

The Search FOR THE Ultimate 5-STRING

BY SCOTT MALANDRONE

S*ine qua non.* It means “The Finest.” That Latin phrase could be used to describe a bass built of the most lavish woods. It could also define one with extra-rich tone. Or it could describe a 5-string with an astounding *B*. What’s your description of the consummate axe? Have you found your *S.Q.N.* instrument?

Here at **BASS PLAYER**, we’re always on the lookout for the finest instruments available on the market. They don’t have to be the most expensive ones, though; our Shootout of 4-Strings Under \$500 (September ’96) show-

cased 13 of the most affordable basses on the racks. This time, though, we were out to find the *best* 5-string money can buy. (We are gluttons for punishment!) The Ultimate 5-String Shootout was born.

This roundup’s a bit different, though. Since it’s hard to put a dollar value on perfection, we didn’t set a maximum list price for the basses to be submitted. We soon had more than 50 5-strings filling every corner of our offices. But we didn’t want companies to simply send their most expensive models (we’d be considering value, too), so we set up three price categories: **UNDER \$1,500; \$1,500 to \$2,499; and \$2,500 & UP.** Not every bass we received would be

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL HAGGARD



**We put
over 50
basses
through
the
ringer—
here's the
scoop on
the 21
best.**



THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

included, though—only those with the best blend of tone, playability, uniqueness, and craftsmanship. We were after the cream of the crop, which is why you'll see lots of 4's and 5's in the scores. (It's important to note not all of the invited builders—including a couple of major manufacturers—were able to get a bass to us in time.)

Pass the lab coat. Our testing criteria involved first checking each instrument for attention to detail, acoustic tone, playability, and amplified tone. This initial round of prodding revealed some basses with shoddy workmanship, weird noises that couldn't be cured, or *B* strings that lacked character or a feel consistent with the other strings. By the time we were done, we had narrowed the field to about 30 instruments.

Our semi-finalists were then put under the microscope. Dimensions such as body thickness, nut width, fret height, and string gauges were measured with a dial caliper that reads in thousandths of an inch. Neck joints, which should always be as tight as possible for maximum tone transfer into the body and tuning stability, were probed with .005"–.030" feeler gauges. (For the record, our old neck-joint testing device, a business card, averages .011".) We used a ruler with $1/32$ " and $1/64$ " increments to measure the string spacing at the bridge and nut. We also checked the truss rod's ability to straighten the neck or add relief when tightened or loosened. (Neck straightness was checked with a precision-ground 24" straightedge.) Fingerboard radius—the amount of curvature underneath the strings—was measured with a radius gauge. A low radius measurement means the fingerboard has more curvature; a high number means it's flatter. (Vintage Fenders have a radius of $7\frac{1}{4}$ "; many builders today prefer 12".) An even more important test involved checking the fingerboard for high frets. With the fingerboard adjusted as straight as possible, we used a precision-ground fret-height gauge (accurate to .0005") to check three frets at

a time. A high fret can mean string buzz—and poor tone.

We also scrutinized other areas of fretwork, including the shape of the crown, bevel and polish of the ends, and depth of the kerf (slot). We wanted to see shiny tops and ends free of filing chatter marks. We expected all of them to be tightly seated against the fingerboard. (.005" feeler gauge found many gaps.) We also kept an eye out for kerfs that weren't filled on the sides of the neck, which might allow dirt or moisture (sweat) to accumulate underneath the frets. While some of these areas are more cosmetic than structural, a bass with superior fretwork scored high in all of these categories.

For playability, we looked at the shape of the neck and the overall quality of the setup. String height was checked by clamping the strings at the first fret with a capo and measuring the height at the 12th fret. With the capo still on, the relief was checked at the 7th fret with the string depressed at either the 15th or last fret. Unless noted, each bass had a medium setup in the $3/32$ " (*B*) to $5/64$ " (*G*) range.

We also checked out the electronics for proper shielding, the effectiveness of the EQ, and lack of 60-cycle hum when the pickups were soloed or fingers were lifted from the strings. If the bass was active, we looked for a battery compartment, a cavity cover that was easy to open, or an active-bypass switch to get you through the gig should the battery fail.

To critique each axe's tone, we trucked a load of amps into our Soundlab. Our backline included a Demeter VTBP-201DBL tube preamp, a Hafner Pro 5000 power amp, and Eden 410XLT 4x10 and SWR Triad enclosures. Surrounding this rig were an SWR SM-900 head and Goliath III 4x10, a Trace Elliot AH400SMX head with a 1048H 4x10, a Gallien-Krueger 2000RB driving either an Acme Low B cabinet or a Hartke 4.5 XL 4x10, and a Glockenklang Heart Core head with a Tedd cabinet. Additional amplification brought in by our tester pool (see below) included two Alembic F-1X preamps, a Peavey DPC 1000 power amp, and

a Genz Benz 410T 4x10. We plugged in with Monster Cable Monster Bass cords and tuned up with a Korg DTR1 Pro tuner.

The low-*B* posse. To help with our evaluations, we invited a few experienced 5-string players to come in for a low-*B*-athon. By the time they were done, each instrument had gotten a fair shake in the hands of several bassists.

We then put each axe through one final test. Since the average bass can get buried underneath a blazing guitar amp's wall of distorted midrange faster than you can say "parametric," we set up a loud Marshall half-stack in our studio and fed it power chords. This test quickly had several basses saying "uncle"—and if an axe couldn't cut it here, what would it sound like when drums and vocals are added? In fairness, though, we should point out that some of these instruments aren't designed with this type of extreme volume in mind; this is noted where appropriate.

A few words about pricing. "Retail" refers to the manufacturer's suggested

list price. (You can usually buy these basses at a discount, depending on the dealer.) "Direct" means the price you see is what you'll pay. Some direct-sale basses come with a money-back guarantee; contact the manufacturers to find out more.

Ready to go low? Here, arranged in price order, are the 21 finalists.

Under \$1,500

Carvin LB75

Made in U.S.A

Direct price: \$1,099 as tested (\$699 base price)

Weight: 8 lbs, 7 oz

Scale length: 34"

Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Fret size: .094" (W) x .045" (H)

Strings: Carvin, nickel, .045"-.128" w/taper-wound *B*

5-Strings Under \$1,500 (L to R):
Carvin LB75, Fender Jazz Bass Deluxe V, Hamer 2TEK CruiseBass 5, and Tobias Growler 5



THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

	1	2	3	4	5
Construction:	■■■■■				
Electronics:	■■■■■				
Playability:	■■■■■				
Sound:	■■■■■				
BString:	■■■■■				
Value:	■■■■■				

Bottom Line: Quite a deal for a neck-through-body 5.

THE LOW DIRECT PRICE OF CARVIN'S LB75 MAKES IT the first at bat. It features a five-piece koa-and-maple neck that runs through a koa body. A well-applied tung-oil finish, as well as fully rounded body contours, gives this bass a natural feel. The neck features a two-way truss rod that's accessible at the base of a 10° tilted-back headstock. The rod has very good action, which provides slight

relief without tension and enough movement in either direction to compensate for light- or heavy-gauge strings. The solid-black ebony fingerboard is fitted with 24 medium-jumbo frets with properly polished ends and crowns. A .006" feeler gauge slid underneath the edges of several frets on our test bass, though, which was confirmed with the fret-height test tool—and a string buzz here and there. (To remedy this problem, Carvin says they've added an additional quality-control check just after the frets are pressed into the fingerboard.)

In the electronics department, two Carvin H50N stacked J-style humbucking pickups are placed in approximate J-Bass position, but the neck pickup is ¼" closer to the bridge. Controls include master volume, pickup blend, active bass and treble, and a midrange-sweep knob. By turning this knob, the tone changes in color from full to honky. Use the mid boost with caution, because cranking it with the bridge pickup selected can cause the bass to feed back. The pickups are a bit too live; tapping on them produces a metallic

"ping" through the speakers. A flip-top compartment houses a 9-volt battery, while three circuit boards with PC-mounted pots sit in a copper-foil-shielded control cavity. There is, however, a small amount of ground noise when you remove your fingers from the strings, and the pickups emit a slight amount of 60-cycle hum. (Carvin notes, "The live sounding pickups and 60-cycle hum may stem from one related problem on the test instrument, and any such problem would be immediately fixed under warranty. We've shipped thousands of these basses with the same electronics without any customer complaints.")

Plugged in, the Carvin has a very rich tone that's fingerstyle friendly. Its koa-and-oil construction might not be the best wood/finish combination to make a B string ring, though. (Carvin does offer many wood-and-finish combos.) But even with the active EQ set flat, the LB75 has the right amount of bottom for many situations. Comments: "Great tone for a country or blues gig." "The B requires a lighter touch." "Bridge pickup is very J-like."



Fender Jazz Bass Deluxe V

Made in U.S.A.

Retail price: \$1,229

Weight: 9 lbs, 3 oz

Scale length: 34"

Width @ nut: 1 7/8"

String spacing @ bridge: 1 1/16"

Fingerboard radius: 9 1/2"

Fret size: .102" (W) x .040" (H)

Strings: Fender, nickel, .045"-.135" w/taper-wound B and E

	1	2	3	4	5
Construction:	[Progressive bar]				
Electronics:	[Progressive bar]				
Playability:	[Progressive bar]				
Sound:	[Progressive bar]				
BString:	[Progressive bar]				
Value:	[Red bar]				

Bottom Line: Great rock tone with a pick.

THE JAZZ BASS DELUXE V MELTS TRADITIONAL

Fender features with modern active electronics. You can also run the strings through the body or through the back of the bridge for a different string feel.

The Deluxe's body has an alder core with thin ash veneers on the top and back. Our tester wore a vintage blond finish highlighted with a tortoiseshell pickguard. (Slight sanding marks could be seen in one of the undercoats.) The flatsawn maple neck joins the body at the 17th fret; for added stiffness, graphite strips are inlaid into the neck.

Pau ferro is the wood of choice for the fingerboard; ours sported jumbo frets with good crowns, although several of the ends had been rounded over differently. All 22 frets passed the fret-height-gauge test, with no high frets to be found. All of our players liked the satin finish on the back of the neck, but some thought the profile was a bit too thick.

Two new-design J humbuckers are placed in typical J position. They use 1/4" magnet slugs, rather than the bi-pole design of vintage J's. They also have a 3+2 coil design, with the A, E, and B

strings covered by the upper magnet; this allows a humbucker configuration to reside in a single-coil housing. The pickups are controlled by an active preamp with master volume, blend, concentric bass and treble, and midrange controls. A front-routed cavity houses the pots and preamp board, while a 9-volt battery is nestled in a rear-mounted cavity. Minor complaint: If you bend strings *à la* Stanley, don't do it with the neck pickup selected; bending them between the magnets causes a noticeable change in output volume.

That fat B sure has a lot of meat. Fingerstyle testers liked its warmth, although slappers found it a bit dark down low. The B's tone opened up a touch with the blend control turned slightly towards the bridge; with both pickups full on some low mids were lost. The Fender does have a great pick tone with this blend, capable of laying a swampy foundation for the heaviest wall of guitars. Comments: "More modern-sounding than the average J." "Not the clearest B, but it's pretty fat." "Heavy lows, crisp top."

Continued



5-Strings \$1,500 to \$2,499
(L to R): Yamaha BBN5A, Ernie Ball/Music Man StingRay 5, Alembic Orion, Pedulla Rapture Bass J2, Schecter Baron V, Lakland Deluxe 55, Mike Lull Modern 5

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

Hamer 2TEK CruiseBass 5

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$1,324

Weight: 10 lbs, 4 oz

Scale length: 34"

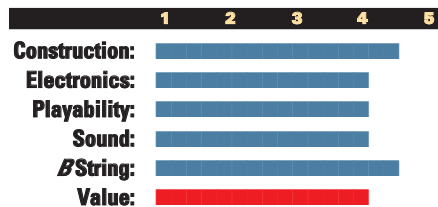
Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{5}{8}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ "

Fret size: .115" (W) x .045" (H)

Strings: Hamer, stainless steel, .045"–.130"



Bottom Line: A well-made 5 with lots of sustain.

HEAVY BASS, HEAVY TONE—THE TWO USUALLY GO hand in hand. Tipping the scales at 10 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds, the Hamer CruiseBass 5 is the beefiest axe of the bunch. Part of the mass is due to the 2TEK through-body bridge, but you may find its added sonic benefits are worth the shoulder strain.

The Cruise is very J-like, and its glossy, three-tone sunburst alder body has a yesteryear vibe. A three-piece quartersawn rock-maple neck (with an asymmetrical profile) is held in a tight neck joint. We liked the angled and rounded neck heel, which made runs on the rosewood fingerboard easy all the way to the 22nd fret. The setup was well done with properly leveled frets (although the ends could have been polished better); this, too, made it easy to play.

The electronics are also J-inspired. A pair of Basslines by Seymour Duncan Active Jazz Bass pickups are connected to individual pickup volume controls and a passive master tone. The neck pickup is placed $\frac{5}{8}$ " closer to the bridge than on a J-Bass. The conductive-paint-shielded cavity houses three 250k Ω custom-taper pots and a 9-volt battery wrapped in foam. Thanks to the stacked humbuckers, 60-cycle hum is eliminated, which makes the Hamer quiet enough for studio work.

The 2TEK Bridge sure

makes this puppy bright and snappy when played acoustically, and open strings and harmonics ring for days when amplified. Some testers loved its big bottom and snarling top, but those with more aggressive attacks thought the B could be tighter. Even so, the CruiseBass is a smart choice for just about any style. Comments: "Active EQ would make it *huge*." "The notes blossom, but the open B can get wobbly." "A ripper."

Tobias Growler 5

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$1,495

Weight: 7 lbs, 9 oz

Scale length: 34"

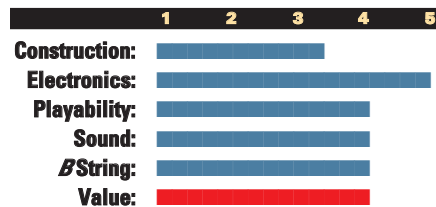
Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{5}{8}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 16"

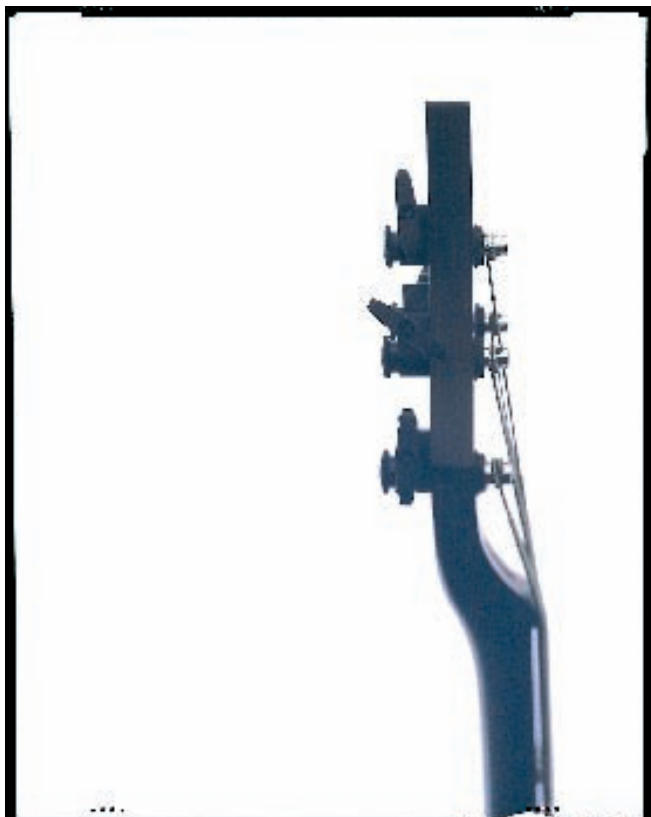
Fret size: .101" (W) x .040" (H)

Strings: Tobias Signature Series, stainless steel, .045"–.130" w/taper-wound B



Bottom Line: A funkmeister's delight.

THE GROWLER'S DUAL-COIL BARTOLINI HUMBUCKER produces a range of tones most single-pickup



basses can't match. And at less than eight pounds, this bass is a featherweight.

The heart of the axe's double-edged tone is a Bartolini DNTBT-18 preamp, which features separate concentric bass and treble controls for each coil of the 70MM5HX humbucker. The pickup actually has *four* coils; each side has a split arrangement to provide a humbucking effect. With this system, you can move between coils via a blend knob and set up separate EQ for each coil. There are also two 3-way EQ switches, each with flat, mid-boost, and bass-boost/mid-cut settings. Two batteries inside the copper-foil shielded cavity supply 18 volts for the preamp.

