

**GEAR**

**ROUND-UP**

**YAMAHA ACOUSTICS**





Words: Dave Burrluck Photography: Adam Gasson

# YAMAHA F SERIES ROUND-UP

It's 50 years since Yamaha introduced its first steel-string guitar. But the Japanese giant never rests on its laurels, and for 2016, one of the world's best-selling guitar ranges has gotten even better...



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**IT WAS** a year of sex, drugs and musical revolution – oh, and England won the World Cup, of course – so on reflection it's perhaps not surprising that the 1966 arrival of Yamaha's first steel-string guitars, the FG180 and FG150, didn't cause that much of a stir. Fast forward a few years though and it was a different story. The FG seemed the essential must-have for any wannabe troubadour: even guitar hero John Martyn played one! During the ensuing years the FG range has become one of the biggest selling guitar series' on the planet and has gone through numerous makeovers; the last 700 one however, was over a decade ago, by which time the avalanche of affordable steel-strings from China was already underway.

For 2016, then, Yamaha needed something a little special and that's exactly what the new 800 series range (which completely replaces the previous 700s) is. It centres on just two body shapes: the original FG 'Western' dreadnought and the smaller 'folk' or concert-size FS.

The guitars are all made in Yamaha's own mega-factory in China and feature solid wood tops – spruce on the 800 to 840 models, mahogany on the 850s – with laminated back and sides: the start up 800 level uses what Yamaha state as 'nato/okume', the 820s are mahogany, the 830s are rosewood, the 840s are maple and the 850s are again mahogany but with that solid mahogany top.

## The FG was the must-have for any wannabe troubadour



## YAMAHA FG800M **£213**

**Matt's the way we like it...**

**AS** it's been well over a decade since these guitars got a refresh, Yamaha is going all out with these 2016 upgrades, and according to Yamaha, the aim is to create guitars that are tonally enhanced. On the one hand that means a return to the original FG180, but with the addition of "a little more volume, a little more bass, a little more oomph". Now, us reviewers will always take such claims with a pinch of salt but a quick strum on this all-matt-finished guitar – the start of the new range priced just below the gloss-finished FG/FS800 (both £268) – has us double-checking our price list. But we've got ahead of ourselves...

The FG800M is a typically classy, clean build and those of us who like our guitars to look a little less posh will find a friend here: the matt finish gives a lived-in working guitar appearance. There's little ornamentation, the fingerboard dots are small and lack

contrast but the white side dots are clear and bright. The brand logo and fleur motif are simply silk-screened but it's the three-piece neck, with a roomy full C profile, that immediately engages. Tuners are quite generic but more than up to the job while the synthetic 'urea' nut and compensated saddle are well cut with a sensible, get-on-with-the-job action. The fretting is also extremely tidy, while the fingerboard edges are actually bound creating, in typical Chinese-style, a very tidy job.

Dreadnoughts, of course, come in many different tonal shades but we should expect plenty of roomy lows, a strong thump in the lower mids, crisp highs: a big projecting sound. Well, the FG800M ticks those boxes and some and sounds dangerously close – albeit thinner, crisper and 'newer' – to our reference and well-used 16-Series Martin dread' that costs an awful lot more. Game on...





## YAMAHA FG830 £360



The classic spruce/rosewood dread on a budget...

**JUMPING** up very nearly 150 notes, the FG830's increased price tag is certainly reflected in its looks – it's a much more classy proposition with its thinly gloss-finished body, deep chocolate coloration of the rosewood laminate back and sides, and satin neck (though less 'open pore' in feel than the FG800M), all topped off with old-looking, cream-coloured edge binding. There's a little abalone bling in the soundhole décor and headstock motifs, too. Like the FG800M it's near-perfect in execution – inside and out – and if asked the retail price, we'd undoubtedly suggest a substantially higher figure... and that's before we play a note.

Perceived thought says that solid rosewood back and sides, compared to mahogany, should create a little more definition sound-wise and although the

laminate construction here will narrow the differences, we certainly hear some of that: there's more sparkle added over the roomy dreadnought character of the FG800M. That smoother neck finish does tell your hand it's a more upmarket proposition even though the shaping is near-identical and again comparing the FG830 with a much more expensive USA solid wood spruce/rosewood dread (a new Taylor 410) we're hearing a guitar that on all levels, not least sound, punches way above its price.

