

Turning Japanese Yamaha SGV300 & SGV800

YAMAHA'S 'FLYING SAMURAI' GUITARS created quite a stir back in the '60s – and now these masterpieces of Eastern surf fashion have been recreated for shallow-pocketed modern-day tone hounds. Review by Paul Day

SGV300 RRP: £259

SGV800 RRP: £359

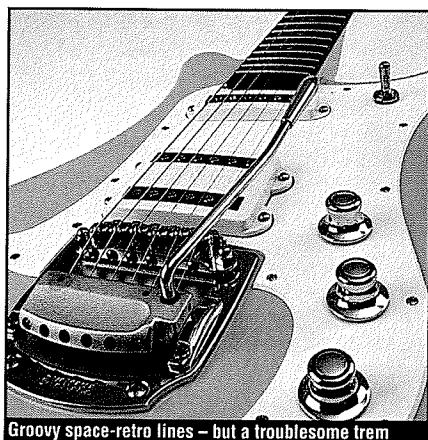
More and more guitar makers are increasingly bent on looking to their past for inspiration. Sometimes they authentically re-create former glories: other times, they use their earlier designs as a basis for new instruments. Yamaha is no stranger to re-invention – and as Yamaha's electric guitar history extends back as far as the '60s, there's no shortage of food for second thoughts.

Having already rekindled their '70s best-seller the SG2000, Yamaha has now decided to delve even deeper time-wise for the inspiration behind the SGV series. These electrics target the more individual end of the retro market, courtesy of eye-catching reverse-bodied styling – cribbed, along with quite a few other features, from what was virtually the second generation of Yamaha SG

solids that debuted around 1966.

Unlike the traditional SG2000 and its play-safe stablemates of the mid-'70s onwards, the company's earlier efforts were actually more adventurous and emphasised original thinking rather than conservative copying. The SG prefix may have been the same, but back then the company's approach reflected a distinct desire to be different. In the late '60s the American Mosrite brand enjoyed a high profile in Japan, thanks to the monster success enjoyed there by US instrumental group The Ventures, who endorsed the creations of Semi Moseley. His idiosyncratic ideas on guitar design influenced numerous Japanese guitar makers, including Yamaha. Their SG-5A and SG-7A six-strings certainly incorporated Mosrite mannerisms, along with a hefty dose of original thinking, plus hints of Fender and Rickenbacker for added flavour. These eye-catching solids were imported into the UK at the time and certainly made a bit of an impact, although actual sales were somewhat lean. But the range enjoyed appreciably more success in Japan thanks to homegrown groups like Terry & The Blue Jeans, and over there the early originals have become quite sought after by collectors.

To cater for this continuing interest Yamaha has produced various re-issues during the past 25 years (strictly for Japanese consumption only, of course). These revivals have been high-priced models, often emphasising the Blue Jeans associations, but now the company has decided to once



Groovy space-retro lines – but a troublesome trem



CHECK OUT...

Plenty of choice in the 'nouveau retro' market these days, via revivals, recreations and all-new 'oldies'. Those with a taste for the weird and the wonderful, read on...

ARIA's M series certainly targets the individualist, and the sparkle-finished, vibrato-equipped M650T (£399) is one of the best of the bunch, **contact** Aria UK ☎ 0208-572-0033. Brit builder **BURNS** naturally harps on about the past, but the Korean-made Marquee (£349) offers a more-affordable ticket for this particular piece of time travel, **contact** House Music ☎ 0207-481-3350. **DANELECTRO** has the 'fun guitars at fun prices' formula off to a fine art, and the Hodad (£425) and Mod (£439) represent new ideas on

old themes, **contact** JHS ☎ 0113-286-5381. The **DE ARMOND** Jet Star (£249) is a simplified but character-packed slant on Guild's Thunderbird solid six-string from the '60s, **contact** Arbiter ☎ 0208-202-1199. The Firebird (£268) from **EPIPHONE** repeats this formula, using Gibson's original feathered friend as role model, **contact** Rosetti ☎ 01376-550033. **GODIN's** Radiator (£359) is a modern twist on the pearloid-packed electrics from 35 years ago, **contact** EMD International, 01865-341597. But the new Korean-made **ITALIA** range takes this concept even closer to its origins via wacky plastic axes such as the suitably Italian-styled Modena (£449) and Monza (£399), **contact** Exclusive Distribution ☎ 01462-481148.

