

Albert Lee's Huss & Dalton MJ



Before taking delivery of it, the legendary Albert Lee granted Acoustic a world exclusive sneak preview of his newly commissioned (and paid for) Huss & Dalton MJ for a full review.

You might be forgiven for thinking that Huss & Dalton were a pair of mythical California cowboys, or outlaws in a Sam Peckinpah movie. But Jeff Huss and Mark Dalton's company makes high end acoustic guitars in Staunton, Virginia. Huss made his first guitar after hours at Stelling Banjo Works where he had been working for five years. His boss was so impressed that he asked Huss to build him one, which he started taking along to festivals. Pretty soon other players were placing orders, including Mark Dalton, and Huss eventually set up shop on his own.

After Huss left, Mark Dalton took a job at Stelling Banjo Works to do finishing work, but after a year and a half Huss and Dalton decided to join forces. The Huss And Dalton Guitar Co. Inc. was formed in October 1995. The business blossomed and the operation was moved to its present four thousand square foot facility in 1999. No longer a two man operation, the company now has eleven employees building six to eight guitars per month. In a relatively short time, Huss & Dalton guitars have attracted some big name players, including Paul Simon, Mary Chapin-Carpenter, Gerry Leonard (David Bowie) plus Robin and Linda Williams.

Last year the company had a stand at the huge American trade show NAMM in California where the British guitar pickin' phenomenon, that is Albert Lee, dropped by to check them out. Albert was impressed; so much so that he commissioned the company to build him a custom guitar based on their standard MJ model. MJ stands for mid jumbo, a classic hour glass shape that recalls big bodied Gibsons like the J185, the J200 and the Everly Brothers model that Albert is so often seen playing. In fact Don Everly gave him his original guitar and Albert has been similarly generous by allowing us a first look at his new guitar. That's right folks, this is Albert's personal guitar and my editor has promised me that my passport will be returned once I've sent it back safely.

A spruce top with maple back and sides is the usual recipe for guitars of this shape and size, and Huss & Dalton are happy to stick to the same ingredients. But this isn't just any old timber. The top is Sitka spruce with a copious amount of bear claw figuring and the back, sides and neck are all maple with fairly outrageous flame. The tiger stripe pattern on the back is quite vivid, thanks to some fine book matching but it has to be said that the black stain Albert requested obscures the grain pattern a little.

The standard MJ model has a clear catalyzed urethane finish, but the black does create a striking contrast with the koa binding and the scratchplate. The effect is made even crisper by black/white/black and half herringbone edge purfling,

with two more bands of herringbone combining with koa to form the rosette. Interestingly the underside of the ebony fingerboard tongue is tapered to compensate for the curve of the top, so the purfling thins out to nothing, starting from the edge of the body. It's barely noticeable but the result is a ruler straight fretboard from nut to final fret.

The Huss & Dalton logo is inlaid into the ebony face of the koa bound peghead. For an extra touch of class (and strength) a sliver of koa is veneered onto the rear of the headstock. The gold plated Waverly tuners with snake wood buttons look great with a fresh set of phosphor bronzes and they work so smoothly it's easy to see why they're still the number one choice for so many top American guitars.

The bone nut is polished and precision fitted, just like the bone saddle with the smoothly shaped and barely noticeable intonation compensation. Small details like these, and the way the slots of the screws precisely line up on the neck bolt cover inside the body provide ample evidence of Huss & Dalton's attention to detail.

My customary grope inside the box provided a few interesting insights. Rather than copy the double 'X' brace pattern of the 1950s Gibson J200s, the MJ has a single forward shifted 'X' arrangement with two tone bars. The 'X' braces are scalloped but the tone bars aren't, and there's one additional small brace just behind the bass side of the bridge that ties the X brace to the tone bar.

The tops are all thickened individually using a deflection system to measure the stiffness of each individual top. Every one is placed on a jig and suspended at four points. A weight is then placed on the top, near the center, and a dial indicator is used to measure the deflection. The top is then incrementally thinned on a thickness sander, and continually rechecked on the deflection jig, until it deflects within an optimum range. Huss & Dalton claim they can achieve more consistent results with this system than by tap tuning or simple flexing of the wood.

The inside is as smooth as a baby's proverbial and all the braces are made from hand split Appalachian Red Spruce. The braces are also radiused, along with the kerfing. This puts a natural curve, or dome, into the top so the edges don't need to be flattened down when they're glued to the sides. Huss & Dalton claim that this reduces 'built in stress' and it also changes the sound by reducing boominess and bass heaviness while lifting the mid range. However they also make a Traditional Series for players who prefer old style tone.

