

## FIRST PLAY



**EPIPHONE**  
**JOE BONAMASSA BLACK**  
**BEAUTY LES PAUL CUSTOM**  
£749

**WHAT IS IT?** Epiphone's latest tie-up with Joe Bonamassa – a Chinese-made version of his own three-pickup 1958 Gibson Les Paul Custom 'Black Beauty'

# Style & Substance

Joe Bonamassa raids Nerdville East to select his latest Epiphone replica. Isn't this three-pickup Custom one of the coolest Les Pauls ever?

**Words** Dave Burrluck **Photography** Neil Godwin

**E**piphone's latest Joe Bonamassa tie-up, based on his three-pickup Les Paul Custom circa 1958, certainly comes across as a very complete package. It has vintage credentials, a great backstory, comes with a very tidy case and, oh, looks great! But it's far from style over substance and is another reminder of the ever-increasing quality of the Asian-built guitar.

The original Custom recipe is replicated here. This guitar is all mahogany with an ebony fingerboard. While it's actually slightly lighter than Joe's original, it's chunky and weighty; there's no weight relief and it's well in line with numerous modern single-cuts we've tested. Of course, we're not talking nitro finish, but the standard poly is perfect. It's beautifully contrasted by the amber-tinted binding to the top and back of the body with multi-ply inner purfling, and single-ply binding to the fingerboard and headstock, which, incidentally, is pitched at a slighter angle than the classic 17 degrees.

The new-regime, more Gibson-style headstock outline is pretty cool in our book, too, as are the very tidy pearloid block inlays. We haven't played a note and we're falling for this one already...









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## Under The Hood

The circuit of Joe's new drive is largely vintage-correct

We've opened up plenty of guitars considerably more expensive than this to find the same CTS pots (500kohms) and Orange Drop tone caps (.022 microfarads). While not the tidiest job we've ever seen, this is pretty much the same as you'd get in a USA Production Les Paul Standard. The middle pickup connects to an extra lug on the pukka Switchcraft toggle switch then heads to the input lug of the bridge volume control where it joins the bridge pickup and in the centre position of the toggle creates that 'new' sound. The tone controls connect to the volume in what we'd call modern style, but comparing what we have here to the original circuit diagram it seems pretty vintage-correct.

Here, though, unlike the original, all three pickups have the same polarity and all have the same wire mesh shielded single-conductor hook-up cable, so if you were considering any trickier wiring then bear that in mind. DCRs are on the hotter side of the PAF scale with the bridge ProBucker 3 measuring 8.56kohms at output; the ProBucker 2s at the neck and middle are closer to 8k.



The CTS pots and Orange Drop caps are not your usual Epiphone fare

1. Don't you just hate it when you restring your Les Paul and the bridge and tailpiece drop off? Well, here Epiphone's LockTone system holds both pairs in place without additional locking bolts

2. It might have the 'wrong' logo, but this new headstock outline is very classy, isn't it?

While the tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece appear pretty generic-looking, they employ Epiphone's LockTone system, which means both parts clip to their posts and won't fall off during a string change. Whether or not they improve sustain, as claimed, might be difficult to determine, but as we'll find out this is a guitar that certainly doesn't lack in that department. The unusual and very retro tuners, which have appeared on previous Epiphone Masterbilt models, might seem an odd choice here, but the originals were actually stock on Bonamassa's '58 Gibson. They have domed backs and pretty chunky buttons, but are smooth enough in use, and do contribute to a very stable guitar, tuning wise. The Graph Tech NuBone nut is extremely well cut, too, and if we're honest we've had more tuning issues with some contemporary Gibsons.

A trio of gold-covered ProBuckers (2s in the neck and middle, and a 3 at the bridge) contribute to the opulent gold/black theme. The PAF-style ProBuckers appeared around 2013 and have had consistently good feedback, but another twist here is the control circuit components, which are more like you'd find on a Gibson USA production Les Paul.

## Custom Credentials Joe talks through his new model's inspiration

The Les Paul Custom surfaced in mid-1954 and introduced the game-changing tune-o-matic bridge. Of course, that was pre-humbucker, so the P-90 soapbar at the bridge was joined by the Alnico V 'staple' at the neck. The sales line was "The Fretless Wonder – the incomparable Les Paul Custom guitar". Originally, the all-black-finished Custom, aka the 'Black Beauty', was all Honduran mahogany with no maple top, and an ebony fingerboard. The three-pickup version was introduced

Ohio, apparently. "This one here was a candidate because it's not mint," says Joe. "The neck was over-sprayed on the back because it had worn out and people clear-coat them sometimes. I got this guitar at the right price to do what I needed to do to make it a super-playable instrument."

