

FRESHMAN 12-STRINGS

A brace of Freshman 12-strings unleash their sonorous enchantment upon reviewer **David Mead**...

I've always thought that the 12-string acoustic occupies its own niche in the guitar world in a similar way to the tenor, harp or high-strung instruments. It possesses a unique voice, rich and full, that makes virtually any player adapt his or her style to suit its particular charms. It has its champions, too; any self-respecting acoustic player's record collection would be incomplete without a copy of Leo Kottke's *6- And 12-String Guitar* album, for instance. But don't take my word for it, check out Leo's 'Vaseline Machine Gun' on YouTube and you'll see what I mean. Anyway, back to business: let's take a look at what this pair has to offer.

FRESHMAN FA1AM12

Tuning was my first job and you've doubtless heard all the jokes about the time it takes to tune one 12-string guitar, let alone two. In actual fact, I think that they sound better if they are slightly out of tune, as it produces that distinctive chordal wash - a sort of natural chorus effect - that can really make a rhythm part stand out.

BUILD QUALITY AND FEATURES

The FA1 comes in at £300 cheaper than its jumbo-sized stablemate, with Freshman classifying this particular body

size as a "folk cutaway". The body looks quite compact, but everything is in proportion and its light-coloured honey hue is attractive to the eye.

Freshman has gone for Canadian Sitka spruce for the FA1's top and everything is in order. It's a nice-looking piece of wood, ably bookmatched and set off with a tortoiseshell trim around both the guitar's body and soundhole, sandwiched between layers of black and white plastic in both cases.

The spec says that the back and sides are quilted maple, but it looks more flamed to my eyes. Nice-looking, though, and I suspect that it's a laminate, as the striping is not mirrored inside the body from what I can see. No problems there; as I've said in the past, I've played some absolutely stunning guitars with laminated backs and sides, some luthiers



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even insisting that they add sturdiness to the body – and who am I to argue?

The FA1's neck is maple, too; it's a three-piece affair with a separate heel and a subtly scarfed headstock and whereas it's broad to accommodate the fretboard width, it's shallow enough to feel good in the hands.

There's a whole slew of sealed back, gold-coloured tuners on the elongated headstock, the front face of which is covered by a rosewood veneer bearing the Freshman logo at the top, matching both the fretboard and bridge.

One of the features of a 12-string is some additional width to the fingerboard, the FA1 measuring in at 48mm at the nut. I've found in the past

that an accurately cut nut and sympathetic string spacing are both crucial to a 12-string guitar's playability and I'm glad to report that both features here are absolutely spot on.

Returning to the body end, we find 12 cream-coloured plastic string pegs and a compensated bone saddle. All in all, the workmanship is top notch; my only small complaint would be a slight roughness to the fret edges along the neck.

SOUNDS AND PLAYABILITY

One of the inevitable aspects of any 12-string is a tendency towards top-heaviness due to additional length of the headstock. It's not so pronounced here – in fact the FA1 is a comfortable guitar to sit and play – but you might need to wear a strap to ensure no untoward listing to starboard during a performance. Freshman has provided an additional strap peg on the guitar's heel with this in mind and so everything here remains satisfyingly ship-shape.

The FA1's tone is exceptional. It's incredibly warm and rich – surprising, in view of the body size. Even when I drop tuned the entire guitar to D the warmth remained, with no shortage of nicely proportioned bass response as an additional bonus. Another surprise is that it's relatively easy both to fingerpick and use a plectrum to bring out individual note patterns within chords. It might sound like an obvious attribute for any self-respecting 12-string, but I've found it to be quite rare to find an all-rounder in this respect.

There's a Fishman Isys pickup (with a built-in tuner for those tempestuous 12-string tuning moments) pre-



The Freshman FA1's tone is exceptional – it is incredibly warm and rich



The AP3 is darker in tone than its companion, with some added authority

It's maple for the AP3's neck, although this time it's a three-piece piece of wood with a centre strip of slightly darker wood and I'm guessing that the grain has been reversed for added stability and strength. To be honest, it's hard to be sure, but it would figure that this might be the case.

This time around, the tuners are Grover, but I must admit that one or two of them felt slightly stiff whilst I was tuning the guitar. This is probably down to the newness of the instrument and they should loosen up with time. Apart from that, the spec is along similar lines as before: rosewood fingerboard – no sharp fret ends – rosewood bridge, compensated bone saddle and cream-coloured string pegs.