again bring this distinctive design to a broader market via the very competitively priced and widely available examples which make up the new SGV range. The series currently comprises three six-strings plus a similarly styled SBV bass. Two of these are now on offer in the UK – the SGV300 and 800.

SGV300

This is the cheapest in the line and the one that most accurately recreates many of the unique design features found on the original SG-5A – but it also manages a few updates of its own.

The original headstock owed nothing to any other brand and has been recreated here in all its stretched slimline splendour. The outline actually echoes the elongated hooked right horn of the body and offers ample room to accommodate a set of unbranded contemporary-type tuners. These are spaced so that all strings travel straight and true from nut to spindles, while wing-style guides on the top two pairs exert extra downforce.

The truss rod adjuster is situated behind the nut, hidden under a small cover neatly recessed into the headstock face. On the original SG-5A the latter was black, but now Yamaha have painted it the same as the body colour – always a cool cosmetic touch.

Another departure from the past concerns the zero fret. Thankfully this time round there isn't one, which means one less potential problem area, while the nut slots are evenly spaced and nicely cut for reduced friction and minimal action.

The rosewood fingerboard is lightly radiused and the dry-ish texture will benefit from some finger oil lubrication provided by playing in. Unlike the original, it's unbound and there's an angled overhang at the end, added purely as a visual match for the slope of the adjacent neck pickup. The frets are on the slim side, maintaining the SGV's retro feel, and all have been fitted and finished to the standard expected of Yamaha. The front

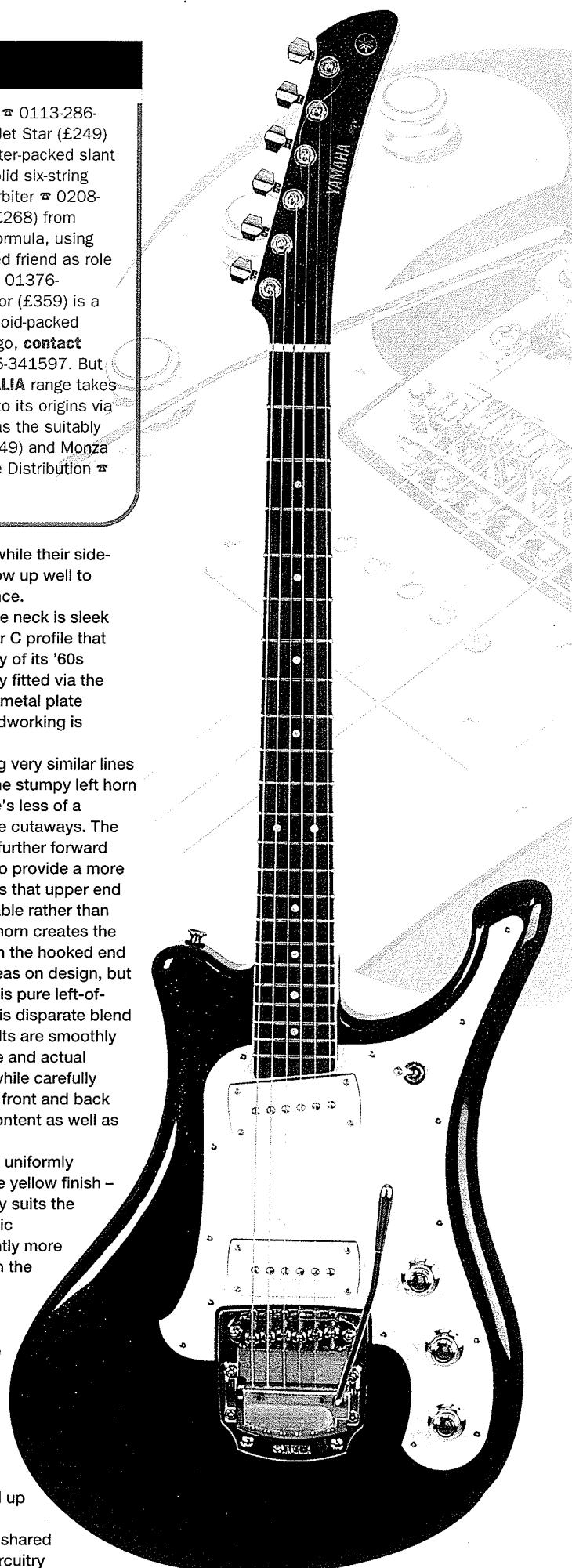
position dots stay small, while their side-mounted companions show up well to ensure easy visual reference.

