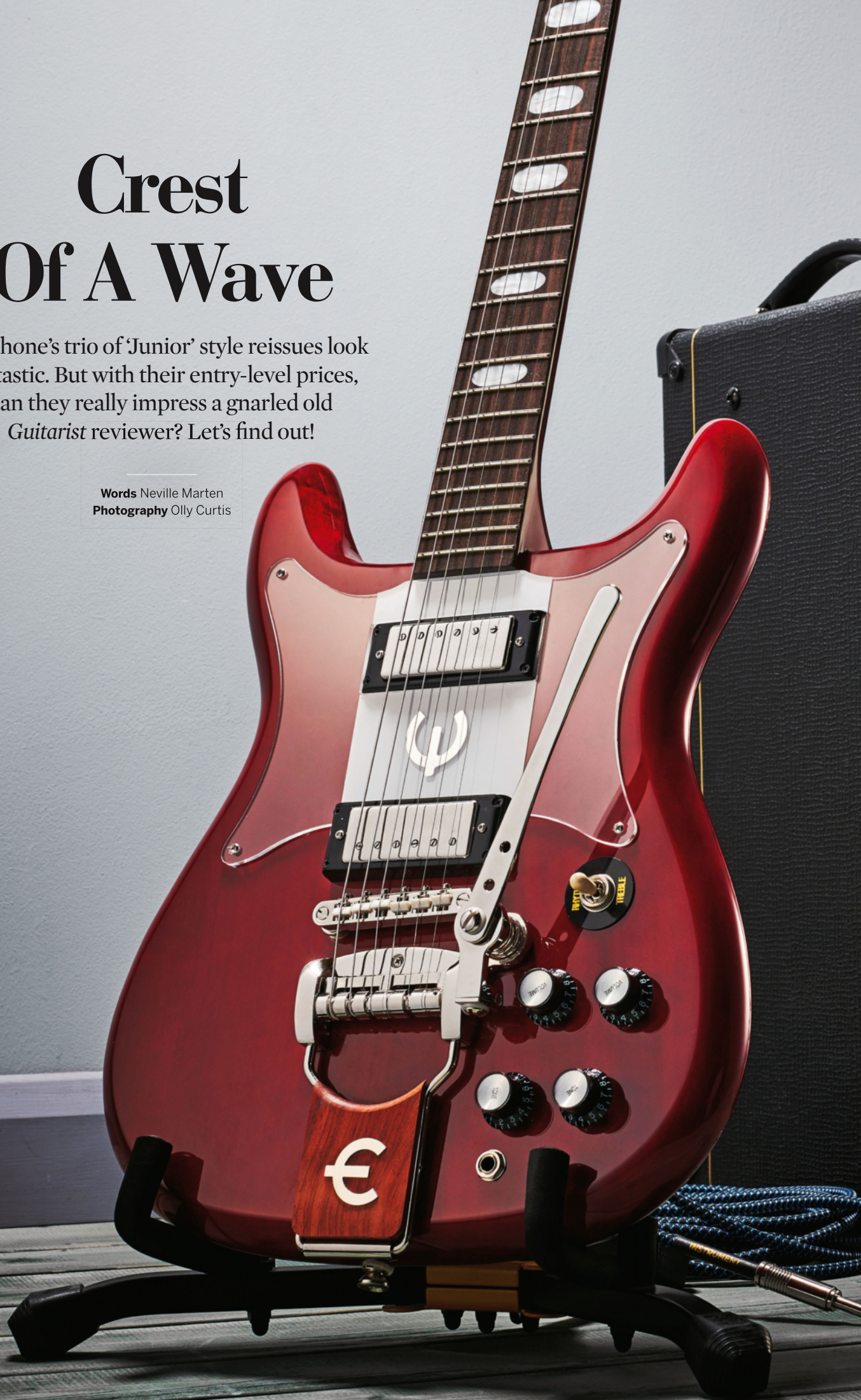


Crest Of A Wave

Epiphone's trio of 'Junior' style reissues look fantastic. But with their entry-level prices, can they really impress a gnarled old *Guitarist* reviewer? Let's find out!

