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Elrick

Expat New Jazz Standard 4- & 5-String

BY JONATHAN HERRERA

CHICAGO LUTHIER ROB ELRICK HAS EARNED A reputation as an innovative, technically skilled luthier with a fastidious attention to detail. His prized U.S.-made instruments exemplify the best of boutique bass building: beautiful wood, high-end electronics, and superb hardware, carefully chosen and painstakingly transformed into sophisticated musical instruments. All of this work comes at a cost, with prices for his Master Series basses reaching the low five figures. Eager to bring his concepts to a mass audience, Elrick once collaborated with big-time Korean manufacturer Cort on a line of low-cost basses, but after some initial success, the deal soured when Elrick felt that he could no longer ensure the quality of products associated with the Elrick Bass Guitars brand.

Still seeking to bring his unique designs to more players, Elrick turned to the Czech Republic as a source for a new mid-priced line. Given the high demand for painted versions of his Jazz Bass-inspired New Jazz Standard series (a costly option on the U.S. version), he chose that model for overseas production. A further incentive to work with the Czechs was their high tolerance for his micro-management. Says Elrick, “I select and supply all the swamp ash bodies and maple for fretboards. I also supply

all hardware and electronics, including preamps that are pre-wired and tested prior to export for production.” The hands-on approach doesn’t end there: “Every Expat Series bass is fully disassembled and inspected before shipping to a dealer or customer. All frets are given a level and re-crown ... in many cases, even screws are removed and replaced depending on condition or quality.” In the end, Elrick wants to deliver a bass that is in essence a U.S.-quality bass whose woodworking has been contracted to partner craftsmen. The materials and components are the same as found on his high-end models.

MAKEOVER

The NJS basses were designed to embody the definitive qualities of the familiar J-style bass while offering a number of updates and modifications. I have no beef with the builders who make it their métier to improve on the formula, often by endeavoring to capture its vintage Fender origin, but Elrick’s more radical approach is refreshing and progressive. Looks and personality-wise, the resulting instrument has as much in common with a vintage Jazz as the average person does with a grandparent: There’s a resemblance, but you have to kind of squint to see it. Regardless, the

NJS does excel in a few areas where more traditionally styled J-basses sometimes suffer, especially concerning weight, balance, and high-fret access (which in this case means all the way up to the 24th fret). I did find the lower horn to be perhaps a smidge too insubstantial to anchor firmly on my right leg when I was playing seated, but hey, that’s just my legs. The basses’ high-register access is indeed near perfect for a bolt-on—Elrick’s ergonomic neck joint is beveled and cut away in all the right places. The Expats’ neck is set deep into the body; some slappers might long for more room to dig in for pops, while other will delight in the control such a tight space can help convey.

Many (but certainly not all) mass-produced imported basses betray their origin in any number of ways, some more subtle than others. It has nothing to do with intrinsic national competence; rather, it’s because of the U.S. companies’ cost-saving priorities, revealed in lower-quality materials, generic electronics, and a skilled but flawed fit-and-finish. The Elrick Expat basses I tested exhibited none of these weaknesses, and felt every bit boutique. Their fretwork was flawless, the finishes were lustrous and smooth, and the hardware felt and looked slick and high-end. The 5-string’s creamy transparent-white finish revealed a one-piece ash body—a relative rarity, mid-priced bass or not.

CZECH IT

I played the Expat basses through a variety of rigs, including a Warwick LWA 1000, an Ampeg SVT, and in the studio with a Tube Tech MEC 1A preamp and a Universal Audio LA610 preamp/compressor. The

basses share an essential character, although the maple-fingerboard-equipped, ash-body 5-string was certainly brighter and more aggressive than the rosewood/alder 4.

The most immediately striking quality of each bass was the excellent evenness and balance across the frequency spectrum. Each instrument had a refined and smooth sound, with a burnished and colorful low-mid response and a nice sheen on the top end. The 5-string sizzled more and harbored the more typical assortment of slap sounds, but both basses were equally capable of the full gamut of J-bass-style flavors, including a barky soloed neck pickup sound, a full-bodied blended tone, and a burpy soloed bridge tone that is on the milder edge of the punch spectrum. The instruments’ knob layout was clean and intuitive. An old favorite, the Bartolini NTMB performed as musically as ever, never sounding harsh or coarse, even when dramatically boosted. The B string on the 5’er was solid and supportive, though a little shy in comparison to the other strings. Experimenting with setup and string type yielded good results, though. Each instrument also had impressive string-to-string clarity and definition—qualities that help inspire journeys into the high register for chords and solo parts.

The Elrick Expat basses are an excellent value. They’re just as nice as many high-end boutique basses (including those from Elrick itself), and they’re blessed with an excellent variety of real-world tones. Players seeking a J-style bass that has a polished sound and 24-fret range would be hard pressed to be find a more capable alternative. **BP**

S SPECIFICATIONS

Expat Series New Jazz Standard 4-string & 5-string
Street/direct 4-string, \$2,095; 5-string, \$2,295
Pros Excellent ergonomics; smooth and sophisticated tone
Cons Some slappers might favor more room for pops
Bottom Line The beautifully constructed Expat Series basses are excellent instruments with huge value in comparison to equally well-equipped instruments.

Construction Bolt-on
Body One-piece swamp ash
Fingerboard 4-string, Indian rosewood; 5-string, maple
Frets 24
Scale length 4-string, 34"; 5-string, 35"
Neck width at zero-fret 4-string, 42mm; 5-string, 48"
String spacing 19mm
Pickups Bartolini CBJD
Preamp Bartolini NTMBF w/3-band EQ
Hardware Custom Elrick by Hipshot bridge; Hipshot Ultralite tuners

Made in Czech Republic; final assembly, USA
Contact elrick.com

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