

*Elrick*

## GOLD SERIES ICON BASSES

*By Ed Friedland*

**ROB ELRICK HAS EARNED A** reputation as one of the top custom bass builders in the world, building hand-carved treasures that satisfy a highly discerning clientele. His original designs incorporate years of examining the shortcomings of traditional instrument designs, and coming up with his own balance of radical and familiar. I've had the chance to review several of his instruments, and I've played countless others during my years teaching at the long-gone Bass Emporium in Austin, Texas. I've always felt his boutique creations are not only superbly crafted, but they have a "practical" tone — meaning something I would actually want to use on a gig. Granted, my personal taste runs to the ordinary (read: old Fender), but many of us know what it's like to pick up a beautiful custom bass, only to plug it in and start asking, what type of legs would convert it into the best coffee table? Elricks are suitable for framing, but also provide

the meat and gristle that stodgy traditionalists crave.

There comes the time in every custom builder's career when someone suggests, "Hey, why don't you try building a Fender?" And looking around, it seems most of them have added a FSO (Fender-Shaped Object) to their product line at one time or another. It's always interesting to see how various luthiers approach this. Some build a direct copy, but produced with a standard of materials and workmanship unachievable in the mass-produced world. Others seek to improve upon the inherent inefficiencies in the physical, sonic, or cosmetic realms, and others still — as I feel Elrick has done — incorporate their own build esthetic, design, and knowledge of the materials to produce something that "sounds" like a Fender, but is still distinctly their own creation. The Gold Series Icon Bass is essentially "Elrick's P Bass," but it's also a "P-Bass' El-

rick." Two samples were sent: a "P" with a burl maple top and swamp-ash body (\$3,475 street), and a "P-J" with quilted-maple top and alder body (\$3,775 street). Due to my road schedule, my time with the instruments was brief, but they both received a healthy dose of attention in Johnny's Basement (see video).

I was immediately impressed by the low weight of the P model. I guessed it to be eight pounds, but the Elrick site has this particular bass listed at a gravity-defying 6.85 pounds! To those who claim there is no more lightweight swamp ash available — there is, you simply have to pay for it. The rounded-C neck profile and 1.625" nut width reminded me of home, although the slightly flatter 12"-radius fingerboard was a noticeable difference under the hand. The bird's-eye maple board is glued to a three-piece quartersawn, bolt-on maple neck (graphite-free), with the Elrick industrial-strength headstock



## SPECS

### GOLD SERIES ICON BASSES

**STREET** \$3,825-\$3,925

**CONSTRUCTION** Bolt-on

**BODY** Alder

**TOP** Quilted Maple

**FINISH** Hand Rubbed Oil

**NECK** 3-piece Quarter-Sawn Maple  
Neck

**FINGERBOARD** Morado

**FRETS** 24 + Zero Fret

**NUT** Bone

**BRIDGE** Black Elrick Bridger By  
Hipshot

**TUNERS** Black Hipshot Ultra-light

**SCALE LENGTH** 34"

**PICKUPS** Bartolini Pickups

**WEIGHT** 7.67 lbs

**CONTROLS** Passive Volume, Vol-  
ume, Tone Controls

**STRAP LOCK** Dunlop

**MADE IN U.S.A.**

**CONTACT** [elrick.com](http://elrick.com)



joint at the top end. The neck is lively and responsive, undoubtedly influencing the Icon's quick, snappy attack. The "heelless" neck joint gives you easy access to the 21st fret, and the stability of five asymmetrically positioned countersunk bolts creates an airtight coupling between body and neck. The Bartolini P pickup is in the classic "correct" position for this genus — I measure the center of each coil at 28" from the nut for the bass coil, and 29" for the treble coil. Understanding this as the most basic requirement of the P tone, Elrick has used this configuration before, but in a soapbar case that was easily swapped for other types of pickup. Committing to the split-coil pickup was a conscious decision: It sets up a sonic expectation that Elrick chose to meet head on. The hardware is Ultra-Light Hipshot tuners and a Hipshot-built Elrick bridge that incorporates elements from both their A and B-style models.

Elrick's build quality is impeccable; his work is on par with (or surpasses) the biggest names in the custom luthiery world. But his low-key nature, and his insistence on building each instrument by himself — hand-carved with chisels and draw knives, without pinrouters or CNC machines — has kept his output lower than some of his peers that employ a staff of builders, or use at least 20th-century methods of guitar building. I jest with Mr. Elrick, but in truth, it is his dogged adherence to the most hands-on methods that impart his instruments with a spark, as well as some serious bragging rights.