It needed refretting, too, says Joe: "The 'Fretless Wonder' thing worked at the time for the kinda music Les [Paul] wanted to play on it – super fast, no bends. But if you're bending on it, it doesn't work."

"It was not mint... I got this guitar at the right price to do what I needed to do to make it a super-playable instrument"

late in 1957, effectively the same guitar but this time with the famous trio of gold-plated covered PAFs.

The Epiphone follows that style based on Joe Bonamassa's '58 model – "all nine and a half pounds of it," he quips to Gibson's Mark Agnesi in a recent walkthrough of his fabled Nerdville East HQ in Nashville – and a relatively new addition to his ever-growing collection, purchased at Hauer Music in Centerville,

The other oddity you'll find on Joe's '58 model is the way that, in the centre position of the toggle switch, the middle pickup was voiced with the bridge pickup to create what Gibson stated at the time was a sound "for extreme highs and special effects". Joe explains: "The middle and bridge pickups when voiced together are severely out of phase – not even cool out-of-phase but severely tinny, unplayable. So what you do is you flip the magnet on the



[middle] PAF to get them all going in the same direction and it kinda sounds like a SuperStrat, you know?"

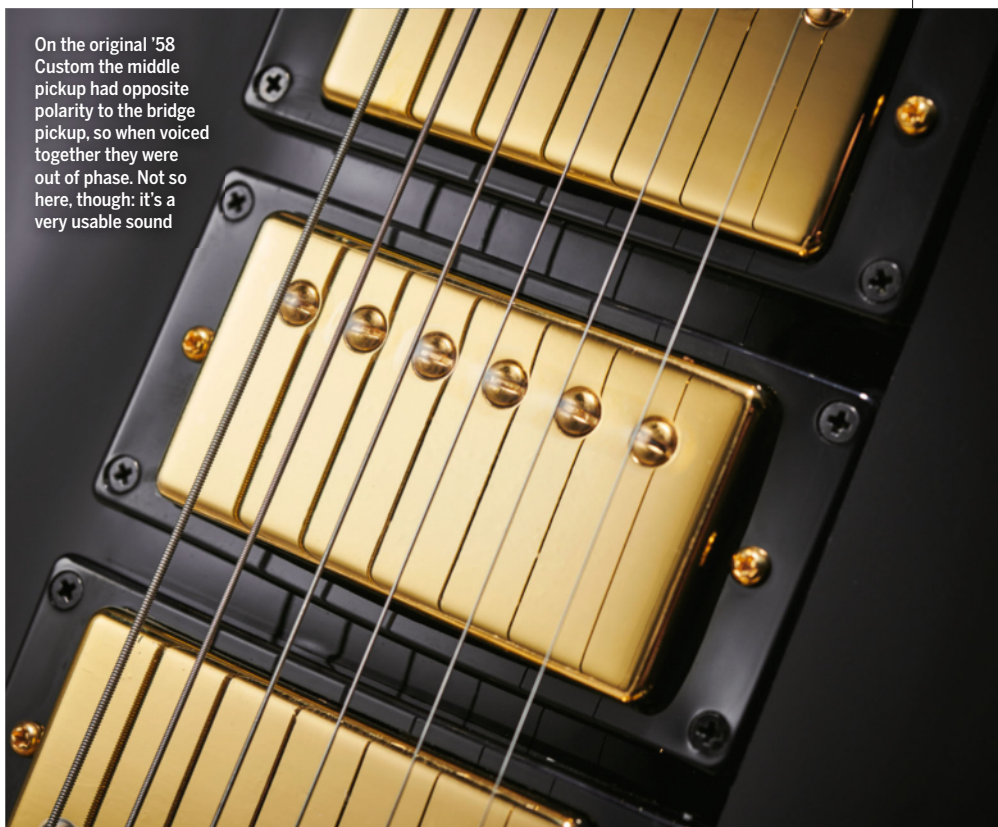
The model lasted until its SG-style makeover in 1961, after which numerous greats wielded this different-sounding Les Paul. We're talking Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, even Danny Gatton – and not forgetting Peter Dinklage, of course, whose Custom was originally a '54 routed for three humbuckers.