This guitar generates a huge sound. The low mids punch like a prize fighter and the high frequencies are amazingly extended. I have often heard people describe acoustic guitars as 'piano-like', but it's the first time the term has ever seemed appropriate to me. This Huss & Dalton really does sound like a baby grand piano, most likely a Yamaha, with a brick holding the sustain pedal down. The tone is three dimensional and room filling with harmonics that swirl and collide in the most intriguing way.

Like speaker cones, acoustic guitar tops move air. Some speakers are small, so we expect them to be a bit light in the bass. Some have excessive treble to create the illusion of clarity for gullible listeners while others have over hyped bass to entrance the dance herberts. This MJ is more like a superbly engineered studio monitor. The clarity and precision of the sound is exceptional. The treble range is wide open and extended, but it's sweet and pure. There is balance and poise through the mids, creating a smooth transition to the very bottom without running out of puff or degenerating into boomy bluster.

Assuming the action is set to Albert's specifications, he prefers it medium/high. His MJ custom is still an easy playing guitar with perfect string spacing for finger-picking and strumming, and superb intonation. It's common practice for engineers to add high frequencies to allow an acoustic guitar to cut through a mix, and to roll off some bottom end to avoid boominess. A quick mic test demonstrated this guitars suitability for recording - I'd be surprised if any EQ would be deemed necessary.

For rhythm duties the MJ can be muscular and driving when played hard with a medium or thick plectrum, or delicate and ethereal with a thinner plectrum and a softer touch. The dynamic range is quite extraordinary too, but it's easy to control with pick or fingers. It's also a dream for fingerstyle thanks to the clean note separation and the solidly profound bass. Equally, melody lines picked out on the upper strings, whether it's strummed in a Bluegrass or Pete Townsend style, ring true and clear.

Verdict

I really don't know what to make of this guitar's looks. Every time I open the case I think 'wow', but after a while I'm not so sure. The famous Gibson Everley Brothers model probably inspired the fashionable trans black finish, and I've never seen it done better. But I can't shake my feeling that such glorious timber would look even better without it. On the other hand I'm equally certain that this guitar will look absolutely fantastic on stage.

In every respect this guitar oozes genuine class as a prime example of the (black) art of lutherie. The playability is quite wonderful, the tone will make jaws drop and you will only find this standard of workmanship and attention to detail from small operations run by dedicated master craftsmen. Since it's so clearly inspired by Gibson's classic jumbo models, I couldn't resist comparing the Huss & Dalton with my friend Roger Clatworthy's 1953 Gibson J185. After all, at this price level collector's grade vintage instruments are an option.

The guitars shared many characteristics but the MJ was louder, brighter and punchier. However the Gibson ran it close, with a warm toned woodiness through the midrange that it will take Albert's new guitar some years to acquire. Neither was better, it's just one of those vintage guitar/new guitar things. But Albert won't mind, the MJ has a unique voice and if he needs something a little sweeter, there's always Don's old Gibson hanging on his wall. So a big thanks to Albert Lee from all of us here at Acoustic, and here's hoping he'll love playing this guitar just as much as we have.

Huw Price

ACOUSTIC RATING:

Build Quality ★★★★★

Drop dead gorgeous

Sound ★★★★★

This isn't a generic sounding all rounder, but it's everything that you might hope or imagine a super jumbo maple/spruce guitar to be.

Playability ★★★★★

We have played guitars with lower action and a slightly looser feel, but if H&D can build to this standard then they can certainly set any guitar up to your personal specs.

Value ★★★★★

You can buy superficially similar all-solid guitars for considerably less, but if you have the inclination plus the funds to commission a guitar like this, 'value for money' probably isn't your number one priority.

Wow Factor ★★★★★

If we could award a 6 out of five we would!

Price: £4,200

Manufacturer: Huss and Dalton

Model: MJ Custom for Albert Lee

Body Size: Mini Jumbo

Country of Origin: USA

Top: Bearclaw Sitka Spruce

Back & Sides: Maple

Neck: Maple

Fingerboard: Ebony

Custom Extras for A Lee: Koa Soundhole rosette, Koa body and fingerboard binding. Ebony peghead facing Trans Black see through finish

No of Frets: 20 medium

Tuners: Waverly 4110 Gold Plated with Snakewood buttons ut Width

Length: Nut 1.75, Scale 25.4"

Weight: n/a

Strings Fitted: (Gauge & Brand) D'addario EXP 12's

Left Handers: To order

Gig bag/case: Tweed Hardshell Case included

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