The instrument's body is sawed from light-weight swamp ash that's covered in a handrubbed-oil finish. The three-piece maple/purpleheart neck features a deep-set bolt-on joint: the neck extends 1 $\frac{3}{8}$ " past the end of the 24-fret fingerboard into the body. The single-action truss rod doesn't have a lot of adjustment to offer; you'll really have to crank it to straighten the neck. Also, there's not much relief available when the rod is completely loosened. (Fans of light strings, beware.)

The fretwork on the test bass was a little rough. The ends were rounded down to the edges of the pau ferro fingerboard, which had small gouges next to the fret ends from the round-over file. There were a few high frets, and a .005" feeler gauge found its way under several of them. On a positive note, that trademark asymmetrical neck shape and a very flat fingerboard radius will appeal to even the smallest of hands.

It sure is a blast to play with the Growler's electronics. We were able to get a super-J tone from the rear coil (with the mids boosted) and blend in the front coil (with the "slap" curve) for an all-out funkathon. The B doesn't have the same attack as the other four strings, although it has good thump. Don't mix this bass with a blazing guitar amp, though—its tailored tone and lightweight body just don't offer enough low mids to compete. A lifetime limited warranty is included. Comments: "Cool slap tone." "B is a bit loose in the booty." "Very Music Man-like."

\$1,500 to \$2,499

Yamaha BBN5A

Made in Japan

Retail price: \$1,699

Weight: 9 lbs, 8 oz

Scale length: 34"

Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{13}{16}$ "

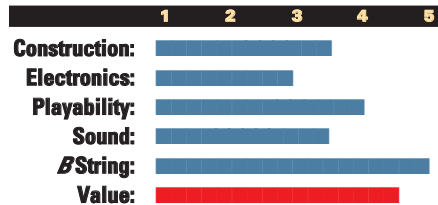
String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 15"

Fret size: .094" (W) x .045" (H)

Strings: Yamaha, nickel, .045"–.125" w/taper-wound B

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*



Bottom Line: Robust *B*, but the electronics are noisy.

YAMAHA'S BBN5A, BASED ON THE NATHAN EAST

Signature model, features an alder body with a beautiful bookmatched flame-maple top. The bass's three-piece maple neck has a flattened-oval shape. It's well attached to the body with six bolts—but there was a .013" gap on the tester's treble side. Square mother-of-pearl position markers adorn a rosewood fingerboard with 24 medium-height frets. The fret dressing on our tester was above average; however, the ol' feeler gauge and fret-height tool got a workout on several unseated/high frets. (String buzzing was mainly a problem on the *B* string; this was cured by raising the saddle.) Also, the single-action truss rod wasn't able to straighten the neck when tightened to its maximum tension. Not good. The bone nut had an excellent profile (only half of the

strings' height sat in each slot), but the spacing between the strings was a hair off.

The BBN5A's electronics are the same as the Signature model's. Two Yamaha soapbar humbuckers send the signal to an active preamp with master volume, blend, bass, and treble controls. There's also a 3-position EQ switch with adjustable frequency points. Position 1 is flat, while the frequencies of positions 2 and 3 are controlled by two trim wheels inside the control cavity. There is a flip-top compartment for the 9-volt battery.

Although we thought the BBN5A had one of the better sounding *B*'s, its electronics could be improved. The main complaint? Too much EQ circuit noise. (Ever heard a bass control add hiss?) This wouldn't be a huge problem live—but it could require the use of noise reduction in the studio. Nonetheless, this bass has good warmth for fingerstyle and a pseudo-Music Man grind when played with a pick. Comments: "Fender-type tone with a high-tech spin." "The *B* string is smooth, but those electronics spoil the tone." "Boy ... is this thing punchy!"

Ernie Ball/Music Man StingRay 5

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$1,600

Weight: 10 lbs, 3 oz

Scale length: 34"

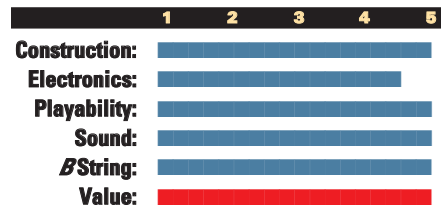
Width @ nut: 1³/₄"

String spacing @ bridge: 1¹/₁₆"

Fingerboard radius: 11"

Fret size: .100" (W) x .043" (H)

Strings: Ernie Ball Slinky Bass, nickel, .045"–.130"



Bottom Line: Ballsy lows, electric highs.

SPEAKING OF PUNCHY ... WITH A TAUT *B* THAT'S TIGHT enough for slapping and pick styles, the StingRay 5 is ten pounds of pure guts.

The construction details of our test bass couldn't have been cleaner. The heavy swamp-ash body's translucent teal finish was buffed to a mirror-like shine. The flatsawn bird's-eye-maple neck sported a rosewood fingerboard with 22 exquisitely dressed jumbo frets; they were all properly seated and leveled. It also had one of the tightest neck joints of the lot. And its playability was excellent, due to a pro-quality setup and an oil-and-wax-finished, oval-shaped neck.

The wide humbucker provides lots of output when connected to the onboard active preamp with master volume, bass, midrange, and treble controls. (The pickup mounting could be a bit stronger, though.) A 3-position switch selects

series, single-coil w/dummy humcanceling, or parallel modes; we preferred the series setting with just a dash of treble, as adding too much high end gets a tad noisy. A flip-top battery compartment can be found on the rear.

The StingRay V's muscular tone delivers the goods right down to low *B*. It even serves up a great thumb-mute tone. Most of us agreed the series setting was best for slapping and pick work, while fingerstyle players preferred the parallel mode for more lows. This one's a crowd pleaser, gang. Comments: "Growling, earthshaking lows." "The *B* is very heavy." "A thumbman's bass."

Alembic Orion

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$1,860

Weight: 9 lbs, 6 oz

Scale length: 34"

Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

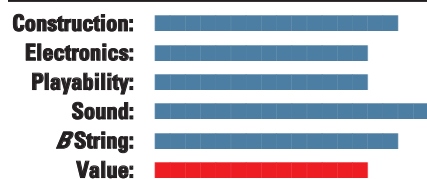
String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{5}{8}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 12"

Fret size: .100" (W) x .040" (H)

Strings: Alembic CX-3, nickel, .045"–.128"

1 2 3 4 5



Bottom Line: Hi-fi sound, but the treble's a bit sizzly.

THE ORION IS THE NEWEST MODEL IN ALEMBIC'S mighty line of basses. If you lust for the smell of natural wood and the gleam of brass, this bass's bookmatched flame-walnut top, mahogany body, five-piece maple neck, and custom-machined hardware should suit you.

The body and neck are finished with a special polyurethane that's formulated to look like oil. The set-in neck is glued to the body at the 20th fret; it features two single-action truss rods and a two-octave ebony fingerboard. The neck has a 1° angle for lower string height and a 14° pitched-back headstock to increase string pressure on the adjustable brass nut. We found above-average fretwork without any high spots, which provided buzz-free playability on the *E* through *G* strings. However, because the neck is straight when the truss rods are completely loosened, players with a heavy attack may find the *B* string is too buzzy unless the saddle is raised quite high.

The electronics feature two low-impedance, wide-aperture pickups souped up by 9-volt active electronics with master volume, blend, and bass and treble controls. (Interestingly, the magnets stop short of the *B* string—but we didn't detect an output problem.) We liked the solid pickup mounting, silver-conductive-paint-shielded cavity, and solder-free wiring harnesses that

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

connect the Bourns pots and circuit boards. The battery resides inside the control cavity, with threaded inserts for the cover's five small screws.

Plugged in, the Orion has super-precise highs and an ultra-deep low end. We were surprised, though, that the preamp has a bit of background hiss and a noisy treble control. Several testers also thought the flattened-U-shape neck profile was kind of chunky in the lower positions. How's the *B*? Very good, and it can withstand the attack of heavier playing styles. Comments: "Stanley tone!" "A hi-fi J-style bass." "A great axe for rock, funk, or jazz."

