



# Review

by Mark Bell

# Hamer XT Series Quilt Top Sunburst Electric



**H**amer Guitars are considered by some to be the first American 'boutique' guitar company set up specifically to cater to professional musicians. Starting up in 1974, their most popular designs were based rather adventurously on the angular Gibson Explorer and Flying V models. By hawking their wares to touring bands and word of mouth Hamer eventually attracted some big-name customers like Bad Company, Kiss, Jethro Tull, Cheap Trick's Rick Nielson and Wishbone Ash. They also made some rather sexy custom 8-, 9-, 10- and 12-string basses (the latter with octave strings either side of each main string!) for some big-league customers like Tom Peterssen of Cheap Trick and The Who's John Entwistle. By 1977 their staff of seven

was also producing the more affordable Sunburst models at the fairly modest rate of about 10 a week in a move to appeal to a broader market.

Since being engulfed in 2007 by guitar giant Fender Musical Instruments, all but the top-line hand-crafted and custom Hamers have been produced offshore, at a rate closer to 10 an hour I would imagine, with this month's review model hailing from Indonesia. Sound aside, this guitar should give us a pretty good idea how Hamer's reputation for quality build and hardware has survived the transition to Asian mass production techniques.

The XT Series Quilt Top is certainly a very appealing-looking guitar for its fairly modest price tag of \$1200, with arched flamed maple top, chunky abalone neck inlays and sleek black EMG humbuckers. The large-ish headstock is pretty sober and functional-looking with straight lines and a token small scroll at the end. The quality of the wood stain and lacquer finish is faultless and all the hardware, from the Hamer-branded machine heads to the Tune-O-Matic bridge, Les Paul-style tailpiece and smooth, precise volume and tone pots looks up to the task.

The guitar arrived well set up with nice action and intonation straight out of the box – usually a good omen, with the rosewood overlaid mahogany neck solidly fitted and glued to the mahogany body. In terms of what you can actually see, and factoring in the quality of the woods used, there's really nothing about this guitar that says 'obvious cost cutting measure' other than the 'Made in Indonesia' sticker on the back of the headstock. So, aesthetically speaking, I'd have to give Hamer the thumbs up for producing a very professional-looking axe at a very reasonable price.

On the sonic side of things, being something of an EMG fan I had fairly high expectations for the sort of

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I tried to think of a musical genre where the Quilt Top might be a fish out of water and couldn't come up with one – with the possible exception of fast country picking. Hamer have come up with a no-nonsense electric built on solid vintage design principles.

tone I might expect the H4 humbuckers to deliver, and on the whole I was impressed. Like the look of the guitar itself, they seem to be voiced in a way that they won't automatically alienate any particular group of players, i.e. not too heavy and not too light. Played through a clean channel the Quilt Top has plenty of clarity and sparkle, with fairly passable jazz tones able to be coaxed from the front pickup or a bluesy burr with a little overdrive introduced in the mid toggle setting (both pickups active). While Telecaster twang might be a bit of a stretch for these pickups, they nevertheless manage to straddle the range between single-pole and humbucking sounds quite effectively without the use of a coil-tap switch.

I was also impressed with the smoothness and accuracy of the tone and volume pots, with the volume controls never compromising the top frequencies as they were rolled back like a cheap pot will do, while the tone pot displayed a nice even EQ curve.

The output is quite hot, about the same as a Les Paul, but the voicing is geared more towards the mids, with a creamier distortion that's less harmonically complex and jagged than the Gibson's and with less pronounced bass response. The sustain at the higher frets was pretty good but not stunning, as you would expect from a guitar in this price range without a neck-through-body. At higher distortion levels while riffing on single bass notes and power chords the guitar had plenty of poke and growl in the bridge pickup position, while the front pickup produced a nice line in *American Woman*-style round, singing sustain. Soloing in the bridge position there was plenty of attack and bite, the neck felt fast and comfortable with good access right to the very top frets, and I also liked the placement of the bridge pickup volume control where you can reach it with your pinky while playing.

As a mental exercise I decided to try and think of a musical genre where the Quilt Top might be a fish out of water and couldn't actually come up with one, with the possible exception of fast country picking. Straight jazz or Larry Carlton overdrive, very passable tones achievable. Reggae skank or clean funk – ditto. Blues – definitely right at home there whether you want clean or broken-arsed overdrive. In the metal zone there's an absolute plethora of amps and pedals that will do the lion's share of the sound-shaping for you, but this guitar packs a good wallop as a strong starting point.

In essence what Hamer have come up with is a very simple, affordable, no-nonsense electric, built on solid vintage design principles that have stood the test of time. For all its determined simplicity and lack of obvious innovation, it's a very attractive package that hides a surprising versatility behind its girl-next-door good looks.

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