



MJ Guitars Roadster Baritone

THERE ARE MANY SMALL GUITAR COMPANIES building stellar double-cutaway solidbody electric guitars. Unfortunately a large number of them are, to one degree or another, content to simply build Strat copies. If you're open to more inspired takes on Fender's classic double-cutaway form, you might want to consider the imaginative designs of Montana guitar luthier Mark Johnson, founder of MJ Guitars. Johnson started building guitars and basses at Alembic in 1975. In 1996, the veteran builder launched his own design, the MJ Mirage—a sculpted and chambered set-neck double-cutaway. The Roadster, a streamlined, solidbody version of the Mirage, came later, and is available in the baritone version you see here.

The Roadster's body has a unique cut in the upper midriff that gives its silhouette distinctive, "womanly" hips. (Wrap a live python around this instrument, and it might gain a hint of Nastassja Kinski.) Other modern aesthetics include pleasing vertical-line fret marker inlays and chrome pickup rings. But long before people notice the Roadster's unique body contours and modern accoutrements, they'll probably ask you to explain the guitar's wild looking open headstock. You might think that, as an owner of three MJ guitars, I'd be able to field such queries with ease, but as interesting as these headstocks are, they're still a bit of a mystery to me.

Mostly, explains Mark Johnson, the headstocks (which people liken to everything from tuning forks to tennis racquets to salad tongs) are forked the way they are simply

for artistic and brand-recognition purposes. Plus, they provide an ergonomic benefit: They comfortably angle the pegs of the Gotoh tuning machines right at your tuning hand. One thing's for sure: With a graphite/carbon-fiber-reinforced top surface, an aluminum reinforcement bracket, and one-piece construction (it's part of the Roadster's maple neck), the headstock is tough.

The Roadster's most appealing attribute is its zippy playability. With a perfectly straight neck and even string height throughout, this guitar begs to be played at every position. This is handy, because if you need to cover parts in a more "normal" guitar range, you can hop up to the higher half of the two-octave neck and the guitar's intonation and action won't give you any headaches. A Megaswitch working in conjunction with two splittable Seymour Duncan pickups allows for five distinct and useful sounds. If baritone guitar is going to be a huge part of your show—and if that act involves navigating adventurous riffs in multiple pitch ranges—the highly maneuverable MJ Roadster can handle all the curves.



To allow for a minimal, sculpted neck heel, MJ Guitars uses three machine screws to secure the Roadster's neck. Metal inserts installed in the neck allow enough torque to be applied that the neck won't shift during jolts the way some three-bolters do.