Pedulla Rapture Bass J2

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$1,999

Weight: 8 lbs, 9 oz

Scale length: 34"

Width @ nut: 1 7/8"

String spacing @ bridge: 5/8"

Fingerboard radius: 10"

Fret size: .100" (W) x .038" (H)

Strings: Pedulla Stainless Steel, .045"—.128" w/taper-wound *B*, *E*, *A*, and *D*

	1	2	3	4	5
Construction:	[Progressive bar chart]				
Electronics:	[Progressive bar chart]				
Playability:	[Progressive bar chart]				
Sound:	[Progressive bar chart]				
BString:	[Progressive bar chart]				
Value:	[Red bar chart]				

Bottom Line: J-like growl from a *B* string.

PEDULLA'S RAPTURE J2 COMBINES THE BEST OF THE old-school tone with a fast neck, warm-sounding active electronics, and a downsized body. It also has one of the best *B*'s to be found at any price.

Players of all styles praised the comfortable feel of the J2's soft-maple body and the sleek, soft-V profile of the flatsawn maple neck. The traditional heel has rounded corners that allow easy access to the rosewood fingerboard's 22nd fret. An excellent setup—including absolutely perfect fretwork, a cleanly cut bone nut, and a powerful two-way single truss rod—provided buzz-free performance. The cherry sunburst finish was equally flawless. The Fender-style bridge, however, needs deeper channels to keep the saddle-height adjustment screws from moving around.

The Pedulla uses two Bartolini 59P J-style humbuckers with offset 3+2 magnet structures. (It should be no surprise they're sitting in exact J-Bass territory.) These pickups are wired to an active NTBT preamp with bass and treble EQ. Removing the tortoiseshell pickguard reveals a large routed cavity doused in conductive paint. (The amount of wood removed helps to lighten the body.) The cavity features clean soldering and bundled wiring with heat-shrink tubing on



connections. A rear-mounted, flip-top battery compartment cuddles an Energizer battery.

Thanks to their humbucking design, the Bartolinis are much quieter than single coils—but there’s a slight amount of 60-cycle hum and grounding hiss present. This doesn’t detract from the J2’s modern-classic tone in any way, though. Comments such as “meaty, piano-wire tone,” to “the most versatile bass so far,” to “unbelievable playability” speak for themselves. Is it the ultimate J-style 5? You be the judge.

Schecter Baron V

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$2,195

Weight: 9 lbs, 6 oz

Scale length: 34"

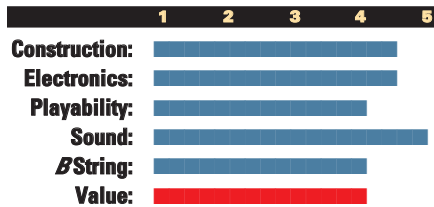
Width @ nut: 1 7/8"

String spacing @ bridge: 5/8"

Fingerboard radius: 10"

Fret size: .112" (W) x .048" (H)

Strings: SIT, nickel, .045"–.135" w/ taper-wound *B*



Bottom Line: Gigantic tones from an active-sounding passive axe.

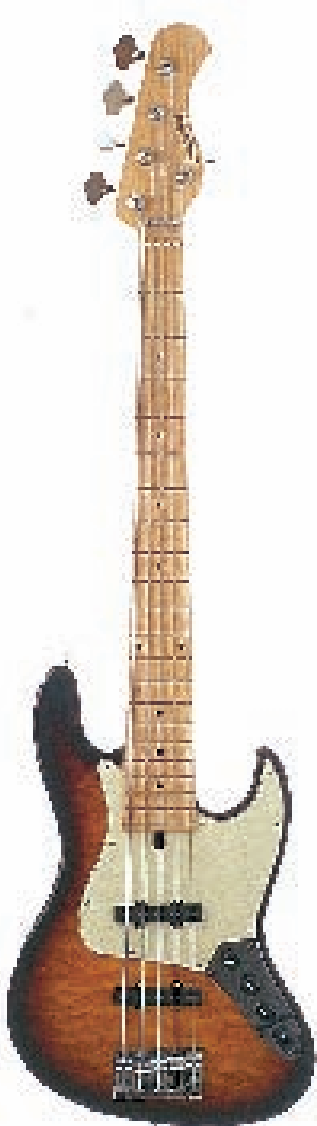
IF YOU LIKE YOUR BASS PLAYED LOUD AND HUNG LOW, the Baron V may be your mean machine. Its over-size Telecaster-style body and Basslines humbucking pickup are ready to rumble.

Schecter chose Honduran mahogany for the body because of its “aggressive tone.” The bass looks sharp; its black polyester finish is highlighted by cream binding. The finish of our tester was very good, but there was some shrinkage into the mahogany’s pores. For an aged look, the back of the flatsawn bird’s-eye-maple neck is tinted with

a yellowish-brown satin stain. We liked the angled heel, which holds the flattened-oval neck in place with four bolts and a steel plate.

Jacaranda, a wood similar in look and feel to rosewood, is quartersawn for the fingerboard. The 22 well-dressed jumbo frets gleam. The bass also features a Fender-style bridge that can be strung either through the body or through the back of the bridge. (Ours came strung with the *B* and *E* through the body.)

Basslines’ new Music Man 5-string humbucker sits 3/4" closer to the neck than the pickup on the StingRay 5, for a fuller tone. The passive electronics are simple: master volume, master tone, and a 6-position rotary pot with a “chicken-head” knob (which repeatedly fell off). This selects among various pickup-coil combinations, with a few positions accentuated with capacitors. Positions 5 and 6 have the most authority, although a few players dug position 2’s clarity. We all agreed position 4 was way too honky. With the exception of the single-coil settings, the bass was buzz-free, thanks to a conductive-paint-coated cavity.



5-Strings \$2,500 & Up
(L to R): Acacia Custom, Roscoe LG-3005, Dingwall Voodoo Zebra Bass, Modulus Guitars Quantum 5, Sadowsky Vintage 5, Zon Legacy Elite V, Curbow International Exotic Petite Carved Top

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

The Baron has very hefty tone for a passive axe, making it great for rock and blues. The open *B* string is also warm, but the *C* and *D* notes sounded darker. Overall, though, the Baron V moved more air than several of our active test basses. Comments: "There *has* to be a battery hiding in there." "Good *B*, but it needs a bit more fundamental." "Has an almost P-like thickness."

Lakland Deluxe 55

Made in U.S.A

Direct price: \$2,395

Weight: 8 lbs, 8 oz

Scale length: 35"

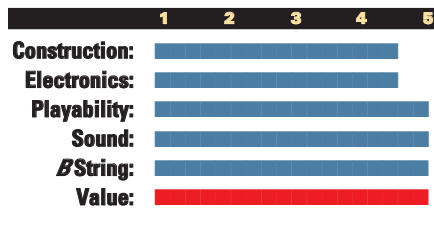
Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{13}{16}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 10"-13"

Fret size: .084" (W) x .040" (H)

Strings: LaBella Hard Rockin' Steel, .045"- .128" w/taper-wound *B*



Bottom Line: A versatile bass with a killer *B*.

HOW MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE CAN AN INCH MAKE? In the case of a 5-string, it can be *huge*. The Lakland Deluxe 55 has a 35" scale—and after hearing the natural sustain and depth of this instrument's *B*, we have to wonder why more 5-string manufacturers haven't switched over to a longer scale. Lakland also places the *B* string's tuner $2\frac{3}{4}$ " from the nut and runs the string through the body; this doesn't add more tension, but it does change the feel of the string slightly.

Our test bass's lightweight swamp-ash body was capped with a bookmatched quilted-maple top, and its translucent-teal finish made the quilt look like a jewel-blue swimming pool. (The chrome-plated Lakland brass bridge looks cool, too.) A graphite-reinforced, quartersawn maple neck with a flatsawn bird's-eye-maple fingerboard joins the body at the 16th fret. The neck joint was so tight we couldn't slip in our smallest feeler gauge on either side. Twenty-two medium-profile frets are slip-fit and epoxied into oversize kerfs. Because of this (and a good leveling job), the frets in our Lakland were perfectly seated, with no high spots. They could have been cleaner, though—there were file chatter marks on a few ends.

The flattened-oval neck shape is very comfortable to play. In fact, some players didn't even notice the extra length of the 35" scale. A tung-oil neck finish, combined with low setup at the nut and bridge, makes this one very fast 5.