Words Neville Marten
Photography Olly Curtis







EPIPHONE CORONET, WILSHIRE & CRESTWOOD CUSTOM £349, £399 & £489

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Let's get the obvious out of the way right here: these are some of the coolest-looking electric guitars ever made. There's no debating that fact, so let's quickly move on...

The Coronet, Wilshire and Crestwood were released in 1958 (Crestwood) and 1959 (Wilshire and Coronet) as Epiphone's answer to the Gibson Les Paul Junior and Special. Epiphone had been part of the Gibson family since the two companies came together just the year before. But the once rival firm became vital to the parent brand in that it allowed Kalamazoo-made instruments to be sold to retailers that, due to territorial restrictions in Gibson dealers' contracts, were otherwise out of bounds.

As was so often the case with new models that emerged around this time, all three underwent changes – big and small – in the five or so years post launch. And without presenting you with a comprehensive and almost certainly tedious list, some of the most obvious changes include: slimming the body down from the original 44.45mm (1.75

inches) to 35mm (1.375 inches) as here, and rounding off the squarer Tele-style edges; losing the kitsch-but-cool metal nameplate seen on our guitars and switching from this short double-sided headstock to the famous 'batwing' six-a-side design; and lessening the lower horn and replacing the launch models' asymmetrical pickguards with the 'butterfly'-style and large 'E' logo, again as here. Possibly most notable of all was that, when they ran out of the single-coil Epiphone New York pickup, Gibson wisely fitted its more powerful P-90 to the Coronet and Wilshire, and its new mini-humbucker to the Crestwood – which became the Crestwood Custom a year after launch. Phew!

Let's get the obvious out of the way right here: these are some of coolest-looking electrics ever made

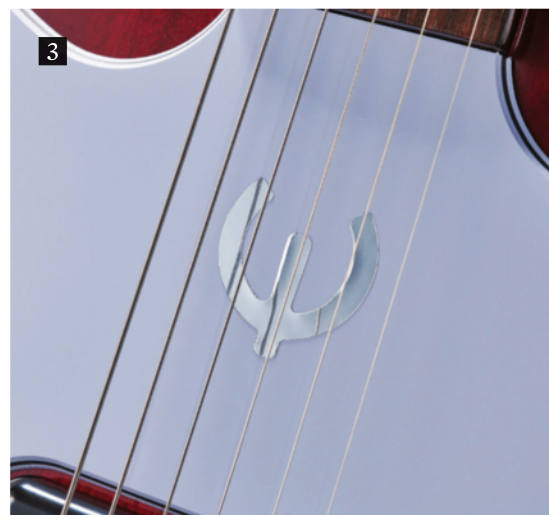
So, even with that stripped-down version of events, you can see it was a complicated if not turbulent time for the range, and, in a way, what we have here is the most pleasing visual and working compromises of all the above versions.

Clearly there's a hierarchy present, with the flashier two-pickup Crestwood Custom sitting at the top of the pile and the simplest of the three, the single-P-90 Coronet, at the bottom. Snuggled in the middle sits the Wilshire, a sort of 'Special' to the Coronet's 'Junior'.

All three guitars are finished in lustrous polyester, and all feature nickel-plated hardware and the stylised Epiphone 'E' in gold foil in the centre of their 'butterfly'-style pickguards. And just to show the level of thought that's gone into the new range, they all come with Graph Tech NuBone fingerboard nuts, where Epiphone could have easily insinuated cheapo plastic.

Spot The Difference

Actually, Epiphone has made the demarcations very clear in these new models. And, while they all sit on the



same double-cutaway body, they've been designed as specific propositions in their own right, each one bringing something specific to the table. Going from bottom to top of the range, we begin with the delightfully basic Coronet.