SOUNDS AND PLAYABILITY

So does the AP3's jumbo body size add up to a bigger sound? To be honest, it's a strange one because whereas there's definitely a "hump" in the instrument's lower mids and bass response, it seems to have had the effect of obscuring some of the luxurious shimmer I found so endearing with the FA1. There might be some added separation between the notes, but the higher end has lost some sparkle. However, the overall effect is still pleasing, with strummed chords sounding full and fruity and individual notes having a lot of authority.

There's a Fishman Presys pickup on the AP3, comprising both an under saddle piezo and a fixed microphone inside. I opted for around a 70:30 blend between the pickup and mic when testing the guitar through an amp and the result was pleasing. With the use of the on-board EQ it's possible to restore some of the top end to

its slinky magnificence and go pretty much anywhere else you might choose on the sonic spectrum.

CONCLUSION

Overall, the AP3 is darker in tone than its companion but there's possibly some added authority to both its acoustic and amplified voice. It sounds "sturdier". I guess if I was asked to choose between the two I would go for the FA1 because of its pert body size and remarkably beautiful sound. But, you understand, that's just a subjective opinion and I would urge anyone who is currently on the hunt for a 12-string to try both models as each has its individual charm.

David Mead

FRESHMAN FA1AM12

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Manufacturer: Freshman
Model: FA1AM12
Retail Price: £400
Body Size: Folk Cutaway
Made In: Asia
Top: Canadian Sitka spruce
Back and Sides: Quilted maple
Neck: Maple
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 20
Tuners: Die-cast gold coloured
Nut Width: 48mm
Scale Length: 650mm
Onboard Electronics: Fishman Isys 201
Left Handers: No
Gig Bag/Case Included: No

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: A compact and affordable 12-string with a seductively warm tonal response
Cons: Just those fret ends
Overall: A nice surprise to find such good sounds in a 12-string at this end of the price range

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality ★★★★★
Sound Quality ★★★★★
Value for Money ★★★★★

5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless.
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat.
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.

CONTACT DETAILS

Freshman Guitars
 www.freshmanguitars.net



installed on the FA1 and this really sees the guitar come to life. All the warmth remains and even with the EQ controls on both guitar and amplifier set perfectly flat, there's a tonal response that would delight anyone. I would imagine that a little bit of fine-tuning would bring about even more depth and flexibility, tonally speaking, too.

FRESHMAN AP3JEM12

The second Freshman 12 is a jumbo and promises several upgrades in terms of hardware in accordance with its higher price tag.

BUILD QUALITY AND FEATURES

This guitar is part of Freshman's "Apollo" range, which offers a greater bang-for-buck ratio with premium grade woods and state of the art electronics. As a jumbo, it's significantly bigger than its folk-sized counterpart,

which should lend a little more depth to the sound. We'll see later on. For now, we'll take a look at the bare essentials where construction is concerned.

The top wood here is AA-grade Sitka spruce and it's possible to see straight away that the grain pattern is more

complex than on the FA1. This may or may not be significant as it's never really an indicator of quality. I've seen some incredibly ordinary looking Adirondack spruce tops on high-end instruments. However, here we have a tight, close grain pattern with a good amount of "feathering" present, too.

What comes as a bit of a surprise is that the maple back and sides on the AP3 are so plain when compared to the FA1's attractive tiger stripe equivalent. I suspected that this might be due to the fact that the back and sides here would be solid, but a quick inspection of the wood surrounding the battery compartment confirms that it is, once again, a laminate. It's certainly not

totally without some figuring, but it's a bit of an understated appearance when compared to the attractiveness of its little brother.

The tortoiseshell binding is wider and more highly figured, matching the scratchplate nicely, while the rosette is a neat and unfussy collection of black and white rings.

FRESHMAN AP3JEM12

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Manufacturer: Freshman
Model: AP3JEM12
Retail Price: £700
Body Size: Jumbo Cutaway
Made In: Asia
Top: AA Grade Sitka spruce
Back and Sides: Maple
Neck: Maple
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 20
Tuners: Grover
Nut Width: 48mm
Scale Length: 650mm
Onboard Electronics: Fishman Presys 301
Left Handers: No
Gig Bag/Case Included: No

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: A jumbo 12 with upgraded spec and a seriously nice tone
Cons: A slight lack of high-end shimmer and a stiff tuner or two
Overall: A 12-string that's easy on the fingers as well as the wallet – great for strumming and fingerstyle

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality ★★★★★
Sound Quality ★★★★★
Value for Money ★★★★★

5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless.
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