Okay, we don't get a case or gigbag in the deal and the cutaway electro 'X' versions ramp up the price to £536 but as a pure acoustic dreadnought this is one you simply must try whether you're just starting out or are a lot more experienced. With a suggested selling price of £322 in store it's dangerously close to being a real game-changer.

## YAMAHA FS850 £398

The FG's little bro'...

**THE** FG monicker apparently, stands for 'folk guitar', but the FGs are deadnought-sized, and if you want an actual 'folk'-size guitar, you'll want this FS – sitting somewhere between Martin's 00 and 000 sizes – the genesis of which seems to date back to the Yamaha FG1500 of the early 70s.

The FS has a shorter 635mm (25-inch) scale length, a reduced body width of 381mm (15-inch) and shallower depth by about 8mm. It retains the same width and string-spacing at the nut as it's bigger bro' but – importantly – reduces the string spacing at the bridge from 55mm to 50mm. This is why when you start playing this lil' chap things feel rather cramped. For many players a smaller 000-size is the perfect fingerpicking guitar and many a more 'serious' model has a wider nut and bridge string spacing. So, here, FS doesn't really stand for 'FingerStyle': it more accurately equates to 'For Student' or 'For Small (people)'. Ahem.

But while the new FSs start with the wallet-friendly FS800 (£268), this one, along with the FG850 dreadnought, tops this new range. It's certainly classy in style with its solid mahogany top and wood edge-binding, abalone soundhole inlay and fine white coach-line inside its black-bound fingerboard and headstock; its more compact dimensions also make for an extremely comfortable seated player.

Sound-wise the combination of its reduced size and its hardwood top give it a slightly narrower sound with a little less bass oomph and slightly rounded, almost compressed, highs but it's not as 'bluesy' or powerful as Martin's only slightly smaller-bodied new, all-sapele Dreadnought Junior.

So while it may well suit younger players with smaller digits, it's a very cool piece for electric players, too: its more Gibson-like string spacing and scale feel very familiar – a plectrum player's *tour de force*.

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### VERDICT

**IRRELEVANT** OF the 50th anniversary, these new Yamaha's are near faultlessly good for their prices. If we're honest, the FG830 could be considerably more and we'd still be saying the same. The 800M might not quite have the sparkle and contemporary sheen of the 830 but it has a real workhorse

'blue collar' vibe. Finally, the FS850 has everything going for it except, for more serious fingerstyle players at least, its narrow bridge spacing. Even so, with its subtly different voicing it'll appeal to player looking for an 'older' sound and certainly played with a pick it has plenty of punch.

#### YAMAHA FG800M £213

##### AT A GLANCE

**TOP:** Solid Spruce  
**BACK & SIDES:** Laminated nato/okume  
**NECK:** Nato  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 650mm (25.6")  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 20  
**ELECTRICS:** No  
**HARDWARE:** Rosewood bridge w/ compensated urea saddle, die-cast chrome-plated tuners  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No, check the FG820L (£351)  
**FINISH:** Natural matt (as reviewed)  
**CONTACT:** Yamaha, 01908 366700, uk.yamaha.com



SUMMARY	FEATURES				
	SOUND QUALITY				
	VALUE FOR MONEY				
	BUILD QUALITY				
	PLAYABILITY				
	OVERALL RATING				

★★★★★

#### YAMAHA FG830 £360

##### AT A GLANCE

**TOP:** Solid spruce  
**BACK & SIDES:** Laminated rosewood  
**NECK:** Nato  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 650mm (25.6")  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 20  
**ELECTRICS:** No. The FGX830C electro costs £536  
**HARDWARE:** Rosewood bridge w/ compensated urea saddle, die-cast chrome tuners  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Natural (as reviewed), Tobacco Brown Sunburst, Autumn Burst – gloss body with satin neck



SUMMARY	FEATURES				
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	VALUE FOR MONEY				
	BUILD QUALITY				
	PLAYABILITY				
	OVERALL RATING				

★★★★★

#### YAMAHA FS850 £398

##### AT A GLANCE

**TOP:** Solid mahogany  
**BACK & SIDES:** Laminated mahogany  
**NECK:** Nato  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 634mm (25")  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 20  
**ELECTRICS:** No  
**HARDWARE:** Rosewood bridge w/ compensated urea saddle, die-cast chrome tuners  
**LEFT-HANDED:** No  
**FINISH:** Natural (as reviewed) – gloss body with satin neck



SUMMARY	FEATURES				
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★★★★★