger headstock for 25 years on our 17-inch archtops," comments Steve McCreary. "It looks cool with the SoCo body and lends the guitar a kind of a whimsical appearance."



■ Faultless ivoroid body binding wraps around the sculpted neck heel



"SINGLE NOTES BLOOM WITH A LONG, SMOOTH DECAY"

guitar, slender in the lower positions then progressively filling out as it moves towards the body. It is topped by a lovely Brazilian rosewood fingerboard that is bound in ivoroid and inlaid with a series of pearl dual parallelograms, an upgrade that adds £130 to the basic price (pearl dots are fitted as standard). Whether by accident or intent, Collings has eschewed brightly coloured abalone in favour of a subtly tinted pearl that is more in keeping with the guitar's luxurious yet understated image.

All 22 wide/medium frets are expertly crowned and polished. Collings installs the frets so that they overlap the binding without the benefit of Gibson style 'nibs' (a series of small protrusions that, in theory at least, create a smooth transition between the fingerboard binding and the fret end). Besides offering a wider

HARDWARE & PARTS

Like Collings' I-35 and City Limits, the Soco Deluxe sports a nickel-plated TonePros Tune-o-matic-style bridge and stop tailpiece. Once the guitar has been set up, these are locked firmly in place with an Allen key, thus eliminating any 'play' between the various components involved.

A pair of PAF-style Lollar 'Low Wind' Imperial humbuckers with nickel-plated covers are mounted in ivoroid plastic surrounds. As with other Collings electrics, Jason Lollar has worked closely with the company to find the right pickups to suit this guitar. The bridge unit is wound to Collings' custom specs and, in terms of output, it sits somewhere between a standard Imperial and the more mellow stock 'Low Wind' Imperial pickup used at the neck.

Electronics comprise the familiar Gibson arrangement, with individual tone and volume controls for each pickup, plus a three-way selector



DETAILS

AN OUTSTANDING GUITAR BUILT TO THE VERY HIGHEST STANDARDS



■ The Jason Lollar 'Low Wind' Imperial humbuckers are mounted in ivoroid surrounds



■ The high-quality Sperzal Vintage tuners are completed by cream plastic buttons



■ The electronics comprise individual tone and volume controls for each pickup



GBVERDICT

COLLINGS SOCO DELUXE

GOLD STARS

- ★ Build quality to match the best vintage electrics
- ★ Superb looks and playability
- ★ Supreme tone

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

A versatile instrument that will take most styles of pop, rock, jazz or blues in its stride

GBVERDICT



switch that is positioned on the guitar's upper shoulder. Details include an ivoroid truss rod cover and control knobs, matching the very tasteful ivoroid pickup surrounds and body binding.

SOUNDS

With a body that is 15-inches wide (a full inch less than a Gibson ES-335) and 1.65-inches deep, the SoCo Deluxe feels compact and easy to handle. It's light too, weighing in at around 2.7kg (6lb), and balances perfectly whether played seated or on the strap.

Unplugged, the guitar sounds lively and bright though not particularly

loud. Despite its light weight, the natural sustain is equivalent if not superior to that of many set-neck solidbodies. Chords ring out evenly across the entire fingerboard while single notes bloom with a long, smooth decay.

Despite having the appearance of a jazz guitar, in terms of sound, the SoCo occupies classic 335 territory. We put the guitar through its paces using a variety of vintage and new valve amps and were impressed by the degree to which it nails the solid-meets-hollowbody balance encountered in the finest examples of Gibson's thinlines. The SoCo delivers the robust mid-range, volume and sustain of a solid-bodied instrument while retaining much of the warmth and woody character of a hollowbody.

The Lollar pickups acquit themselves admirably, complementing rather than fighting the guitar's inherent tonal qualities, but it's the intelligence and execution of the underlying design that shine through here. Resistance to feedback matches that of other thinline semis – fine for most applications but probably not

GBCONCLUSION

YET ANOTHER COLLINGS CLASSIC

■ **The SoCo Deluxe delivers the versatile performance and resistance to feedback of a semi-solid thinline in the guise of an ultra-cool single-cutaway jazz guitar.**

Arguably more distinctive than the I-35 (which, visually at least, sticks close to the ES-335 blueprint) the SoCo Deluxe successfully combines the virtues of a semi-solid with the timeless elegance of a vintage archtop. Like all of the Collings instruments that we have looked at, it is built to the very highest standards and from absolutely top quality materials. Every aspect of the design, from the internal structure and electronics to the neck dimensions and overall balance, combines to create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Though undeniably expensive, the SoCo is not, in our opinion, overpriced. This level of quality simply doesn't come cheap. **GB**

