



Hagstrom
Ultra Swede

Kramer
Assault
211 FR



Group Test

'Improver Axes' Under £500

You've already got a foot on the guitar ladder. Now TG helps you move on up with **four mid-price stunners** that will **condemn your starter axe to the attic**

WORDS HENRY YATES



Adam Black
Libra UK

Italia Maranello
Speedster1

Take a good, hard look at your guitar. Sure, you guys have had some good times together; you'll never forget bringing it home from Argos, holding it all night long, forming your calluses on its cheesewire strings, promising you'd take on the world. But be honest: you've outgrown each other. Your fingers are writing cheques the fretboard can't cash. Your band are playing venues the pickups can't fill. A split is on the cards, and you're going to need a new songwriting partner.

That's where this issue's Group Test comes in. We're not lying in the gutter with four budget-scraping horrors. Nor are we looking at the stars with a quartet of limited-edition pipe dreams. Instead, we've rounded up four realistic rockers that shouldn't break the bank and that we hope should prove a

killer choice for improving guitarists, whether you're keeping them as a spare or rocking them nightly on the gig circuit.

We're setting a tight-ish budget of £500 on this test, but you'd be amazed how far that gets you. First in the ring is Adam Black's Brit-built Libra UK (£399), fighting a bloody price-point battle with Hagstrom's Ultra Swede (£399). Cheaper still is the Kramer Assault 211 FR (£299), while Italia's Maranello Speedster1 (£449) brings a dash of va-va-voom to proceedings at the higher end of the price point. ■

**"THESE ROCKERS ARE
REALISTIC AS SPARES
OR FOR GIGGING"**

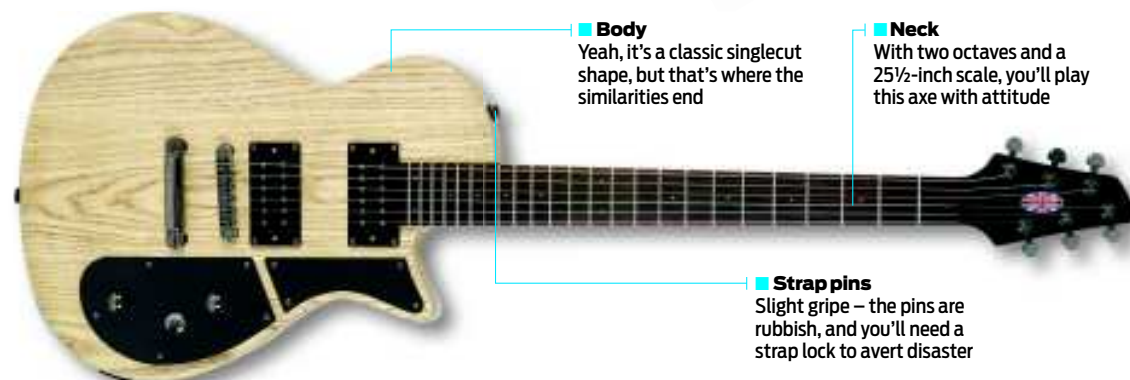


Flip the page to
find out which one
won our Group Test
head-to-head



Adam Black Libra UK £399

Best of British?



Body

Yeah, it's a classic singlecut shape, but that's where the similarities end

Neck

With two octaves and a 25½-inch scale, you'll play this axe with attitude

Strappins

Slight gripe – the pins are rubbish, and you'll need a strap lock to avert disaster

At a glance

Adam Black Libra UK

BODY: Solid ash
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 24
SCALE: 25½-inches
PICKUPS: 2x high output humbuckers
CONTROLS: 1x volume, 1x tone, 3-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Nickel
FINISH: Natural [pictured], Scar Red
LEFT-HANDED: No
CONTACT: Rosetti 01376 550033
WEB: www.adamblackguitarcompany.co.uk

