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Elrick Expat e-evolution 4- & 5-string

BY JONATHAN HERRERA

THE LAST TIME WE CHECKED IN WITH RENOWNED Chicago luthier Rob Elrick, it was a January '15 review of his Expat New Jazz Standard basses. I praised the modern-J-style instruments for their superb tone and construction, concluding that even though the Expats are Elrick's entry-level basses, they essentially give up nothing to their much higher-priced U.S.-made counterparts, other than a less comprehensive option list. The supply chain for the Expat instruments is notable, not only for its transcontinental scope, but for the boutique-style attention to detail that characterizes each step of the instruments' construction. Knowing the Czech's centuries-old legacy of fine instrument building, Elrick worked extensively with luthiers there to ensure that his European instruments were every bit as good as his American basses. Says Elrick, "I have partnered with the finest craftsmen in the Czech Republic and personally perform final QC and setup

of each instrument. I select and supply all of the swamp ash used for the bodies, as well as the fretboards."

IMPORTED GOLD

The Expat e-evolution basses are essentially imported duplicates of Elrick's Gold Series e-evolution basses, with the same construction, design, and electronics, but without the figured tops. Our test basses were as plain as could be, which may not please those looking for a blingy boutique bass, but they will appeal to more utilitarian players who simply want a handsome instrument that plays and sounds great. The instruments' construction was perfect; that's a quality I've learned to expect from Elricks. The fretwork was smooth, with no protruding tangs or high spots. The sanding and finish brought the most out of the plain-jane look. Top-notch hardware is all over the instrument, from the Elrick-spec'd Hipshot

bridge to the Hipshot Ultralite tuners and Dunlop Dual Design strap buttons with strap-lock capability. Popping off the monstrous grain-matched control-cavity cover revealed a beautiful electronics assembly, with each component of the venerable Bartolini NTMB+ 3-band preamp installed and soldered with professional detail.

The Elricks' pickups may appear to be a pair of soapbar humbuckers, but in fact the pickups are Bartolini J-coils, just in a soapbar-type cover. The reason is clever: "This choice is intended to offer an instrument with the same J-coil pickup used on U.S.-Series basses," says Elrick, "but with a pickup rout large enough to accommodate a variety of retrofits without necessitating additional woodworking." Elrick can supply instruments preloaded with Bartolini dual-coils or Aero J- or dual-coil pickups in black plastic or matching wood for an additional charge.

Bass body contours vary widely, with some designers favoring aesthetics and others sacrificing visual harmony for a comfortable feel. To me, the Elrick e-evolution has always exemplified a beautiful blend of both. I dug the subtly bulbous body contour, which is

singular in the bass landscape, but also deeply appreciated the basses' superb ergonomics and balance. To further improve playability, the e-evolutions incorporate Elrick's signature heel-less neck joint, which essentially offers the high-fret access of a neck-through, making excursions up high less gymnastic than on clunkier heel designs. The basses' light weight also adds to their overall cozy vibe.

CZECH PLEASE

The Elrick e-evolution basses combine a time-tested formula for tone, and indeed their sound didn't disappoint. Combining a carefully chosen ash body with a maple neck (and, in this case, wenge fingerboard with a Bartolini preamp and pickups), the Elricks exemplify the do-it-all hyper-flexible sound that a working professional might need to cover just about every gig. String-to-string balance and clarity is exceptional, and as ever, the zero fret diminishes the glaring timbre difference between open and fretted strings. Each Expat's essential voice is clear and piano-like, with a wiry edge that never felt grating. The Bartolini 3-band preamp has a gutsy midrange, and it was especially nice to

utilize the 3-way mid-frequency select switch to bump the output around 500Hz for punchy back-pickup funk. Slapped with the pickups blended, the basses had a crystalline sheen and just the right amount of scoop in the mids to cut, but bolster. While the soloed neck pickup has woody bite, the basses' natural tone isn't exactly P-like in its tub-biness (although the EQ can get you close).

The Expat e-evolution basses are exemplars of the midrange of bass buying, offering none of the superficial features a player doesn't need but nearly perfecting the playability, tone, and musicality that they do. Essentially faultless, the only reasonable justification for spending significantly more on the U.S. line of basses is access to Elrick's gorgeous tops and custom features. Otherwise, those looking for a modern-sounding jack-of-all trades instrument would be hard pressed to find a better option. **BP**

S SPECIFICATIONS

ELRICK
Expat e-evolution
Street 4-string \$2,299; 5-string \$2,499 case included
Pros Perfect construction; versatile and elegant tone; thoughtful design
Cons None
Bottom Line No matter the price, these instruments are simply divine. That they're reasonably affordable means the e-evolutions are one of the highest-value semi-boutique basses out there.

SPECS
Construction Bolt-on
Body Ash
Neck Maple
Fingerboard Wenge
Frets 24 medium
Nut Phenolic corian
Bridge Custom Elrick by Hipshot
Tuners Hipshot Ultralite
Scale length 4-string 34"; 5-string 35"
Pickups Bartolini J-style in soapbar cover
Controls Volume, blend, bass, midrange, treble; 3-position mid-frequency switch (250Hz/500Hz/800Hz); active/passive switch
Made in Czech Republic;
Final QC and assembly, U.S.A.
Contact elrick.com