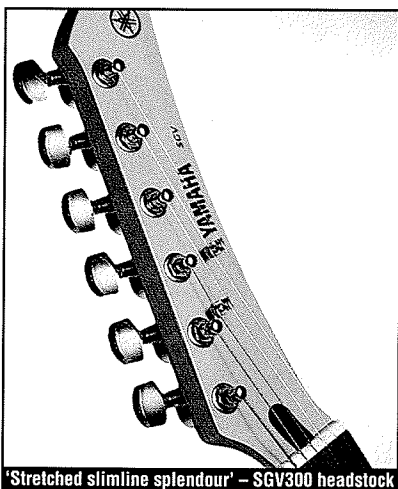
The satin-finished maple neck is sleek and slender, with a deeper C profile that improves on the playability of its '60s predecessor. It's still firmly fitted via the usual screw-quartet-plus-metal plate combination and the woodworking is typically precise.

The body is styled along very similar lines to the original, although the stumpy left horn is a little smaller and there's less of a sweeping curve across the cutaways. The neck is also sited slightly further forward than before, presumably to provide a more stable joint, but this means that upper end reach is now only acceptable rather than easy. The extended right horn creates the reversed-body image, with the hooked end recalling Rickenbacker ideas on design, but the lower half of the body is pure left-of-centre Mosrite. Despite this disparate blend of influences the end results are smoothly streamlined in appearance and actual balance is equally good, while carefully considered contouring on front and back increases the character content as well as creature comforts.

The alder body sports a uniformly smooth and glossy vintage yellow finish – a bold choice that certainly suits the SGV. The plain white plastic scratchplate features slightly more pronounced curves than in the '60s and provides a good colour contrast.

As before, the scratchplate carries all the controls, but the pickups are mounted directly to the body. These modern pickups look simpler than before but their configuration stays the same: a sloping single-coil up by the neck and two more mounted under a sizeable shared cover at the bridge. The circuitry





'Stretched slimline splendour' – SGV300 headstock

seems pretty much unaltered, with straightforward master volume and tone plus a three-way selector, but it still incorporates the novel balancer control that pans between the two coils of the bridge pickup.

The control knobs are yet another unique feature and these improve on the originals, being brightly chromed and smoothly styled. Other differences between old and new are mostly minor and mainly visual: the selector switch is sited a little closer to the neck pickup, which in turn isn't quite so angled, and the jack socket now resides on the side of the body rather than being last in line on the scratchplate.

The bridge has been revised, actually ending up more like Mosrite's classic creation

from the '60s. It offers overall height adjustment via two screw supports, while the individual saddles are tall and roller-topped. A degree of vibration-induced buzz is apparent on some of the saddles – a result of insufficient string tension. This can be cured by jacking up the bridge, which naturally in turn heightens the action, so the neck then needs to be shimmed to compensate. It's nothing major and all well within the parameters of standard set-up procedure.