Britain, Britain, Britain... land of high production costs, overpaid workers and punitive tax rates. As such, it's no surprise that relatively few axes are made in this green and pleasant land, and a big one that Adam Black has built the Libra from its Essex HQ for £399. But should TG bestow our royal appointment on it? Forget the British build: it's bulletproof, but not noticeably better than a modern Far Eastern one. Of more interest is the Libra's mix-and-match spec. It



looks like a Les Paul-inspired bruiser, but features a Fender-style ash body and maple bolt-neck. You pick it up expecting to play meaty mid-tempo rock riffs, but are thrown a loop by the two-octave neck and 25½-inch

scale. Inevitably, given the wood, the humbuckers don't deliver the dark 'boom' you'd get if they were sat in a brick of mahogany, but that's kinda refreshing – it's bright, jangly and rich, a good halfway house. Similarly, the filth is a bit more wholesome than Slash fans might demand, but it's anything but boring.

Conclusion: Only a plank would buy a guitar for its British birthplace. Fortunately, the Libra's qualities run deeper than a stiff upper lip. In a price bracket

where imagination is thin on the ground, this is a memorable axe that plays fast and loose with spec sheet conventions, and to generally good effect, as long as you're not expecting the bottom-heavy swagger of a textbook singlecut. It hasn't won. That's not because of any tangible failing; we just like others more.

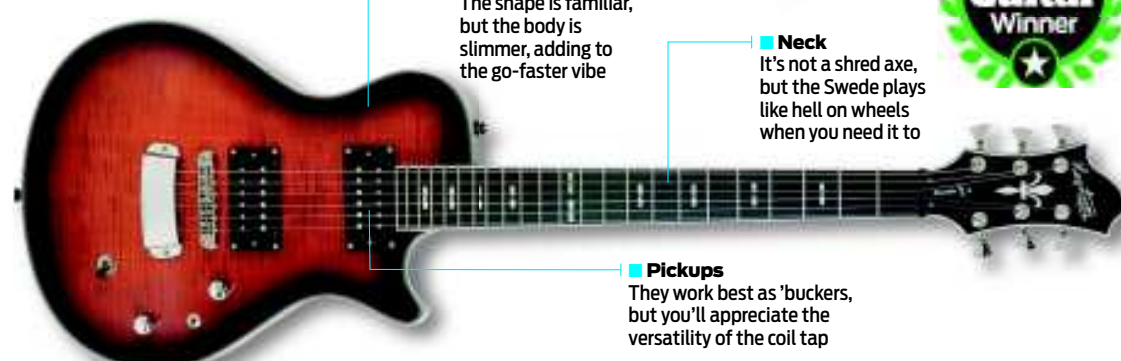
SUMMARY

For: Quirky, build, memorable
Against: Lack of mahogany warmth
★★★★☆

TG says: Britannia rules!

Hagstrom Ultra Swede £399

Less haste, more Swede



Body

The shape is familiar, but the body is slimmer, adding to the go-faster vibe

Neck

It's not a shred axe, but the Swede plays like hell on wheels when you need it to

Pickups

They work best as 'buckers, but you'll appreciate the versatility of the coil tap



At a glance

Hagstrom Ultra Swede

BODY: Basswood, maple cap
NECK: Maple, set
FINGERBOARD: Resinator
FRETS: 22
SCALE: 24¾-inch
PICKUPS: 2x humbuckers
CONTROLS: Volume, tone, coil tap, 3-way switch
HARDWARE: Die-cast
FINISH: Burgundy Burst [pictured], Cosmic Blackburst, Black Gloss
LEFT-HANDED: Black only
CONTACT: Hagstrom UK&I 08701 657456
WEB: www.hagstrom-guitars.co.uk

Behind the façade of pigtailed and flat-packed furniture, the Swedes are a nation of rock pigs, exporting the planet's fastest shredders and its most underrated guitar brand. Ruined by the Far Eastern copy boom in 1983, and resurrected in 2006, it's been a bumpy ride but Hagstrom reckons this "little monster" will "grab the competition by the neck". Hagstrom prides itself on physical flair, and with some



justification, because despite familiar full-frontal contours the Swede is slimmer than a LP and plays faster, with the H-Expander trussrod resulting in a flat, thin, fast profile whose

low action requires a mere tickle to sound notes. It's not a 'shred' axe; to describe it thus would do a disservice to the clean tone, which is fat and proud, and the frayed, bottom-heavy old-school Zep swagger that is delivered at more 'classic' overdrive levels. Shredders may struggle to get a razorblade lead tone without splitting the coils (a mere gripe).

