

Art For Art's Sake?

Duesenberg Starplayer TV & Double Cat-12

Duesenberg guitars have got a whole lot more to offer the discerning player beyond just their art deco influenced appearance.

The man behind Duesenberg is Dieter Golsdorf, who has had a long history in the guitar making business over in Germany. In 1978 he started the Rockinger company, which specialised in replacement parts that later included the first locking vibrato system, along with an assortment of often unusual instruments. The Duesenberg brand debuted eight years later, initially employed on electrics that catered for the rock guitar market via frequently futuristic shapes, eye-catching paint jobs and innovative hardware. In 1995, the Duesenberg logo appeared on

an all-new line that represented a complete change of direction, design-wise. The earlier, ultra-modern models were replaced by a range employing decidedly retro looks; an image emphasised by the use of numerous art deco-styled components. Unlike the original radical shapes, the 90s Duesenbergs displayed much more traditional outlines, an approach that's been maintained over the ensuing 12 years.

Another consistent factor concerns construction. Duesenbergs combine Korean-made woodwork with German assembly, while components come from various Far Eastern and German sources. This method is intended to offer improved quality and increased individuality, but at more wallet-friendly figures.

Despite soon proving popular in Germany and gaining an increasingly impressive roster of international users, the Duesenberg brand didn't reach Britain until 2002. Since then it has become one of the more prominent players in the somewhat niche sector that is the 'modern retro' market.

Starplayer TV

The Starplayer was the first of the re-designed Duesenbergs, originally offered in I and II guises. These have been joined by other variations on this single-cutaway, semi-solid theme, although styling has stayed pretty much the same for all.

The TV version was introduced in late 1999, identified by its single-coil-plus-humbucker pickup combination, rather than the twin humbuckers fitted to the I and II models. Another common component is the three step-topped headstock; the first of the many art deco-influenced aspects that distinguish Duesenberg electrics. This theme is echoed by a pearl 'D' logo adorning the black headstock

face and maintained by the fancy, ribbed-button, Duesenberg-branded tuners. These have slotted spindles, each with a centre hole, a la vintage Kluson, which speeds up string changing. Even the humble truss-rod cover hasn't escaped the art deco treatment, being a sizeable, ornate affair in black and chromed metal carrying the company name.

An impeccably cut nut is matched by 22 tidily fitted, medium gauge frets. These are arrayed along a lightly radiused rosewood fingerboard that employs a Fender-style scale length, not the more expected, shorter Gibson equivalent. Pearl position dots are partnered by sensibly sized black side repeaters that show up well against the cream tinted plastic binding.

The neck profile is more D- than C-shaped and these fuller proportions promote a muscular feel, although it's still perfectly playable. The glued-in neck joint is accomplished in the traditional manner, which means upper end access is acceptable rather than easy.

The body outline is obviously Les Paul inspired, but the horn is more rounded. The laminated spruce top is accordingly arched and a substantial interior centre block can be seen through the single F-hole, confirming the semi-solid construction. The extra air helps keep weight to less Les Paul-like levels and another difference is that the body back is also arched, the flamed maple employed being visible under a see-through, high-gloss black finish. Body sides are solid black, while the face comes in a variety of colour choices and cream edge binding all round provides further contrast.

The Starplayer TV pairs a DP90 Domino single-coil at the neck with a Grand Vintage pickup humbucker, both encased in open top, chromed covers. The black plastic surrounds are another art deco touch, each incorporating a stepped centre section housing an extra height screw that ensures pickup angle matches string slope.

The shape of the gold sparkle plastic

Review by
Roger Cooper

scratchplate echoes the headstock styling. It's flush-fitted to the curving body face and separated from the pickups by a chromed metal strip adorned with the 'D' logo. The latter also appears as a metal badge on the body front and yet again on the vibrato tailpiece, so there's no doubting brand identity!

The scratchplate-mounted controls seem straightforward, with master volume and tone partnered by a three-way pickup switch. But in the centre position the latter combines the neck pickup with the humbucker's inner coil to provide a more twangy tone. The art deco influence is again apparent on the attractive but practical control knobs and switch tip, while the jackplate is also similarly styled in black and chromed cast metal. Even the strap buttons are Duesenberg's own, likewise the vibrato tailpiece.

The Starplayer has employed various Duesenberg-designed wobbly bits over the past six years, the latest being based on the classic single-spring Bigsby unit, but with some useful improvements. Strings anchor in a bar beneath the main spindle and this simple but smart update eliminates the fiddly pins of the original, making restringing much easier. The flat arm has now been replaced by a round bar with an art deco-ish end knob. It's secured to the swivel mount by two grub screws, so operating length can be altered. Finally, the forward tension bar is grooved to keep strings correctly aligned en route to the bridge. In contrast to Duesenberg's usual desire to be different, the latter is a narrow, traditional Tune-o-Matic type, with six saddles and limited intonation adjustment.

The Starplayer TV is pretty resonant acoustically, while plugging in reveals that construction and component choice contribute to an overall open character. The single-coil at the neck goes deep, sweet and quite twangy, not as raw or rough-edged as some P90-type pickups. The bridge humbucker is more upfront in comparison, but its bright-edged bite leans towards Gretsch, rather than Gibson. The centre selection yields a thinner, decidedly Fender-ish blend of both pickups and interestingly, the switch can be lodged between the centre and bridge setting to provide an extra, out-of-phase, nasal-ish tonality that's great for funky styles. All options respond well to some amp-induced gain and definition is retained even under pretty dirt-laden conditions. The TV is pleasantly feedback free, what is generated proving predictable, reasonably controllable and usefully musical. Volume and tone controls are smoothly gradual in operation, offering the bonus of subtle but effective changes.