The original SG-5A's bridge and vibrato unit were completely separate components but on the SGV they share the same baseplate: this moves the wobbly bit further up the body, leaving more open space behind. The actual vibrato system is very

different to its predecessor – an all-new design that combines top-stringing with Strat-style tension springs situated round the back, their presence confirmed by an oval cover plate. This wasn't necessary on the original guitar because it featured a Jazzmaster-derived unit employing a single, baseplate-mounted spring. The new version certainly looks very smart and neat. The strings terminate in a top block that's shaped to smoothly exert some necessary downforce on them on their way from the bridge. It also accommodates the sensibly short arm, which is a screw-in type, but with both a nylon bush and a swing tension grub screw to prevent any unwanted play.

This top section is attached to an axle that connects to twin ball-bearing assisted pivot points, and it also incorporates a downward projecting pillar at each end. These pillars carry the two tension springs, anchored to the body via the usual Strat-type adjustable claw. The design means no more springs can be added and so any string balancing adjustments are limited to the range and feel provided by just the two fitted, but hopefully this should be adequate to cope with all normal string gauges.

● SOUNDS

The positioning of the pickups indicates that the SGV300 should be capable of some out-of-the-ordinary sounds and plugging in confirms this fact. The sloping single-coil at the neck has a lean, twangy quality courtesy of tight-toned bass and a slightly sweet top end. The bridge unit springs some surprises thanks to its coil spacing and partner

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balancer control. The outer pickup has a pretty sharp bite, but combining it with the neck unit yields a nice mid-position Tele tone. Adding the SGV300's inner coil then beefs things up, but when used on its own this pickup provides a wiry honk. This quality remains in other combined settings, and with just both bridge coils in operation some phase cancellation induces a Stratty hollowness. Such tones are best heard clean or with a mild-mannered amount of gain, just enough to get things gritty... full-frontal filth is not what the SGV300 is about.

While the sounds and the overall playability elicit no complaints, there are some problems regarding tuning stability. As all other relevant aspects appear to be friction-free, the finger of suspicion points fairly and squarely at the vibrato unit.

FACTFILE

YAMAHA SGV300 RRP: £259

Taiwan-made solidbody electric based on 1960s version. Reversed alder body with bolt-on maple neck. 22-fret unbound rosewood fingerboard. Contemporary tuners, white scratchplate, three single-coil pickups in one-and-two configuration, three-way selector, volume, tone and balancer controls, Yamaha vibrato.

Options: none

Colour options: black, pearl green, red metallic, vintage yellow (as reviewed)

Left handers: No

YAMAHA SGV800 RRP: £359

Taiwan-made solidbody electric derived from '60s version. Reversed alder body with bolt-on maple neck. 22-fret bound rosewood fingerboard. Sperzel locking tuners, white pearl scratchplate, two single-coil pickups, three-way selector, two volumes and master tone control, Yamaha vibrato.

Options: none

Colour options: black sparkle (as reviewed), blue sparkle, red sparkle

Left handers: No

Contact: Yamaha-Kemble Music UK, Sherbourne Drive, Tilbrook, Milton Keynes, Bucks MK7 8BL
☎ 01908-366700.

Dimensions

(In mm unless stated)

	SGV300	SGV800
Scale Length	630	630
Width of neck		
...at nut	41	41
...at 12th fret	50	50.5
Depth of neck		
...at 1st fret	22.2	21.9
...at 12th fret	24.2	24
String spacing		
...at nut	34	33.5
...at bridge	50.8	50.1
Action as Supplied		
...at 12th fret treble	1.6	1.4
...at 12th fret bass	2.2	2
Weight (kg/lbs)	3.2/7	3.4/7.5