Conclusion: We love the Swede: it's a cool model by a cult hero that will get your bandmates

crowding round in rehearsals and knock them out when you start playing. No £399 guitar is perfect: this could use more bite at the bridge and its slim body costs you sustain. But we think you'll hold onto the Swede as a spare or live axe as you progress. Not bad for a week's wages.

SUMMARY

For: Versatile tone, feel, vintage looks
Against: Bit more bridge bite needed
★★★★★

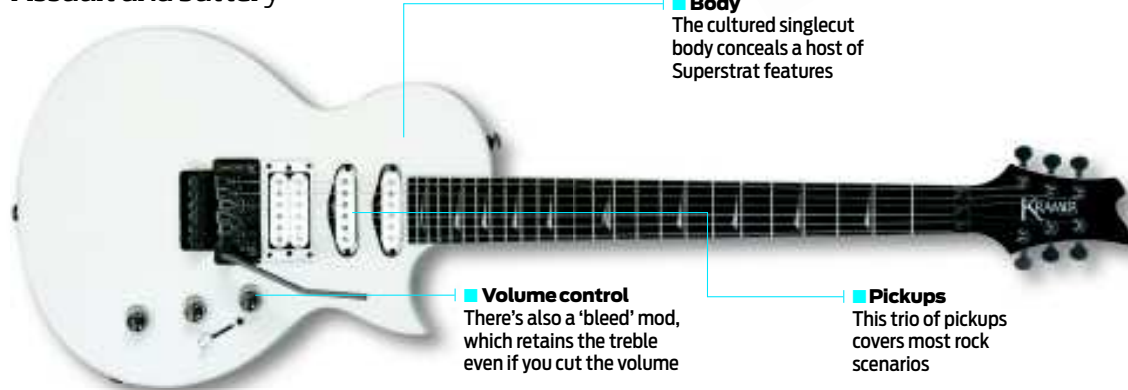
TG says: It's no vegetable

"WE LOVE THE SWEDE: IT'S A COOL MODEL BY A CULT HERO. NOT BAD FOR A WEEK'S WAGES"

'IMPROVER AXES' UNDER £500 **★ GROUP TEST**

Kramer Assault 211 FR £299

Assault and battery



Body

The cultured singlecut body conceals a host of Superstrat features

Volume control

There's also a 'bleed' mod, which retains the treble even if you cut the volume

Pickups

This trio of pickups covers most rock scenarios

At a glance

Kramer Assault 211 FR

BODY: Solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, set
FINGERBOARD: Ebony
FRETS: 24
SCALE: 25½-inches
PICKUPS: 2x singlecoils, 1x humbucker
CONTROLS: 1x volume, 2x tone, 5-way pickup selector
HARDWARE: Black nickel
FINISH: Pearl White [pictured], Candy Red
LEFT-HANDED: No
CONTACT: Gibson UK 00800 444 27661
WEB: www.kramerguitars.com

Kramer ruled the 80s off the back of Eddie Van Halen's striped 5150 model, but even the official website admits it "slowly burnt out" alongside the shoulder pads and *Police Academy* movies. Enter Gibson, with a fistful of dollars and a new run of models including this stylish singlecut. It was acceptable in the 80s – but is it now?

The Assault moves with the times, concealing Superstrat features within a modern package that doesn't scream,



"I love 1984!". Best news is that Kramer's trademark neck speed has come through, with the wide mahogany profile delivering velocity and comfort that would be even more impressive if we hadn't just tested the

Hagstrom. Also welcome is the versatility: with both pickup formats, it makes a decent fist of most rock styles. Granted, its clean tone sometimes sounds comparatively thin, and under distortion it doesn't match the Scandinavian's cultured character, but it bites harder in the high end and that (along with the Floyd) has gotta make it the virtuoso's choice.