Bartolini pickups—one Music Man-style humbucker and one J-style humbucker—are connected to an NTMB-L preamp with an output-trim pot. Controls include master volume (with pull passive mode), blend, and 3-band EQ. There's also a 3-position coil switch for the bridge pickup, which allows for bridge-coil, both, or neck-coil settings. Both pickups have a split 3+2 configuration to cut down on 60-cycle hum. A superb shielding job (even the output-jack cavity is covered) means there's zero noise. The 9-volt battery is held in a clip inside the control cavity; removing the four screws on the cavity cover from their threaded inserts provides access.

The Deluxe has a supple tone with a slight edge ideal for fingerstyle, slapping, or picking. The EQ is great, too—but the treble can get a bit hissy at higher settings. The Lakland's sound appealed to fans of traditional bass tones, and it also sounded mighty commanding in our guitar test. Comments: "The *B* has amazing focus." "Has an old Music Man vibe, but it's much more versatile." "Active mode sounds like the same bass but louder."

Mike Lull Modern 5

Made in U.S.A

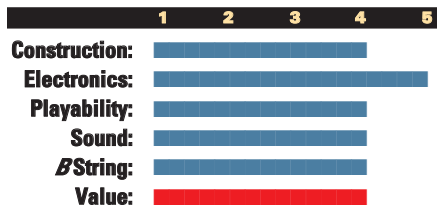
Retail price: \$2,495

Weight: 8 lbs, 9 oz

Scale length: 34"

Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ "
Fingerboard radius: 10"
Fret size: .096" (W) x .038" (H)
Strings: Ken Smith Rock Masters, stainless steel, .045"–.130"



Bottom Line: Workhorse sound.

WHEN LUTHIER MIKE LULL ISN'T BUSY SETTING UP AXES for Seattle's finest (see Tech Tips, July '96), you'll find him crafting his own line of custom basses. Mike's Modern 5 is based on the Jazz Bass, but it's far from a Fender clone.

That eye-catching translucent finish on our tester's swamp-ash/quilted-maple body is known as Creole Magenta, and it was as flaw-free as it gets. A bird's-eye-maple neck adds further class. Some players liked the girth of the oval-shaped neck profile, but a few found it a bit too hefty. The neck joint was good, but there was a .012" gap on the bass side. The Modern's maple fingerboard features 21 compression-fit frets held in their slots with super glue. We found them all expertly leveled with minimal file marks.

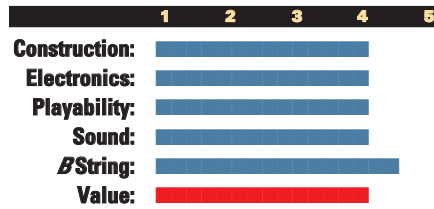
Master volume (with pull passive mode), blend, and concentric bass and treble controls tweak the tone of two Bartolini J-style humbucking pickups that sit in classic J-Bass position. An NTBT preamp brings it all together. Other details include a flip-top battery compartment, clean solder work, and a copper-and-foil-shielded control cavity. No 60-cycle hum here.

This one has a J-vibe. (Surprised?) It gets the boom with both pickups on, and it has good impact when you thump on it. The B does lack some clarity, but it can take quite a beating. (Lull says he's in the process of building a 24-fret, 35"-scale 5 to improve the B-string clarity. Also, since each instrument is a custom order, the customer can choose from a long list of neck dimensions, hardware, and electronics.) Overall, the Lull scores points for its workhorse sound and straight-up electronics. Comments: "Fat bottom." "Not quite as growly as a J, but it has a round, balanced tone." "That bulky neck really delivers the lows."

\$2,500 & Up

Acacia Custom
Made in U.S.A
Direct price: \$2,500
Weight: 10 lbs, 3 oz
Scale length: 35"
Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: 3/4"
Fingerboard radius: 22"
Fret size: .100" (W) x .040" (H)
Strings: D'Addario Slowound, nickel, .045"–.130"



Bottom Line: Lots of wood. Bark not included.

THERE'S AN AFFECTION FOR WOOD AT ACACIA. THE

company's 35"-scale Custom model combines several exotic species for a tone that's best described as "organic." Craftsmanship is also a priority, as it takes some skill to assemble a bass with a concave curve on the back of its body and headstock.

The center of the Acacia's neck-through-body design is rosewood. It's surrounded by wenge and padauk separated with thin maple stringers. The body core is also rosewood, while the top is Australian leopard wood. This particular bass is on the heavy side, but it delivers a lot of punch and snap. Fingerstyle players appreciated the carved thumbrest built into the truss-rod cover.

The fingerboard is gaboon ebony, a favorite wood of classical-guitar makers. For added stiff-

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

ness and stability, two graphite strips are inlaid underneath the fingerboard. The 24 jumbo frets on our tester had slightly uneven end profiles and file marks. The leveling also could have been better, as there were a few high frets. The hardware includes a brass nut, Gotoh tuners, and a Kahler bridge.

The electronics are housed underneath a wood cover that's cut out of the body's leopard wood top. Removing it revealed a copper-foil-shielded cavity with three large pots for the two pickup volumes and master tone. An all-controls bypass switch sends the pure sound of the Lane Poor

pickups straight to the output jack. Gripes? The pickups could have been mounted more firmly, and the soldering was sloppy in places.

Most players liked the round feel of the neck, but some felt its fingerboard edges were too sharp. Others didn't like the open-grain feel of wenge under their thumb. Nonetheless, the Acacia has a brilliant yet compressed sound, which we partly attribute to its blend of woods and Lane Poor pickups. The lows, especially from the *B*, have an openness and air about them. The Acacia's tone would be at home in a jazz, fusion, or R&B gig, but its low output just doesn't have enough guts for rock (although we doubt that's what the designer had in mind). An onboard preamp would add more impact, and Acacia tells us a Demeter

preamp will be added to future models. Comments: "Feels earthy." "Controls-bypass switch adds more sparkle." "A lot of wood in the sound."

Roscoe LG-3005

Made in U.S.A.

Retail price: \$2,565

Weight: 9 lbs, 3 oz

Scale length: 35"

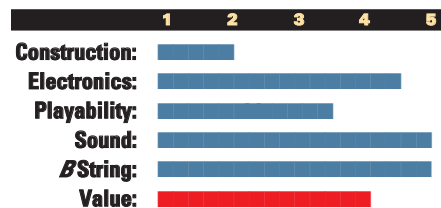
Width @ nut: 1 3/4"

String spacing @ bridge: 1 1/16"

Fingerboard radius: 16"

Fret size: .100" (W) x .040" (H)

Strings: D'Addario XL5, nickel, .045"-.125"



Bottom Line: Chunky neck, chunky tone.

FRANKLY, THE LG-3005 WE RECEIVED SUFFERED FROM construction problems that got several of its peers kicked out of our review. Why did we include it? Room-shaking tone, my friends—the great sound of the Roscoe's 35"-scale *B* string is undeniable.

This bass looks classy. The tobacco-sunburst polyester finish on its flame-maple/Honduran-mahogany body gleams. Its maple-and-purpleheart neck bolts to the body at the 18th fret; alas, the neck joint on the tester had a gap of .015" on the treble side. Closer inspection of the Brazilian-rosewood fingerboard revealed unevenly dressed ends and flat crowns on many of the 24 Dunlop 6150 frets. We also found several high spots. The side of the fingerboard had small gouges in places, there was damage to the wood next to many of the frets from filing, and most of the fret kerfs were left unfilled. Speaking of filing, the end of the fingerboard had a ton of falloff to prevent string buzz at the end of the neck. (Even so, because of the high frets, there was some string buzz.) The nut's string spacing was off (the *D* and *G* were spaced very tight), and the truss rod didn't offer a lot of adjustment. Finally, the *G* string's saddle on the Wilkinson bridge was nearly falling off the edge.

Two Bartolini humbuckers are angled underneath the Roscoe's strings; an NTBT preamp with master volume, blend, and bass and treble controls are standard. The battery is in the shielded control cavity, but you need to remove only two screws to get at it. The pickups are free of hum, but removing your fingers from the strings produces grounding crackle.

Everyone commented on the thickness of the oval-shape neck. (Roscoe offers three different neck shapes: fat, regular, and skinny. Our test bass had the regular profile.) That extra wood, though, must contribute some girth to the Roscoe's

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

mammoth tone. Its high-phat sound and hot output made our Marshall sound like a Pignose. Beef lovers, take note: If you can put up with a few rough edges, the Roscoe's tone is *it*. Comments: "Supercharged P-tone." "Deep and rich with mids that speak." "That *B* is mighty."

