

BLACKSPOT P-11





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From designing furniture and then electric guitars, and now on to making acoustic guitars, Patrick Alexander has an eye for the uncommon detail. Huw Price puts the instrument under scrutiny.

There was a certain inevitability about Patrick Alexander's decision to become a guitar maker. For a start woodworking runs in the family because his father is a joiner by trade. So Alexander was able to use his dad's tools and workshop to build his first guitar at the tender age of nine. As well as being a keen guitarist, Alexander studied design, eventually achieving an MA in fine art. This was followed by a period of studying cabinetmaking at the London College of Furniture. Characteristically Alexander was intent upon bringing some originality and new ideas to the acoustic genre, while recognising that you can't 'reinvent the wheel'.

The first Blackspot guitars were electric solid bodies, with radical but refined body shapes and classic appointments. In fact Alexander acknowledges Bo Diddley as his favourite electric-guitar designer for his Billy-Bo and rectangular-bodied Gretsches. He even made a guitar especially for the late great rocker, and a meeting had been arranged, before ill health forced Diddley to cancel his tour.

Despite the fact that I kept this guitar for a couple of weeks while I was reviewing it, I was continually noticing subtle details and style features that initially escaped my eyes. The P-11's most striking feature is its shape. Measuring

14½" across the lower bout, the P-11 more or less conforms to a Martin 00 template, but the heavily pinched waist certainly doesn't, and the upper bout is actually ½" wider than an 000's.

To my mind the shape is like a stylised art nouveau flower, but there's also a practical benefit because this guitar will sit on your leg and stay put. It's almost as if that pinched waist grips you, so there's none of that annoying sliding-about nonsense every time you adjust your sitting position. There's also something about the shape that holds the neck at the ideal playing angle.

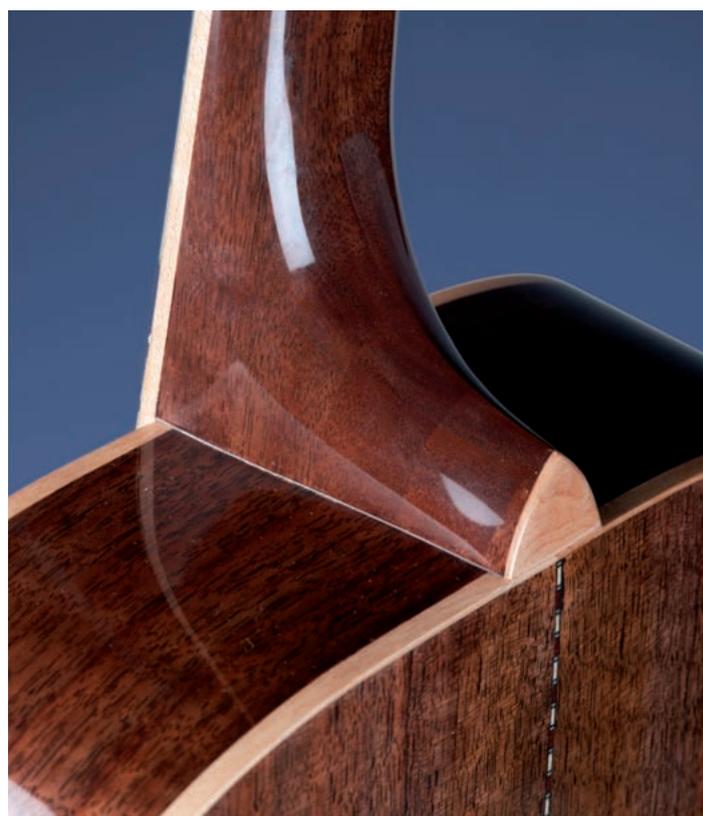
Alexander has retained his distinctive Blackspot headstock design, with its retro-modernist look and a hint of 1950s Americana thrown in. The stark and angular headstock might have looked incongruous with the curvy body, but the Macassar ebony scratchplate and well-buffed black ebony bridge pull the whole design together by echoing the headstock shape.

The curved theme continues with oval gold pearl inlays in the ebony fretboard which, like the body, is bound with solid maple. Although the headstock isn't bound, Alexander has cleverly used a layer of maple under the Macassar ebony peghead veneer, ensuring that maple line continues to flow. The front of the body gets an extra band of solid ebony, which matches

the simple but elegant bands of ebony around the soundhole and the strip of ebony that bisects the tapered maple inlay at the tail block. Even the bone bridge pins have rectangular gold pearl inlays, and their random arrangement is a deliberate feature.