Conclusion: It might have been barged off the podium in a tough Group Test, but the Assault is

a solid choice for faster, more technical players who crave tonal clarity for quicksilver legato, a floating vibrato to abuse and a legendary name on the stock. If that's your criteria – and you're not expecting JEM performance – then you're unlikely to be disappointed. Not a giant leap up the ladder, but a definite step up.

SUMMARY

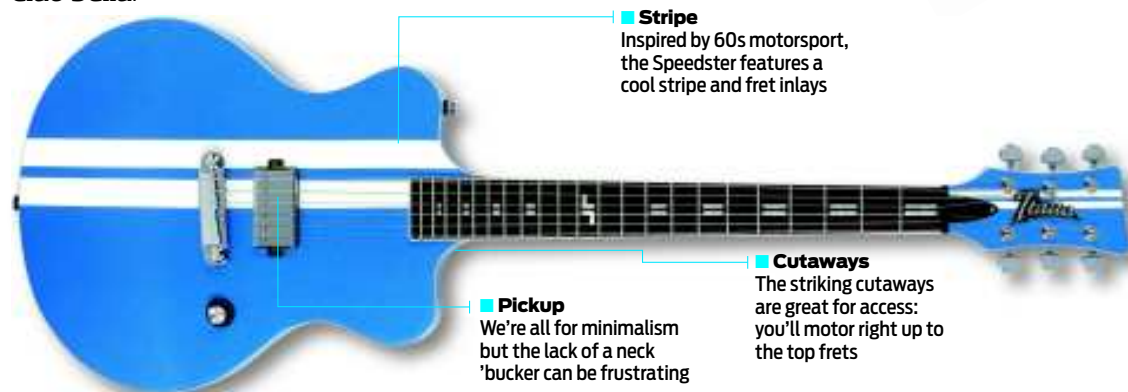
For: Price, versatility, keen sonic bite
Against: Tonal character bit lacking

★★★★☆

TG says: White lightning

Italia Maranello Speedster1 £449

Ciao bella!



Stripe

Inspired by 60s motorsport, the Speedster features a cool stripe and fret inlays

Pickup

We're all for minimalism but the lack of a neck 'bucker can be frustrating

Cutaways

The striking cutaways are great for access: you'll motor right up to the top frets

At a glance

Italia Maranello Speedster1

TYPE: Solid korina
NECK: Maple, set
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with 'accelerating' inlays
FRETS: 22
SCALE: 24¾-inches
PICKUPS: 1x Wilkinson vintage-voiced humbucker
CONTROLS: 1x volume
HARDWARE: Die-cast
FINISH: Blue [pictured], Yellow, Red, Black, Cream
LEFT-HANDED: No
CONTACT: John Hornby Skewes 0113 286 5381
WEB: www.jhs.co.uk

Small boys of the 60s either wanted to be Jimi Hendrix or Stirling Moss. Now we can be both (sort of) thanks to the Maranello Speedster1, which indulges dual schoolboy fantasies with its racing stripe and go-faster fret inlays, combined with a spec that's been cut back to meet weight regulations. Nice concept.

Like a Mercedes that's been parked in Moss Side, the Italia Speedster1 has been stripped of parts. But you won't mind



when you're ripping out solos. The snub-nosed doublecut is as functional as it is attractive, the maple neck is a good all-rounder, while the Wilkinson bridge humbucker combines with

hefty helpings of korina (a sibling of mahogany) for a punchy, characterful tone that has a bit more mid-range brightness than your average Gibson derivative. Good thing we like it, because the lack of tonal options is frustrating for £449. It will take a good amp with a proper EQ to get you a lush rhythm tone.

Conclusion: The Speedster1 is not perfect. It's the most expensive here. It offers fewest features. You might even say

it looks a bit daft. But still, there's something about this guitar's cracking korina-fuelled humbucker roar that marks it out among a sea of faceless mid-price sloggers. When you play this guitar, you'll remember it. And when you gig it, people will remember you.

SUMMARY

For: Memorable korina-powered tone
Against: Price, lack of sonic options

★★★★☆

TG says: It's earned its stripes