Checking the spec on Epiphone's website it's clear that, despite these instruments' entry-level price points, the company has not stinted with the quality of materials or parts. We don't know what genus of mahogany this is, but it's stated as that fabled guitar tonewood in the spec, while the fingerboard is Indian laurel. Also known as Indian walnut, this timber (which other makers, not least Gretsch, have also employed in certain recent models) is grown in both that country and Myanmar and is not on the CITES list of endangered species. With its dark streaky lines on a medium-brown background it looks like a super alternative to the scarcer rosewood. The body is centre-jointed while the glued-in neck is a single piece, save for the added headstock wings that you'll find even on Custom Shop Gibsons. So, no scarf joints or stacked heels here.



1. The Coronet's simple symmetrical design is incredibly appealing, helping to make it one of our favourite vintage guitar designs
2. Indian laurel is the fingerboard material. It's an excellent alternative to rosewood and looks the part, too. Frets are medium jumbo and the dots pearloid plastic
3. The pickguards on all three Epiphones feature the stylised 'E' that appeared on most of the brand's models during the 'golden era'. It rather reminds us of the Gretsch 'G' and is a cool visual touch
4. Epiphone has fitted its P-90 Pro in 'dog-ear' format to the Coronet, as well as an intonation compensated Lightning Bar bridge/tailpiece

5. On the Wilshire we find a pair of Epiphone P-90 Pros; these are powerful and fruity sounding and here they are black 'soapbar' style. Note the single-ply faux-tortoise pickguard and 'E' logo

6. The Wilshire's bridge and tailpiece follow the Gibson norm. Epiphone calls this tune-o-matic the LockTone. Two volumes and tones sit with the three-way toggle and jack socket



The Coronet's single pickup is a dog-ear P-90 Pro, which we already know is a great-sounding, fat-toned single coil, here mated to quality CTS pots and heavy-duty output jack. The wrapover bridge/tailpiece is the same compensated 'Lightning Bar' that Gibson fitted to certain SGs in the 60s, and is a preferable alternative to the basic stopbar that lacks individual string intonation.

Moving up a rung we come to the Wilshire. Essentially a double-P-90 version of the Coronet, it's based around an identical platform but with two 'soapbar' style P-90 Pros linked to twin volume and tone pots. The three-way pickup selector toggle and jack socket are located in the same cluster. Here, the pickguard is single-ply faux tortoise and we find a regular tune-o-matic style bridge that Epiphone calls the 'LockTone', with standard stud tailpiece. The finish is black, and just like the Coronet's classic Cherry, is perfectly buffed to a bright gloss.

Moving on up to the top-of-the-range Crestwood Custom, this is the most different of this trio. Visually, what one notices first is the clear plastic pickguard with large white centre stripe – actually painted onto the underside so the top is perfectly smooth. On this Cherry finish





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7. The great Steve Marriott played an Epiphone Crestwood with Humble Pie. Our Chinese-made reissue retains all the original's coolness, with great sounds and a vibrato that works!

8. Epiphone used the short three-a-side headstock for these reissues, rather than the 'batwing' design found on later models. Quality plastic button Kluson-a-like tuners complete the picture



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you might think it looks a little odd – perhaps a touch too busy – but check out the Polaris White version and it makes instant visual sense.

Here, the pickups are Epiphone Pro mini-humbuckers. Gibson has used mini-humbuckers in various forms on a variety of instruments, from Les Paul Deluxes to Firebirds and, of course, on the Epiphone Riviera and Sheraton models – even jazz guitars like the Johnny Smith. So, as you can see, it's a fantastically versatile pickup with a sound all of its own – that narrow footprint providing a brighter, clearer voice than that of its bulkier siblings.

Control layout is as on the Wilshire, but the big departure here is that interesting-looking vibrato tailpiece. The 'Tremtone', as Epiphone titled it (we love all those corny monikers the electric guitar and amp companies dreamt up), naturally evokes thoughts of Paul Bigsby's classic unit, and there are certainly elements of that in how it operates. However, unlike the former contraption, which is notoriously tricky to load (with the strings' ball-ends having to hook onto tiny posts on a wrap-around bar), here the strings simply load through rearward-facing holes and pull up and over without the 'popping off' problem that

afflicts regular-style Bigsby's (some recent versions have addressed this, of course).