Dingwall Voodoo Zebra Bass

Made in Canada

Retail price: \$2,695

Weight: 9 lbs, 9 oz

Scale length: 34" (*G*) to 37" (*B*)

Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{3}{16}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 16"

Fret size: .080" (W) x .040" (H)

Strings: Dingwall Voodoo, stainless steel, .045"–.130" w/taper-wound *B*, *E*, and *A*

	1	2	3	4	5
Construction:	████████████████████				
Electronics:	██████████████████				
Playability:	██████████████████				
Sound:	██████████████████				
BString:	██████████████████				
Value:	██████████████████				

Bottom Line: One of the baddest *B*'s around.

THE DINGWALL VOODOO BASS WINS THE AWARD FOR the longest *B*-string scale length. To accomplish this, it uses a Novax Fanned Fret fingerboard, a Dingwall/Kahler bridge, and an angled phenolic nut. This yields scale measurements from 34" on the *G* string to 37" on its *B*.

Take a look at the photo—the grain of the Northern-swamp-ash body jumps out from underneath the first-class "whale pool blue" finish. That's because it's highlighted with a black pre-stain—thus the "Zebra" moniker.

The bass has a very stiff bolt-on neck, which is made of nine laminates of rock maple reinforced with two graphite strips beneath a pau ferro fingerboard. Combined with the medium-heavy body, this gives the Dingwall a lot of impact and attack.

The small fretwire provides clean and precise tone. The fretwork on the test bass was very good, with only a few chatter marks on the ends. (Oddly enough, the only high fret we found was the 11th, but the strings didn't buzz against it.) A well-cut nut and very low action at the 12th fret ($\frac{1}{32}$ " on the *B* and a $\frac{1}{64}$ " on the *G*) were unmatched for speedy playability.

The Voodoo uses custom Bartolini soapbar pickups and an NTBT-SP active preamp. The pickups are placed at an angle to match the fingerboard, with the coil structure in each pickup having one magnet covering the *A*, *D*, and *G* strings and a second coil that covers only the *B* and *E*. Controls include master volume, blend,



5-Strings \$2,500 & Up (L to R): Kenneth Lawrence Brase, MTD 535, Ken Smith B.M.T. Elite "G"

and concentric bass and treble. The cavity is well shielded with foil and a brass plate, with the battery attached to the inside of the cavity plate. The bumper? The cover is held in place by four *allen-head* screws with threaded inserts. If you lose the supplied allen wrench to remove them, forget replacing that battery at a gig. The electronics do, however, have an active/passive switch as a backup.

This bass is much easier to play than you might think. Testers loved the flattened-oval neck profile and low action. The strings have a very springy feel under your fingers, and they like to be dug into. Tone-wise, the *B* is killin'; it's so big, though, we had to lower the pickups on the bass side to balance the *B*'s output with the other strings. Still, it has a depth and character all its own; if you're a low-end freak, this axe's *B* is delightful. Comments: "The *B* is like the voice of God!" "Lots of bite from the active electronics, but it sounds smoother passive." "Easier to play if you don't look at the neck."

Modulus Guitars Quantum 5

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$2,999

Weight: 9 lbs, 4 oz

Scale length: 35"

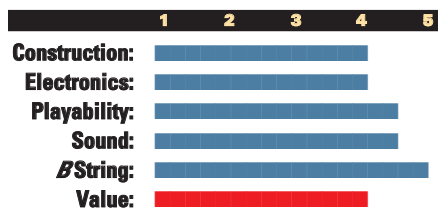
Width @ nut: 1 7/8"

String spacing @ bridge: 5/8"

Fingerboard radius: 15"

Fret size: .102" (W) x .046" (H)

Strings: Modulus Quantum Basics, nickel, .045"–.128"



Bottom Line: Lots of impact.

THANKS TO ITS 35"-SCALE GRAPHITE NECK, THE Quantum 5 has world-class definition and clarity. In fact, one tester thought it was like "playing one big string."

The bolt-on neck is deeply set into a light-weight alder body. (And the bookmatched quilted-maple top looks great.) The neck joint heel is rounded and angled back; four bolts grip the neck tightly, but there was a .014" gap on our tester's bass side. Because the neck is so stiff, no truss rod is required; there's a small amount of relief manufactured into the neck. Phenolic provides a very hard surface for the fingerboard; it's fitted with two-dozen Dunlop 6155 jumbo frets that we found to be well polished and evenly dressed. (Two frets—the 19th and 20th—were a bit higher than the rest, which caused a slight string buzz.)

Two EMG-40DC pickups provide a bold

sound with lots of output and attack. Because they're shielded internally, there's no need for shielding in the control cavity. An 18-volt EMG-BTS preamp (with master volume, blend, and bass and treble controls) provides lots of headroom. The treble control's frequency is adjustable by tweaking two DIP switches on a small board. The cavity is a bit cramped because both batteries reside inside, but Modulus says a separate battery compartment will be used on all '97 models.

Sonically, the Quantum has one of the most powerful and focused *B*'s around. Its dynamic sound and sustain are very impressive. Rock players especially got off on its ballsy, grinding tone when played with a pick. Not everyone was

thrilled with the juiced-up top of the EMGs, though; some preferred the tone with the treble control backed off a hair. (The Quantum is also available with Bartolini or Lane Poor pickups for a few extra bucks.) But just about everyone agreed it's one of the best overall 5's around. Comments: "*B* stays bright, even down low." "Huge tone, but those EMGs are an acquired taste." "Ultra-modern."

Sadowsky Vintage 5

Made in U.S.A

Direct price: \$3,250

Weight: 9 lbs, 4 oz

Scale length: 34"

Width @ nut: 1 7/8"

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 12"

Fret size: .095" (W) x .043" (H)

Strings: Sadowsky Roundwounds, stainless steel, .045"–.128" w/taper-wound *B*

	1	2	3	4	5
Construction:	[Progressive bar chart]				
Electronics:	[Progressive bar chart]				
Playability:	[Progressive bar chart]				
Sound:	[Progressive bar chart]				
BString:	[Progressive bar chart]				
Value:	[Red bar chart]				

Bottom Line: Studio-ready punch.

THE "SADOWSKY SOUND": SUPER FAT, ROUND, AND punchy. The Vintage 5 has all of these qualities, which makes it the ideal axe for anyone weaned on the classic tones of collectable basses. It's also expertly built and features the excellent Sadowsky preamp.

The instrument's classic tone is provided by two Sadowsky J-style passive single-coil pickups with exposed polepieces. Since the pickups are single coils, they do hum when soloed. (Although custom, "hum free" Bartolini pickups are available as an option.) They're connected to master



volume, blend, and bass- and treble-boost controls. (When the EQ controls are turned all the way down, they're actually flat.) This bass had one of the best control cavities of any we saw. The pots and preamp sit inside a fully shielded cavity that's covered in conductive paint to reject

60-cycle hum; a "star" grounding system prevents RF (radio-frequency) interference. This grounding uses a single point for all of the grounds: a wire from each individual ground on the pots and pickups is soldered to a steel terminal. Then, a wire with a 100pf capacitor at the end (to bleed out any outside noise) is run from the terminal to the wall of the shielded cavity. Excellent job. The 9-volt battery for the preamp sits in a clip inside the cavity, but the electronics can be run in passive mode by pulling up on the bass control.

The Sadowsky is made of lightweight swamp ash with an AAA-grade quilted-maple top. The tester's two-tone vintage sunburst finish was super clean. The flatsawn maple neck features a 21-fret maple fingerboard; the frets had nicely formed ends (although you could see some file marks), rounded crowns, and a tight fit to the fingerboard.

The Vintage 5's broad neck fit into the hands of those raised in the Fender camp, but it was too hefty for players used to necks with smaller profiles. (Roger Sadowsky says the necks on all Vintage 5's are now .030" thinner than our review bass.) Tone-wise, some found the tube-like lows

of the bass a bit too immense—even on the *B*—while others thought this was very satisfying. (Sadovsky also offers a more modern-sounding 24-fret 5-string with EMG soapbars.) The Vintage 5's forte? Dishing out big-time support. Comments: "The best *B* for rock." "Big ol' booty." "The EQ is very tuned in to the response of the bass."