Although it sounds like there's plenty of detailing, it doesn't feel

that way because the overall look is cool, clean and uncluttered. What's more, Alexander obviously has no qualms about letting the natural beauty of the materials take top billing. The solid Sitka spruce top is simply fabulous. The centre seam is virtually invisible and there's copious cross-silking to accompany the straight and tight





**BLACKSPOT GUITARS
P-11**

Price: £1750 without p/up, £1875 with
Manufacturer: Patrick Alexander
Made in: UK
Body Size: Auditorium
Top: AAA Sitka Spruce
Back & Sides: Claro Walnut
Neck: Claro walnut
Fingerboard: Ebony
Frets: 20 Jumbo
Tuners: Open geared Gotoh, nickel
Nut Width & Scale Length:
 44mm, 654mm
Electronics: Headway HE2 undersaddle
Strings Fitted: D'Addario .012-3,
 phosphor bronze
Left Handers: Yes
Gig Bag/Case Included: Custom fitted
 Pod semi-hard case

Contact Details

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What we think

Pros: Style, tone, playability and superb build quality
Cons: None
Overall: Excellent and impressive guitar with a highly competitive price tag

Acoustic rating out of five

BUILD QUALITY	★★★★★
SOUND QUALITY	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★



He also radiuses the gluing surfaces around the rims using a dished sanding board, so the edges of the top and back aren't squashed flat when they're glued

grain. This really is top-quality guitar-making timber. The back and sides are solid claro walnut. Unusually the neck and scarf-jointed headstock are walnut too, and a traditional glued dovetail joins them to the body. The grain isn't spectacular, but there is a hint of flame and the high-gloss nitrocellulose finish is pretty exceptional. I'm not saying nitro is better than poly or UV finishes, but nothing else quite looks the same and it's certainly my all-round favourite finish. Looking inside there's a Headway HE2 undersaddle pickup, and all the braces and surfaces are unusually smooth. Alexander firmly believes that some traditional materials can't be beaten, so the compensated

saddle and nut are both bone, and they're polished to an extremely high gloss. Featuring a cross-brace system, it's set way back into the body, so the intersection falls only 40mm in front of the saddle. Alexander's bracing is derived from the Martin template, but it has been tweaked to allow the braces to pass under the saddle rather than under the ends of the bridge. The two tone bars are cut fairly short and bracing in the upper bout area is kept to a minimum. He also radiuses the gluing surfaces around the rims using a dished sanding board, so the edges of the top and back aren't squashed flat when they're glued. Once they're attached Alexander further tunes the top by gently feathering the edges. So how does all this



influence the tone? The P-11's bass response is certainly not hyped into a boomy flabbiness. Instead it sounds robust and very focused. It certainly is bright and chiming, but a warm undercurrent of harmonics bolsters every string so there's no brashness. Like the similarly radius-topped Huss & Dalton D-RH, this guitar has a strong mid range that keeps inter-string volume superbly balanced for smooth fingerpicking and clearly voiced chord work. With the walnut P-11 I can hear a great deal of the woodiness I'd normally associate with mahogany and perhaps koa. But the harmonics, especially in the mids, are more complex and the high frequencies approach the brightness and clarity of rosewood.

The most intriguing sonic feature is the way the harmonic structure seems to shift and respond to playing dynamics. The only thing I can liken it to is a great electric guitar played through a very slightly overdriven medium-sized non-master-volume valve amp. Play lightly and it's sparkly and clean, then dig in and the P-11 responds with extra harmonic richness and a touch of juicy compression that's utterly addictive.

In addition to this extraordinary harmonic response, the P-11 has a very wide tonal range. Play near the bridge for a wiry 'sprang', then move to the fingerboard tongue for one of the roundest and most ringing sounds I have ever heard from an acoustic guitar. What's more, I could identify at least three sweet spots in between.

I found it equally well suited to both bluegrass rhythm and folk picking, as well as sustaining single note solos, Celtic fingerstyle in dropped tunings, and bottleneck blues adventures. Best of all, playing the P-11 was such an enjoyably musical experience I found it almost impossible to stop.

Since all Blackspots are bespoke guitars you can request any tuners, pickup, neck profile or fingerboard radius you'd like. I will say that this example, with its vintage Gibson-style neck and 16" radius, plays superbly with a low action and no fret noise whatsoever. As for the build quality, I'd suggest it's up there with the likes of Patrick James Eggle and Huss & Dalton. However, it feels like a hand-made instrument, with a visual style that's as effortless as its tonal response. This really is a jewel of a guitar!

Huw Price