What also sets this tailpiece apart is the Indian laurel insert, with the attractive Epiphone 'E' emblem making a second appearance. And check out the two extra holes in the vibrato arm: these are for relocating its pivot point should you prefer it shorter for a more positive action – simple but cool, and just the kind of clever hack that our own Trev Wilkinson might dream up.

Feel & Sounds

The guitars all came with slightly different setups out of the box, mostly a little on the high side for this particular player. But a few minor tweaks soon brought them into line – and bear in mind we often do the same on instruments far higher up the food chain. All three necks are exactly the same medium C profile, thickening slightly from approximately 21mm at the 1st fret up to 23mm at the 12th. Scale length is a uniform 628mm (24.72 inches) and nut width is a ubiquitous 43mm (1.69 inches). Frets are medium jumbo – pretty much par for the course these days and likely to provide a fuss-free playing experience on the 305mm (12-inch) radius fingerboard.

Each neck is an enjoyable playground, and the Gibson-style scale length makes for easy string bends

The necks join the body at the last of their 22 frets, leaving the entire fingerboard available for your explorations. On a strap it's a little like a Gibson SG with its strap button also located behind the heel, so there's a tendency for the necks to drop when not supported. The popular fix was usually to add another button on the top horn, as on a Strat, and that might be worth doing if this top-heaviness offends.

Otherwise, each guitar's neck is an enjoyable playground, and the Gibson-style scale length makes for easy string bends, while the medium jumbo frets and laurel 'board do indeed contribute to that comfortable and familiar feel.

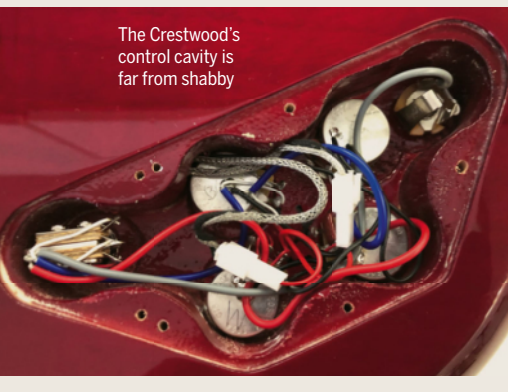
Sonically, the Coronet's bridge P-90 Pro is a killer. Even with the tone wide open it's fat but very present, cleaning up a treat when you knock the volume back to 3, or

UNDER THE HOOD

A peek at the 'busy' innards of the Crestwood Custom

It's always interesting to see how the innards of any guitar stack up when compared with the more obvious external build quality. Here's the control cavity of our Crestwood Custom. There's a lot crammed into this small space: four pots (quality CTS), plus the toggle switch and output jack. We'd say it looks 'busy' rather than untidy. The soldering is neat, with no huge blobs, and note that the pickups are fitted via two white push-in connectors. We can't actually see anything written on the capacitors, but would guess they are Gibson-style .022 microfarads. It looks like someone made a second attempt at fitting the cavity cover, as two sets of screw holes are visible towards the selector switch end (this is not apparent on the other guitars). Let's just say it adds a bit of personality!

The Crestwood's control cavity is far from shabby



9. The mini-humbuckers on the Crestwood sound crisp and ballsy; they work superbly with drive pedals as they don't 'mush up'. The pickguard's large white stripe is painted onto its underside

10. Epiphone calls this vibrato the TremTone. It's solidly built and the arm length is adjustable via two extra holes (see main pic). Indian laurel is used for the wooden insert and the 'E' logo appears in metal here

11. The large oblong position markers on the Crestwood Custom are unique to the model. Again, notice the rosewood-like Indian laurel fingerboard and medium jumbo frets, of which there are 22

even 2. With the power cranked back up and the treble tamed, the sound is huge – like Clapton meets Leslie West and, really, what more could you want?