Zon Legacy Elite V

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$3,375

Weight: 8 lbs, 4 oz

Scale length: 34"

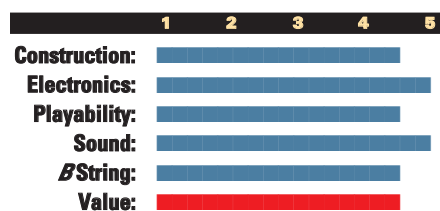
Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: 1 $\frac{1}{16}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 12"

Fret size: .105" (W) x .050" (H)

Strings: Zon Ultrasonic Steel, .045"–.128"



Bottom Line: Explosive harmonics and ringing sustain.

ALTHOUGH THE ZON LEGACY ELITE HAS A GRAPHITE-composite neck, it's got a surprisingly woody, articulate tone. It's also light—the second-lightest bass in the Shootout—and comfortable to play.

The Legacy's electronics (two Bartolini dual-coils and a custom Zon preamp) offer a very wide frequency response. It also has one of the thickest flat sounds around. So thick, in fact, that some of our test crew turned the bass control *down*. Lovers of razor-sharp highs, though, dug the shimmer of the treble control. Combined with the punch and sustain of the graphite, this control makes harmonics explode from your fingertips—and they ring for days. All of the controls (master volume, blend, midrange trim, and bass and treble) are connected to a large circuit board inside a pristine control cavity. Hum and buzz are nil.

Zon basses are known for their precision finishes, and the black back and transparent-red curly-maple top of the test bass gleamed. The neck is glued into the alder body at the 18th fret; the neck heel has a smooth taper into the body, which makes access to the 24th fret very easy. (However, the neck's gloss finish on the back can feel a little sticky.)

The frets are fitted into a "phenowood" fingerboard with an arbor press, and the tester's were all uniform in height. However, there were file marks on some of the fret ends. Setup was very good, with minimal string buzzes.

The Zon's *B* is nice and tight (with a medium touch), and it moves a ton of air when thumped. Slappers swooned over the instrument's dry, percussive snap. Overall, the Elite is an excellent 5

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

with ballsy-sounding pickups (there's a hint of early Music Man in there) and very effective EQ. Comments: "This guy spansk!" "Wow ... nice *B*." "Subterranean bottom."

Curbow International Exotic Petite

Carved Top

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$3,595

Weight: 10 lbs, 4 oz

Scale length: 34"

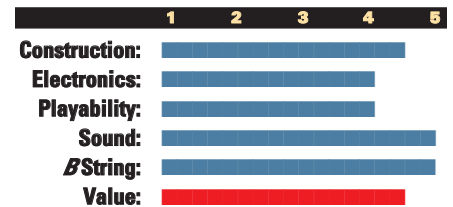
Width @ nut: 1¹⁵/₁₆"

String spacing @ bridge: ²⁵/₃₂"

Fingerboard radius: Over 20"

Fret size: .108" (W) x .050" (H)

Strings: DR Low Riders, stainless steel, .045"- .125" w/taper-wound *B*



Bottom Line: Slammin' slice.

THE FULL-BORE ATTACK OF THE CURBOW'S ROCKWOOD neck and fingerboard begs to be spanked. Rockwood is made from Finnish-birch veneers impregnated with phenolic resin under high heat and pressure. It makes for a mega-hard fingerboard and straight-as-an-arrow neck, which gives this bass a very special character. And, unlike a graphite neck, you can adjust the relief of the Rockwood neck with the truss rod.

For a bass with a small mahogany body, the Curbow is heavy. Part of the weight is from the neck, but there's also a solid-brass bridge bolted to a brass block underneath the quilted-maple top. The weight translates into serious punch, though.

The neck is attached to the body with five bolts. The joint is strong, for maximum tone transfer, but the treble side on our tester had a .011" gap. Its 24 frets were all meticulously polished and leveled to uniform heights, but several of the kerfs on the sides of the neck remained unfilled. The fingerboard has an almost classical-guitar-like flatness; it's also nearly 2" wide at the Corian nut. Remarkably low action (¹/₃₂" on the *B* and ¹/₁₆" on the *G*) allows for jackrabbit-fast slapping and supersonic runs. However, the fingerboard's flatness and width didn't win over everyone; some found it was just too wide and felt flat.

A custom XTCT-B preamp by Bartolini handles the signal from two split-coil soapbar humbuckers, one placed at an angle. The pickup-height adjustment screws are on the back of the bass. Tone is controlled by master volume, blend,

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

bass, midrange, and treble controls. The midrange has a 3-position frequency switch for extra versatility. The control layout is a bit confusing, as the mid-boost knob is the closest to the strings. A copper-foil-encased cavity shuns hum, and the bass has a flip-top battery compartment. The output jack on the tester needed to be replaced, though, as the signal cut out when a cord was inserted too far into the jack. Also, a few of the control-cavity screws had been stripped out.

You already know the Curbow is slammin' for funk—but it's also ready to rock or jumpin' for jazz. With its mids boosted at 250Hz and a bit more bottom, the *B* has a forceful push that cuts. Just be sure to try on that neck for size. Comments: "Very barky and bright." "That small body is like a hot rod." "One of the fatter modern funk tones."

Kenneth Lawrence Brase

Made in U.S.A

Direct price: \$3,750

Weight: 9 lbs, 6 oz

Scale length: 35"

Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{3}{4}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 15"

Fret size: .093" (W) x .047" (H)

Strings: MTD Essential Series, stainless steel, .045"–.130" w/taper-wound *B*

	1	2	3	4	5
Construction:	■■■■■				
Electronics:	■■■■■				
Playability:	■■■■■				
Sound:	■■■■■				
<i>B</i>String:	■■■■■				
Value:	■■■■■				

Bottom Line: Brase? It means huge *B*—and *A*.

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO? THANKS TO THE HIPSHOT Bass XTender Key on the *B* string of the Brase bass, you can drop down to low *A*. This sucker shakes the house.



Although that weird-looking horn attached to the neck takes some getting used to, Lawrence claims it has its advantages. Inspired by a construction method developed by Vinnie Fodera and Anthony Jackson, this horn structurally "braces" the neck to keep it "virtually flat from the 12th fret up." Also, the horn allows the neck vibrations to transfer into the body better, which Lawrence says provides "an aliveness usually associated with older, more seasoned instruments."

Both claims are true. The Brase has *very* low action all the way up the fingerboard. (Pitching the neck angle back 1° helps, too.) Acoustically, the three-piece set-in maple neck, Grenadillo fingerboard, and swamp-ash body have a woody bite with a very natural decay. (Design gripe: That point on the lower horn can get painful.) And the *B* really carries.

Our only complaint in the craftsmanship department concerns a few .005" gaps underneath some of the 24 medium-height frets, but they were nicely leveled and polished. The low setup requires a lighter touch to avoid string buzzing, but the Brase sounds raw and gritty when you dig in Stanley-style. The neck's flattened-oval profile is lightning fast, although that horn doesn't agree with all styles of playing.

Two Lane Poor soapbar pickups work together with a Seymour Duncan active preamp; the controls include master volume, blend, and 3-band EQ. An EQ-bypass switch and slap-

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

contour switch on the master volume are also included. The slap function is very subtle; you have to listen hard to hear a slight increase in the lows. (Lawrence informs us, though, that there are two trim pots inside the cavity to control the amount of bass boost and mid cut.) The cavity is well shielded, but the pickups need to be mounted more securely. A separate battery compartment holds a Duracell 9-volt.

Overall, the Brase has a very organic tone that doesn't sound overly tricked out by the active electronics. Its *B* has loads of fundamental, which supports the bass's sweet top end very well. The

verdict? The Brase was definitely *the* surprise of the Shootout. Comments: "Thundering bass!" "Like a refined Fender, Music Man, and Alembic in one package." "That low *A* rules!"

MTD 535

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$4,150

Weight: 8 lbs, 9 oz

Scale length: 35"

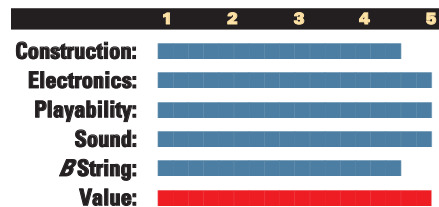
Width @ nut: 1 $\frac{7}{8}$ "

String spacing @ bridge: $\frac{3}{4}$ "

Fingerboard radius: 9"

Fret size: .095" (W) x .045" (H)

Strings: MTD Essential Series, stainless steel, .045"–.135" w/taper-wound *B*



Bottom Line: Lots of woody snap.