Double Cat-12

The Double Cat-12 features the usual Duesenberg headstock, but this time it is slotted, Spanish-style style, with tuners on both sides and back, copying Rickenbacker's clever, but cramped and somewhat confusing configuration. The machine heads are repros of an early Grover type, but badged as Kluson, which isn't surprising, as

Herr Golsdorf also owns this brand in Europe. There's no room for the company 'D' logo, but the truss-rod cover just squeezes in between the two slots.

The nut is another classy example, especially so for a 12-string, combining with a broad but comfortable, shallow-C shaped neck to provide sufficient space between the string courses, something that can't be said about most Rickenbackers! Frets are dressed to impress, contributing to truly excellent playability, further helped by the smooth feel of the gently cambered, bound rosewood fingerboard.

Body styling borrows heavily from Rickenbacker too, although the cutaways are less curvy and the proportions aren't as well balanced. The glass-like Fireburst finish emulates Ricky's Fireglo colour scheme and the semi-solid construction is similarly slab-like, with multi-layer binding around the front, while the rear edge is radiused. The unbound, single 'slash' soundhole is again very Rick-like, but it still manages to incorporate Duesenberg's distinctive art deco-ish stepped styling.

The Double Cat-12 shares many of the Starplayer TV's features, including pickup choice, control layout and copious chromed metal cosmetics. The scratchplate stays the same too, although here it's in vintage green tint plastic. The Tune-o-Matic bridge is another common component, but with each saddle cut to carry two strings. This isn't an ideal arrangement as it precludes individual intonation adjustment, an important ability on a 12-string because it achieves the best possible tuning balance between the standard and slimmer octave strings. The accompanying tailpiece is equally at odds with Duesenberg's desire to be different, being the standard stud-mounted, Gibson bar type, although it has been re-designed to neatly accommodate half a dozen pairs of holes.

Although not as loud acoustically as its six-string stablemate, the Double Cat-12 isn't short on inherent resonance and sustain. The use of similar construction, allied to the same choice of pickups and circuitry, mean that this model shares many of the Starplayer TV's aural attributes. The pickups keep sounds suitably clean and clear and, although humbuckers aren't usually considered the first choice for 12-string chores, Duesenberg's design has a usefully crisp delivery that's surprisingly Rickenbacker-ish.

All selections work well, including the unofficial fourth position on the switch. They provide

the necessary quantities of characteristic 12-string ring, chime and clang, while the nicely gradual controls again add extra versatility via suitable textural tweaking.

Duesenberg's abundant art deco touches are guaranteed to cause love or loathe reactions, but they undoubtedly offer instant, eye-catching identity, which surely can't be bad in today's play-safe market. The Starplayer TV represents an interesting slant on the single-cutaway theme and overall performance poses no problems, although those expecting a full-blown Les Paul clone should look elsewhere. Duesenberg's interpretation is actually more flexible, as it successfully introduces elements of Gretsch and Fender into the aural equation.

The Double Cat-12 incorporates enough distinctive design touches to make this a very viable alternative to the famous American original it resembles and at a much more approachable price too. It also happens to be one of the best-playing 12-strings around and is certainly no slouch sound-wise either.

Duesenberg is one of the few makers that chooses to design and use brand-specific components, rather than fit the generic alternatives employed on most electrics these days. This welcome extra attention to detail is to be admired, as it offers greater individual character as well as ensuring that parts are better suited to their allotted purpose.

This degree of care and quality is apparent on both examples reviewed here, with high build standards matched by performance and playability. Such attributes don't come cheap and these certainly aren't inexpensive electrics, but the extra outlay can be justified by anyone interested in a pro-spec electric that offers more individuality than most. Duesenbergs may look retro but they cleverly combine function with form and their performance more than meets the demands of today's players. **mm**

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Duesenberg Starplayer TV
£995 (including case)

Key Notes

- Semi-solid body with spruce front & flame maple back.
- Glued-in maple neck.
- 22-fret, bound rosewood fingerboard.
- 648mm (25.5-inch) scale.
- Six-saddle bridge & separate vibrato tailpiece.
- Duesenberg single-coil & humbucking pickups.
- Volume, tone, three-way pickup selector switch.
- 3.5kg weight.
- Trans-black finish with body front in choice of Surf Green, Vintage White, Silver Sparkle, Blue Sparkle, Sunburst, Trans-Orange or Trans-Black.

High Notes

- Sounds.
- Attention to detail.

Low Notes

- Too art deco for some tastes.

Dixies Music, 01484 425920
www.duesenbergusa.com

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Duesenberg Double Cat-12
£1050 (including case)

Key Notes

- Semi-solid maple body with spruce front.
- Glued-in maple neck.
- 22-fret, bound rosewood fingerboard.
- 648mm (25.5-inch) scale.
- Duesenberg single-coil & humbucking pickups.
- Volume, tone, three-way pickup selector switch.
- Fireburst or Black finishes.

High Notes

- Playability.
- Sounds.

Low Notes

- Bridge.
- Confusing tuner configuration.

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