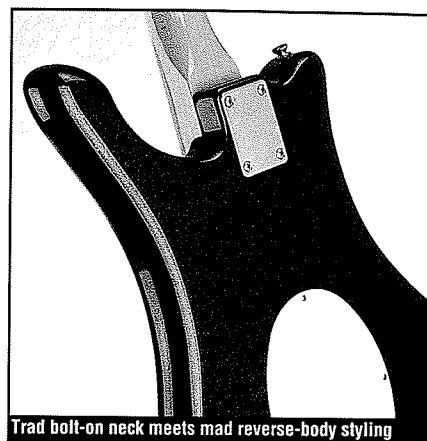
Bending a string results in slightly flat tuning, which has to be rectified by a quick tweak of the arm, while lifting the arm for pitch-rise effects sends intervals drifting rather noticeably. These variable return-to-pitch properties appear to be caused by the unit's mix of features from differing types of vibrato design – the top-stringing of the Jazzmaster or Mosrite systems married to a Strat's under-slung springs. A Strat vibrato relies on a block for string anchorage and inertia properties, and the SGV's twin pillars don't seem to be sufficient to work in the same way. Also, because the strings are anchored up top they play little part in actual operation, contributing none of the pulling or pushing necessary to correctly counterbalance the springs down below. Of course, if string wobbling isn't a priority then there's little to worry about – just leave off the arm, re-tune accordingly and forget all I've said...

However, this is a pretty prominent piece of hardware that looks and feels so nice that it begs to be used, but that's when the pitch return problems start. Obviously a lot of thought, work and money has gone into the design, but the results let the side down, marring what is, for the money, an impressive instrument.

SGV800

This is a down-market derivation of the Blue Jeans BJ-Pro, one of Yamaha's recent revivals of the '60s SG design, but it offers many of the BJ-Pro's updated features in more financially friendly form. Unlike the cheaper SGV300 the 800 employs a back-angled headstock, achieved via a scarf-jointed neck. Styling is otherwise the same save for a cream bound front edge plus a set of Sperzel-made locking tuners, while the Yamaha triple tuning fork logo is featured on a metal badge – the ultimate in luxury!

The added-value vibe is maintained by cream fingerboard binding, while the maple neck is gloss lacquered – not exactly the norm on a modern guitar. Shaping and dimensions are very similar to those of the SGV300, but here the rosewood is better quality and sleeker-feeling. As on its cheaper companion the headstock face and



alder body are colour-coordinated, and our sample's black sparkle finish really comes alive under the lights.

A white pearloid scratchplate increases the eye-catching quota and, while the pickups are again body-mounted, this time they number only two. They resemble the design used on the BJ-Pro, being large-sized single-coils sporting classy-looking, carved-top type white plastic covers. The neck pickup is still sited on the slant, but controls are simplified to two volumes, master tone and three-way selector.

SOUNDS

The pickups are well chosen, their P90-ish poke and punch offering a useful alternative to the retro-toned SGV300. The extra beef they inject makes the 800 more suited to contemporary playing styles and better equipped for digging the dirt. Even when subjected to pretty potent distortion the sound retains character and cut-through qualities.

Tonal choice may not be quite so varied as on the SGV300 but the three basic selections are all eminently usable, and switching in both pickups puts them into humbucking mode – always a useful option.

Despite the differences in headstock construction and the use of locking machine heads, the same tuning hassles afflict the SGV800, providing further proof that the vibrato unit is the culprit. Again this detracts from what is an otherwise excellent electric.

VERDICT

It's nice to see Yamaha's typical high value for money partnered by undisputed individuality, a combination that could and should appeal. Both models display a nicely balanced acoustic response, with the SGV800 sounding slightly warmer – but when plugged in each model has its own tonal character. The actual price difference isn't that great, so choice really depends on which you fancy most.

Of course, the quirk content is

quite high, something which could deter less adventurous players, but they would be missing out on a lot of fun for the money, along with great on-stage looks and some pretty capable performance capabilities. The only fly in the ointment concerns the iffy vibrato unit, and I hope Yamaha address this issue. But again personal playing needs will dictate how much hassle this actually causes you – and the otherwise excellent aspects of both instruments could prove more than enough to balance the equation. **G**