WHEN IT COMES TO FINDING THE RIGHT COMBINATION of ingredients, Mike Tobias is one of the master chefs. His MTD 535 has a unique blend of wood-meets-wire sound we just didn't hear from any other 5. Acoustically, the bass has a complex brilliance slappers instantly fell for. And those raw-sounding MTD strings running across a zero fret add bite, too.

Our test bass was made of lightweight tulipwood that resonated nicely when you plucked a string. Its distinctive myrtle-burl top was covered in a bright-red oil-and-wax finish that made the bookmatched flame really scream. (These options added \$650 to the \$3,500 base price.) MTD uses a deeply set, angled neck joint; the treble side of the neck extends 2 $\frac{7}{8}$ " into the body. This not only helps tone but prevents the neck from shifting, and it improves balance, too. The bass side of the neck joint could have been tighter, though; we measured a .014" gap.

A great deal of the 535's percussive sound comes from the wenge neck and fingerboard, because wenge is much stiffer than rock maple. We found 21 jumbo frets, all properly seated against the board. Each one had been well dressed, although there were a few file-chatter marks on the ends. Also, a small amount of super glue had squeezed out onto the fingerboard from the fret slots. Playability couldn't have been better, though, thanks to a great setup and a shallow asymmetric profile to the back of the neck.

For maximum impact, an 18-volt Bartolini NS3TMB-18 preamp is wired to two custom-made Bartolini active humbuckers. The preamp uses a +9/–9-volt design; according to Bartolini, this requires "no capacitors to diminish the low-end punch, clarity, and frequency response of the instrument." It delivers—we hardly had to reach for the 3-band EQ or 3-position midrange switch (250Hz/500Hz/1kHz) to tweak the tone. The 535 is *plenty* full and cutting, even with the EQ flat.

We were impressed by the bold sound of the .135" *B*, but most of us liked it best with the pickups blended more toward the bridge. The MTD clearly has its own character, but it may not suit everyone. Some cherished its crystal-clear ring, but others found it too unforgiving to less-than-perfect technique. This bass is *alive*. Comments: "Tons of headroom." "Use those highs sparingly!" "Tight and defined tone that would record well."

Ken Smith B.M.T. Elite "G"

Made in U.S.A

Retail price: \$4,700 as tested (\$4,500 base price)

Weight: 9 lbs, 5 oz

Scale length: 34"

Width @ nut: 1 3/4"

String spacing @ bridge: 1 1/16"

Fingerboard radius: 18"

Fret size: .102" (W) x .040" (H)

Strings: Ken Smith Custom Balanced Taper Core, stainless steel, .044-.130 w/taper-wound *B*, *E*, *A*, and *D*

	1	2	3	4	5
Construction:	[Progressive bar]				
Electronics:	[Progressive bar]				
Playability:	[Progressive bar]				
Sound:	[Progressive bar]				
BString:	[Progressive bar]				
Value:	[Progressive bar]				

Bottom Line: AAA-grade craftsmanship and sound.

"EXQUISITE" IS THE BEST WAY TO DESCRIBE THE craftsmanship of the top-of-the-line Ken Smith B.M.T. Elite "G." It's appropriately named, too: you'll need to throw down some serious G's to own one.

There's no shortage of premium woods in the Elite. A seven-piece neck of aged, hard-rock maple and African bubinga sits between mahogany, walnut, and AAA-grade flame-maple body wings. To protect the wood, the instrument is first sealed with Brazilian-rosewood oil and then finished with a catalyzed lacquer. The neck is plenty strong, but Smith makes it even stiffer by inlaying graphite strips on either side of a single-action double truss rod. The bass also features a custom-made Smith quick-release bridge and a brass nut. The inlaid strap locks are a mixed blessing; if you forget the supplied strap, you'll have to play your beautiful bass sitting down.

The two-octave ebony fingerboard on our tester had frets that glistened. (They were all evenly leveled and polished.) The neck's flattened-oval profile and wafer-thin carved heel offer heavenly playability. The action? Plenty low, for ripping funk or fast fusion.

The Smith electronics have their own voice. Two Custom Bass Humbucking Soapbar pickups with adjustable polepieces provide a rich, musical sound that doesn't need much help from the onboard BT preamp with master volume, blend, and 3-band EQ controls. (Pulling up on the master volume puts the bass in passive mode, which sounds as good as active, thanks to its evenly matched levels.) Each pickup also has an optional series/parallel switch (which added \$200 to the list price). Removing five screws from threaded inserts on the aluminum control-cavity cover exposes a work of art: three sideways-mounted modular circuit boards with solderless connectors on a bed of conductive shielding paint. (The 9-volt battery is also found here.) We were surprised, though, by the grounding hum the bass makes when your fingers are lifted from the

strings. (Ken Smith says although "the bass is shielded with three coats of conductive paint, pickups with open polepieces are nearly impossible to fully shield. Also, the optional series/parallel switches add a lot of wire that is difficult to shield from high-frequency buzz." The company is currently looking into a different type of shielding paint.)

Even in passive mode, the Elite has properly voiced midrange and a fluent top that's got the goods for fingerstyle and old-school funk. Most testers liked the pickups wired in parallel for maximum R&B. The instrument's tight and uniform *B* is definitely happening, but it prefers a medium touch for the best tone. Comments: "Plays like butta." "Rings with bell-like clarity." "Sweet-

sounding *B* is well integrated with the rest of the strings."

Good News!

The 5-string has been taken to all-new lows. Advances in pickup technology, better strings, and the use of graphite in wooden necks have made a big difference. Plus, that extra inch of a 35"-scale bass is also very convincing. Want proof? Take a look at the players' Top Five lists (next page).

It was ear-opening to listen to each instrument in the hands of different players. Some *B*'s that sounded good when played with a light touch

THE ULTIMATE 5-STRING *continued*

fell apart when crunched by a player with a harder attack. And as we confirmed in our Strings issue (March '96), the string set you choose does have a significant impact on performance.

Proper pickup placement is even more crucial on a 5. A few basses with two pickups lost too much B-string midrange with both pickups on (due to phase cancellations between the coils) to

let the string really speak. The tone almost always blossomed when we favored one pickup.

Although the majority of these basses had some flaws here and there, most of our nit-picky complaints about construction wouldn't be noticed by most players. The bottom line? If the bass makes you play like you've never played before, get out the checkbook. But if you're paying thousands of dollars for your Ultimate axe, do you really want a bass with roughly filed fret ends?

Look at the players' Top Five picks below—bassists with different playing styles favored different instruments. So what's the *ultimate* 5-string? It's the one that suits *your* style best. ♪

High fives all around to our 5-string posse: The BP staff, plus Chris Beveridge, Nate Pitts, Tony Mariano, and Kirk Bryant. Extra thanks to all of the manufacturers who submitted instruments and to Dan Lenard of Luthiers Access Group for providing us with a Glockenklang test rig.

The Players Speak

After the amps had cooled, we asked each player to pick five instruments in order of preference. Since not everyone can afford a bass that costs as much as a commuter car (*Hmm ... the 4-door or the 5-string?*), we also had them pick the bass under \$1,500 that was their favorite.

Player #1

Style: Fingerstyle rock and R&B

1. MTD
2. Lakland

3. Modulus

4. Kenneth Lawrence

5. Dingwall

Best Under \$1,500: Hamer

Player #2

Style: Rock, blues, session work

1. Pedulla

2. Ernie Ball/Music Man

3. Modulus

4. Roscoe

5. Schecter

Best Under \$1,500: Carvin

Player #3

Style: Blues, jazz, rock, reggae, funk

1. Alembic

2. Kenneth Lawrence

3. Dingwall

4. Ernie Ball Music Man

5. MTD

Best Under \$1,500: Carvin

Player #4

Style: Rock, reggae, funk

1. Modulus

2. MTD

3. Lakland

4. Ken Lawrence

5. Zon

Best Under \$1,500: Hamer

Player #5

Style: R&B, funk, fusion

1. Kenneth Lawrence

2. Pedulla

3. MTD

4. Modulus

5. Alembic

Best Under \$1,500: Carvin

Player #6

Style: Fingerstyle rock

1. Curbow

2. Lakland

3. Ken Smith

4. Roscoe

5. Modulus

Best Under \$1,500: Hamer

Player #7

Style: Blues, jazz, R&B

1. Ken Smith

2. Modulus

3. Zon

4. Roscoe

5. Curbow

Best Under \$1,500: Tobias