

Good looks, top quality finishing and bona fide AAA grade wood

The unique inlays inject style and a whole lot of character

Superbly finished Canadian maple binding just completes those seductive looks

Solid gold, easy action, as the man once said

FRESHMAN FA400D

A BLONDE-TOPPED ACOUSTIC BEAUTY WORDS: MARK GIFFORD

> Nice guitar... Sure it's a Freshman?

Hey, enough of the label snobbery! Freshman have been gaining admirers for some time now, and this is the brand's latest incarnation of its flagship model, first debuted a couple of years ago. While the name may not be universally familiar, the quality is unquestionable. Tonewoods are sourced from around the world and assembled in China to a rigid specification. In fact, the company has a tightly controlled build operation, with a small team of expert craftsmen controlling the whole process.

I thought 'Chinese' just meant 'cheap'?

Certainly not, this guitar features some high quality materials – an Engleman AAA grade solid spruce top, solid rosewood back and sides and gold Grover heads. And the superb detailing and finishing are all very welcome sights on a guitar at the £500 mark.

Fine, but I've seen cheaper solid tops around, so what's the big deal here?

It's true enough that the vastly improved tonal qualities and greater longevity of solid top guitars (as opposed to laminated wood) can now be regularly found around the £500 mark, but this doesn't mean the build, materials and finish suffer as a consequence. Freshman has used AAA-grade spruce (many companies only use A or AA), which means greater precision, even grains, and a sound that will grow old gracefully. Combine this with top quality rosewood neck, back, sides as well as fingerboard, and you have a lot of guitar for relatively little money.

What was that about detailing again?

We're glad you asked, because Freshman have pushed the boat out here too. For a start the brand has used attractive, brushed Canadian maple binding on the body, which

will last longer than the usual plastic that can shrink and crack. Then there are those sparkling gold Grovers for good looks and precision tuning, together with some stunning inlays in real abalone – truly the mutha of pearl. Nice work.

So, this is a bit of posh for less dosh?

Yes. We particularly like the subtle patterning and unique variations in the fretboard inlays, which feature variegated Maltese-type crosses up to the twelfth fret followed by two pearl tears. The subtle differences in shape and colour are down to the graining of the shell cut, and again it beats synthetic substitutes hands (and fingers) down. Topping it all off is the abalone Freshman logo on the headstock, which adds a real touch of class.

OK, so it looks nice. But what about the sound?

Well, the guitar sounds good too. All that top grade spruce and rosewood combines to give a bright, well defined sound that has plenty of penetration and sustain. Whether you're playing open tuned or looking for an instrument that'll really project its character when playing fingerstyle or slide, the FA400D doesn't disappoint.

So what's it like to play?

With a hand crafted, silky smooth solid mahogany neck featuring 20 flawlessly bedded medium frets on a rosewood fingerboard, there's nothing to stop you cutting loose and unearthing the virtuoso within. Fingerpicking highlights a slightly treble-heavy response, but the simple solution is playing in. Engleman spruce – although not quite as warm as cedar, for example – will mellow in tone with time and plenty of hard strumming.

WHO'S IT FOR?

Any acoustic player who rates character, feel and quality more than the name on the neck

INFORMATION

ORIGIN: China
TOP: Solid AAA grade Engleman spruce, Canadian maple binding
BACK & SIDES: Solid rosewood
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 20, medium
HARDWARE: All gold Grover machineheads
CASE: Hard, semi-stitched, velvet-lined
CONTACT: 01355 228028
WEB: www.freshmanguitars.co.uk

ALTERNATIVELY

Cort Earth 1200 – £499
Suzuki SDG100 – £465
Yamaha DW15 – £525

The Freshman is a spruce top with more substance and staying power than most at this price. It has real character

The guitar plays accurately and responsively to the top fret and doesn't produce a nasty buzz or possess a dead spot. The action is firm but flexible, which is great for fast scalar runs, percussive barre work, or just a happy strum, depending on stringing and setting. This Freshman certainly makes playing pretty effortless.

Anything else I should know?

With the Freshman you get everything you'd expect from a top-notch guitar, including a compensated saddle seated on a deep-stained rosewood bridge, subtle hand-stained marquetry around the soundhole and a minimal tear-shaped tortoiseshell scratchplate that flows perfectly with the lines. The build and finish are generally good, apart from a little uneven plating on the Grover pegs and a small run-off to the body from the staining on the fingerboard binding, but, hey, we're splitting hairs here.

Not a dumb blonde then?

This is definitely a spruce top with more substance and staying power than most at this price. While some of the new crop of high-grade dreadnoughts flatter to deceive, the Freshman has real character and expressiveness, both in its looks and, most importantly, in its sound.

FOR: Excellent build and finish; great looks; fine sound; hard case
AGAINST: Those minor finish niggles

TG RATING:

