

Review

An Artist-ic take on a classic

A classic axe gets a modern makeover and a nice price tag in the bargain; SUJESH PAVITHRAN, gear addict supreme, ponders, 'to buy, or to wait?'

IT'S NOT just Fender and Gibson electric guitars of vintage years that command premium prices. Manufacturers like Ibanez, Yamaha and, yes, Tokai, turned out some nifty axes in the 1970s – copies, clones, call them what you will – that are much sought after by collectors and discerning players today.

Thankfully, geriatric Japanese electrics are more affordable. For example, an Ibanez Artist solid-body electric from the mid-to-late 1970s (around the time this classic came out) will probably go for anything between RM3,000 and RM4,000, depending on condition. The 2004 reissue model, the sumptuous Japan-made AR3000VV from Ibanez's current Prestige range, costs more.

Those who can't afford either will be glad to know of a cheaper alternative – the AR300HS. It sports many of the attributes of the Artist tradition, it's made in South Korea, and best of all, it'll set you back about two grand, the least expensive set-neck Artist model Ibanez has turned out.

Touch of class

The 24 3/4-inch scale, set-neck construction and double cutaway design are a given ... with this, you get a maple/mahogany body capped with a gorgeous two-piece flame-maple top and finished in Honey Sunburst (the only colour available now and looking more like cherry burst). The figuring on the review unit is pure eye candy. Ibanez says



COMFY CONFIG: A sizeable percentage of axeman will find the controls on the Ibanez AR300HS comfy and familiar.

the 55mm body thickness takes this model closer to home, unlike slimmer reissue models of yore.

The 22-fret rosewood fingerboard comes with cool inlays, starting from the first fret and alternating right down the length. Another classy inlay and the name adorn the distinctively shaped headstock. Body, neck and headstock are all bound, and pearlloid tuners add a further touch of class to this electric.

For those interested, fretboard width at the nut is 43mm, flaring to 57mm at the last fret. Under the first fret, the neck is 20mm thick, increasing to 22mm beneath the 12th fret; around the 15th fret, the neck starts curving away to the heel.

The bridge is the Full Tune II model with a Quik Change III tail-

piece, both of which are chromed ... updated traditional designs, as you'll see. Two Super 58 (S58)

Ibanez alnico humbuckers reside at the familiar positions, with the pickup selector switch on the upper horn. You get the usual four control knobs – a volume and tone for each of the pickups.

A super player

Here are three factors to consider when choosing your instrument – playability (neck comfort, balance, feel); quality (build, finish); and then, tone. You can always rip out an electric guitar or bass' innards and replace them with better quali-

Model: Ibanez AR300HS Artist electric guitar
Price: RM2,200
Distributed by: BENTLEY MUSIC SDN BHD (☎ 03-2144 3333)

ty electronics. You can upgrade hardware that affects tone and tuning stability, and you can get better strings. But if it ain't nice to play in the first place and/or looks like a dog, no amount of discounting will tempt you.

The AR300 scores top marks in the playability department – at least, in the context of my limited skills. I'll go out on a limb and say this is about the most comfortable solid-body electric guitar I've played, from the way it balances, to the neck feel and action. Well, I could be goaded into finding fault with the way the top of the saddles press into the palm of my right hand when I rest it there ... then again this is nothing a good filing won't solve.

As for finish/quality, let me put it this way – it's an Ibanez and made in South Korea, pretty much a winning combination these days. I only wish, though, they'd offer the AR300 in vintage burst, black and burgundy (one salivates at the thought!).

Tonally, it's a matter of perspective. Ibanez says the S58 pickups sound "classic, warm and versatile" and "handles both jazz and rock without feed-

back." Won't argue with the second, but I have to differ on the first – I have heard warmer and meatier sounding humbuckers on similarly styled axes.

There's nothing wrong with the tones available from the neck and bridge units, each or together – but I expected a bit more character, something fatter and more coloured. The S58s are a bit too neutral, for me at least. They're hot enough to cut through on the clean or distorted modes of an amp, and no doubt, whether it's jazz licks or rock riffs, most guitarists will more than manage. But thoughts of trading the S58s for a set of, say Seymour Duncans or DiMarzios, might surface in their minds.

Appealing

A good and competent axe, by most counts, perhaps held back only by its civilized tones – might appeal to some, and not to others, but the point is, you don't need to keep the onboard electronics.

If you're looking for something collectable and extremely playable, with more than decent resale value, the Ibanez AR300 warrants serious consideration.

- ✓ Design; playability; looks; price.
- ✗ Tones not all I expected but this can be remedied.