The test P-J followed the same form factor as the P, but it had a healthy slab of alder for the body, topped with a trance-inducing quilted-maple top. The fingerboard was Santos rosewood, a.k.a. pau ferro,

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and to my ear it imparted the mid-range bark I expected. Whether it was the placebo effect, or well-established characteristics being what they are, the combination of the alder body and rosewood fingerboard gave the bass a warmer presence than the ash/maple bass, with a perceived bump in the lower midrange. Of course, this comparison only lasted as long as the bridge-positioned Bartolini J pickup was out of the equation — dialing in that puppy changed things significantly. The P-J configuration is often touted as “the best of both worlds,” and while there is no reason it couldn’t be, it rarely is. As this modification traces its roots back to the hazy days of the ’70s, when our impaired judgment led us to believe we could *improve* our ’60s P-Basses by cutting a J pickup into the bridge position,

modern iterations of this concept are often damned from the get-go. One of the potential issues is the natural blend between the two pickups. The P is typically louder and produces a broader frequency range, while the J is more focused due to its position, and can sound nasal and weak in comparison. But there are a few PJ sets on the market that have been carefully designed with this in mind (shout out to Aguilar and EMG) — and with Elrick’s input, Bartolini has matched the two nicely. The P–J mix turned the Icon into something more like how it felt, a high-end race horse. Blending in high-frequency content and focus from the bridge J pickup, I heard something distinctly modern and un-Fender-like. It reminded me of Victor Wooten’s signature Fodera tone (also a PJ): thick, bright,

spanky, with lots of punch. Rolling back to a bridge-dominant blend, the much-loved “Jaco” bubble emerges from the Icon. It’s what you want — tight, crisp, and articulate, this pickup will cut your solo through the mix, or get nasty AF with a pick and a fuzz box.

What I noticed playing both Elricks was how my hands have adapted to the relative sluggishness of the Fender Precision Bass, especially strung with flatwounds. Even the finest examples of the species exhibit a degree of built-in compression and delayed attack that, in fact, are part of the P-Bass sound and appeal to players. Elrick knows this stuff, so it was his intention to “bake in” some of that with his design. The degree to which he succeeds is subjective, but for my gnarly old chops, I found it a chal-

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lenge to play cleanly. Seriously, after playing roots Americana for ten years on flatwounds, I've developed a "controlled slop" approach that the Elrick seemed to reject. The bass is fast, accurate, and clean, and to quote the song "None of the Above" by my favorite quirky '80s power-pop band, the Bears, "All these things, I am not." I've experienced this phenomenon before with other high-end custom basses. It's not a fault of the bass; it's an example of how mastering materials and methods can produce superior results. I'd like to believe I'm capable of rising to the challenge of the Elrick's responsiveness, but it wasn't going to happen that afternoon. While I was ill-equipped to take advantage of its readiness, the Elrick Icon responds quickly and evenly, with a seemingly

limitless dynamic range that would make a tapper or hyper-space slapper swoon.

So, did Rob Elrick succeed in his attempt at the P-Bass? It doesn't look like a P-Bass, and it doesn't respond like one, but it does have the texture, the punch, and the thump. It will stand up to a drummer with an authoritative bark, and in the right hands the tone will get asses shaking. With a set of flatwounds on it, you could take it to a blues gig and the blind piano player won't know the difference. But the Icon exploits a dynamic range that the humble Precision could never dream of. If you lean toward modern styles and techniques, the Icon might be the way in to the groovy world of the P-Bass. Maybe you love the tone but find yourself mired in "Fender molasses"

when you play a Precision. The Fender's innate qualities work for some people, but the world of custom bass building exists for those who never felt satisfied by the stock world. The Elrick Icon bridges these two worlds, but it can't escape its privileged upbringing. Lovingly hand-carved by Rob Elrick, the bass never endured the birth trauma of heavy machinery, or the test-tube-like experience of being born of a CNC machine. It was brought into this world through the hands of a highly-skilled craftsman who knows his woods, and has built high-pedigree instruments for decades. No, the Elrick Icons don't capture the compressed, crappy, draggy response of the Precision. But for a high-toned, fancy-assed, custom-built work of art, they sure get close. ●

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