### Feel & Sounds

If you like your necks big with a rounded profile, you'll be right at home here. This beast has a depth of 23.1mm at the 1st fret – which, to put into perspective, is the depth at the 12th fret of the Fender American Pro IIs on review elsewhere in this issue. That full, rounded feel in the lower positions just gets bigger, touching 26mm as the 12th fret area flows into the neck heel. The fret gauge is pretty regular medium jumbo (approximately 2.69mm wide by 1.1mm high), and the frets themselves sit tidily over the edge binding, although they could do with just a little more smoothing if we're being picky, as there's a slightly scratchy feel on bends. As supplied, setup is pretty mainstream, but is 1.5mm on the treble side at the 12th fret and edging 2mm on the bass side. It's a muscular-feeling, weighty guitar, but even before you plug in there's a really inviting smooth yet vibrant response.

Firstly, this is a different-sounding Les Paul thanks to that middle pickup. You can't voice it on its own, just in tandem with the bridge pickup when the toggle selector switch is in middle position. The downside is that the classic bridge and neck mix position of a two-pickup Les Paul – where

On the original '58 Custom the middle pickup had opposite polarity to the bridge pickup, so when voiced together they were out of phase. Not so here, though: it's a very usable sound





3. The key to this Custom's unique tone is a slightly different three-way toggle switch that, in centre position, pairs the middle and bridge pickup together

4. These vintage-style 'Historic' Epiphone tuners replicate those found (unusually) on Joe's original. They look pretty funky but work very well: this is one very stable Les Paul



## EPIPHONE JOE BONAMASSA BLACK BEAUTY LES PAUL CUSTOM

**PRICE:** £749 (inc case)

**ORIGIN:** China

**TYPE:** Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

**BODY:** Mahogany (non weight-relieved)

**NECK:** Mahogany, 50s profile, glued-in

**SCALE LENGTH:** 628mm (24.75")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Graph Tech NuBone/43.07mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Bound ebony, pearloid block markers, 305mm (12") radius

**FRETS:** 22, medium/jumbo

**HARDWARE:** Epiphone LockTone tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece, vintage-style Epiphone Historic tuners – gold-plated

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 51.5mm

**ELECTRICS:** Epiphone ProBucker 2 humbuckers (neck and middle), ProBucker 3 (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector, 2x volumes, 2x tones

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 4.23/9.3

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The standard 2-pickup Epiphone Custom, in black or white, with Slim Taper neck and a gigbag costs £599

**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not this model

**FINISH:** Ebony (as reviewed)

**Gibson**

[www.gibson.com](http://www.gibson.com)



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**PROS** Very tidy build with vintage-specific neck, fulsome PAF-alike sounds and unique mixed-position voice

**CONS** More expensive than the standard twin-pickup model, but we don't feel short-changed

you can subtly shape so many benchmark sounds – isn't here. Instead, what we have is a frankly more Fender-y mix, if a little thicker, with an almost cocked-wah-like honk that, along with the bridge pickup, gives a relatively bright voicing to what many would consider a 'dark'-sounding Les Paul. It's actually quite a good balance of depth, clarity and power, perfect for classic blues/rock styles without sounding over-thick or one dimensional. And that's just the bridge pickup. That said, the volume does soften the attack as it's reduced perhaps a little too much, and we'd be tempted to consider a treble bleed, certainly for those more diverse function-style gigs.

The neck pickup alone might be the sole reason to buy this affordable 'Paul. It's a big voice, but there is clarity. Pull the volume and tone back and clean up your amp and there's plummy jazz; pull the tone back up and it's a slightly rounded voice that loves a little more crunch; then wind it back up to full for your moodier blues and rock leads. As is, the third pickup doesn't bring anything more to the table than a dual-pickup version, but there is quite a particular character to the voicing here.

With a cranked Marshall, this lowly Custom holds its own when compared to a Gibson Les Paul Classic with Burstbuckers I and II, and our modded and stripped Tokai with Cream T Bangers – less scooped with less high-end sizzle with the controls maxed out. What we're hearing is a slightly

## With a cranked Marshall, this lowly Custom holds its own when compared to a Gibson Les Paul Classic with Burstbuckers I and II

smoother and rounded nose to the note attack and a little more midrange push. Now, whether you put that down to the construction, pickups – whatever – it's a viable and attractive voice.

### Verdict

Many of us can be sniffy about low-cost lookalikes, but this one was a genuine surprise. Aside from the fact it's one of the coolest-looking Les Pauls ever, with its period-style neck and good weight it not only feels substantial but sounds it, too. It's about that illusive character, reflected by the modded mixed position voice, which fixes the original style and provides a different voice that is bookended by very credible bridge and neck sounds that really punch above the price point. Yes, it slots in at the top of the Epiphone range in price, but, like we say, it's a good package that stands out in a crowded market.

Time to re-evaluate Epiphone? On this evidence, most definitely. And with Mr Bonamassa's guitar collection ever-growing, we can only wonder what's next. **G**