CHEAPER CLASSIC: The Ibanez AR300HS will certainly appeal to those looking for a collectable and affordable classic reissue guitar.

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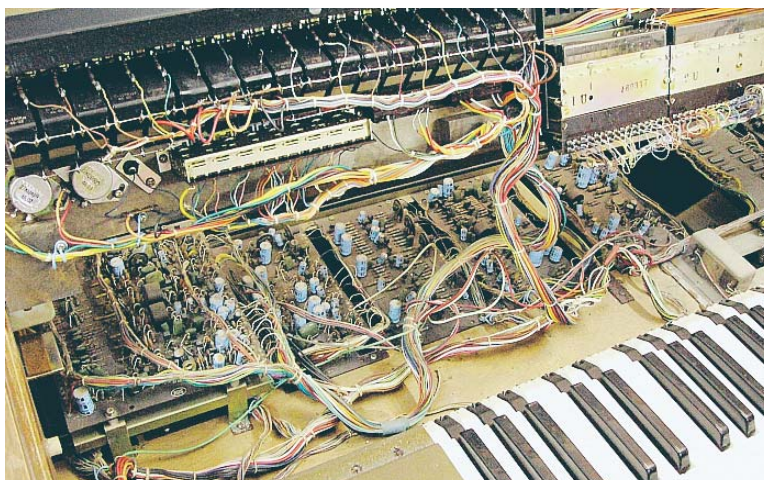
virtually nil. The big Japanese manufacturers don't support products going back much further than 1990s and many employees now working for these companies weren't even born when the original synthesizers were produced, like the Yamaha CS-80 or Roland Jupiter 8. Also, as you rightly say, many of these original manufacturers don't even exist anymore, although Moog has a global presence again, but they do not support their vintage products at all.

Sourcing of parts is a tedious and expensive process and is always going to be a problem. It can account for nearly 15%-20% of the time spent on a very rare keyboard restoration.

KSR and RL Music have built up an extensive contacts list of people who source parts for us, plus our own resource of held spares we have invested in over the years. Sometimes we even get the big manufacturers to reproduce hard to find parts for us. Regrettably, on some occasions, we have to buy vintage synths to break them up for spares. This investment – ensuring other great instruments are still working – is worthwhile in our opinion but this has to be reflected in the final price of a professionally restored instrument.

Do you make parts yourself? Could you provide some exam-

Saving a synth



LONG MAY YOU RUN: Old analogue organs contain a maze of lengthy wiring. Take this Yamaha, for example.

ples of custom parts that are being made for you today.

KS: Yes, we do make some of our own parts and cabinets when there is no way of getting the original. Manufacturing a new case can sometimes only rectify the cosmetic problems of badly damaged cases to instruments like the ARP Solina. We actually had this problem recently and decided to reproduce a Solina case in English Oak, which was significantly superior to the original Chipboard wood effect covered machines, and looks

absolutely gorgeous. To some this may be considered non-original but the alternative was to break up the Solina for spares as she was beyond economical repair but we decided to do it anyway. The Solina was sold within six hours of being ready for sale!

Is there anything that would be considered irreparable?

KS: There is no such thing as a keyboard that cannot be repaired or restored. However there is always the cost of the repair verses



JUST ABOUT THE BEST: The Yamaha CS-80 is regarded as one of the best analogue polyphonic synthesizers ever made.

the market value of the synth to be taken into account. If it does come to the point that it is simply not worth repairing, then the keyboard is reluctantly broken up for spares so that other keyboards can live on.

What sort of shelf life do these instruments have?

RL: After professional restoration, a vintage synth could outlast its owner in many cases, as long as it is taken care of. (For a buying guide and maintenance tips, see *AudioFile* next week.)

Is there anything you've learned about design philosophies over your years of repair work, like why manufacturers did what they did, or even what were successes and what were failures?

KS: We have seen many similarities in synth designs. Some are due to the use of a particular technology of that time, linked with cost effective manufacturing processes, and some have just been copies of other manufacturers' designs. The principle philosophy tends to have been to reduce cost by integrating new and more sophisticated technology as and when it became available.

The emergence of cheaper polysynths in the late 1970s is proof of this although some music technologies have changed very little in 30-plus years – the analogue modular synthesiser, for instance. Many, if not all, of the modern day modular systems can take their design ethos right back to the first Moog modulars of the late 1960s.

The successes are well known and what we now classify as vintage or classics. The failures are always less well known but on many occasions, the smaller US manufacturers could never recover from these and subsequently they went out of business. Books like Mark Vail's *Vintage Synthesizers* or Frank Trocco's *Analog Days* talk about the highs and lows, and are recommended reading.