Swapping to the Wilshire its bridge pickup offers more of the same ballsy fare, while the neck unit kicks out smooth, fruity tones that never get too muddy, even when pushing the gain. Kind of like a really fat Strat. Select the middle position on the three-way and things get distinctly 'quacky', in the nicest possible way – sort of 'country meets *Crossroads*' if you will, and the kind of tone Joe Walsh often goes for with The Eagles.

The Crestwood Custom is the big surprise. The Pro mini-humbuckers are spectacularly good. Clean, they retain an open clarity that's bright but never piercing. Add a nice drive pedal and it's one of the most musical sounds around; that lovely high-end remains but the voice becomes incredibly expressive. Each position on the switch sounds great, and the nearest player whose sound you might recognise in it is Johnny Winter, whose Firebird pickups were, of course, close relations to these. Try some dirty slide with both pickups on – it's Texas blues-rock heaven!

Verdict

At the top of this piece we asked whether guitars at this entry-level price point could impress a gnarled old *Guitarist* reviewer. Well, the answer is a resounding yes! Of course, these are not Honduran mahogany

Crestwood Custom's Pro mini-humbuckers are spectacularly good... Add a drive pedal and it's one of the most musical sounds around



10



11

and Brazilian rosewood marvels, but modern-day versions of 60-year-old Epiphone entry models using today's available materials. That Epiphone has done it so well, and employed such great-sounding pickups and even bothered with quality pots and nut material, is a testament to the brand's clear desire to get it right.

And if you go back to the days of the company's original Coronet, its parent marque's LP Junior and, yes, even the Fender Duo-Sonic, it's exactly what they did all those years ago. "Get them playing your brand at the start and they'll stay with you forever; put them off with an unplayable, cheap-sounding plank and they'll go elsewhere," is what a fairly high-up Gibson man told this reviewer back in 1978. How right he was. And on the basis of these three lovelies, we'd certainly stick with Epiphone. **G**



EPIPHONE CORONET

PRICE: £349
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany with rounded edges
NECK: Mahogany, medium C profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.72")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian laurel, unbound with pearloid dot inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Epiphone Lightning Bar compensated wraparound bridge/tailpiece, '3 On A Plate' tuners with ivory buttons and press-in bushings
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: Single Epiphone P-90 Pro 'dog-ear', single volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3/6.6
OPTIONS: Colours only
RANGE OPTIONS: Wilshire and Crestwood Custom, as reviewed
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Cherry (as reviewed), Black



9/10

PROS Fabulous value, brilliantly ballsy tones, great neck

CONS Location of strap button makes it a tad headstock-heavy



EPIPHONE WILSHIRE

PRICE: £399
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany with rounded edges
NECK: Mahogany, medium C profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.72")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian laurel, unbound with pearloid dot inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Epiphone LockTone tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece, Epiphone Deluxe tuners with ivory buttons
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Epiphone P-90 Pro 'soapbar', twin volume and tone controls, 3-way selector
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.1/6.82
OPTIONS: Colours only
RANGE OPTIONS: Coronet and Crestwood Custom, as reviewed
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Cherry, Black (as reviewed)



9/10

PROS As Coronet, but the Wilshire is more versatile due to that second pickup

CONS Ditto Coronet



EPIPHONE CRESTWOOD CUSTOM

PRICE: £489
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany with rounded edges
NECK: Mahogany, medium C profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.72")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Indian laurel, unbound with large oblong inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Epiphone LockTone tune-o-matic bridge w/ nylon saddles, Tremotone vibrato tailpiece with Indian laurel insert, Epiphone Deluxe Vintage tuners with ivory buttons
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Epiphone Pro mini-humbuckers, twin volume and tone controls, 3-way selector
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.2/7.04
OPTIONS: Colours only
RANGE OPTIONS: Wilshire and Coronet, as reviewed
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Cherry (as reviewed), Polaris White



9/10

PROS Gorgeous bright but 'important' tones, versatility, quirky but cool vibrato system

CONS Ditto Coronet/Wilshire