

FIRST PLAY



RAPIER 33
£429

WHAT IS IT? A modern Chinese-made repro of the British-made Watkins Rapier, a stalwart of homegrown players of the 60s

Second Charge

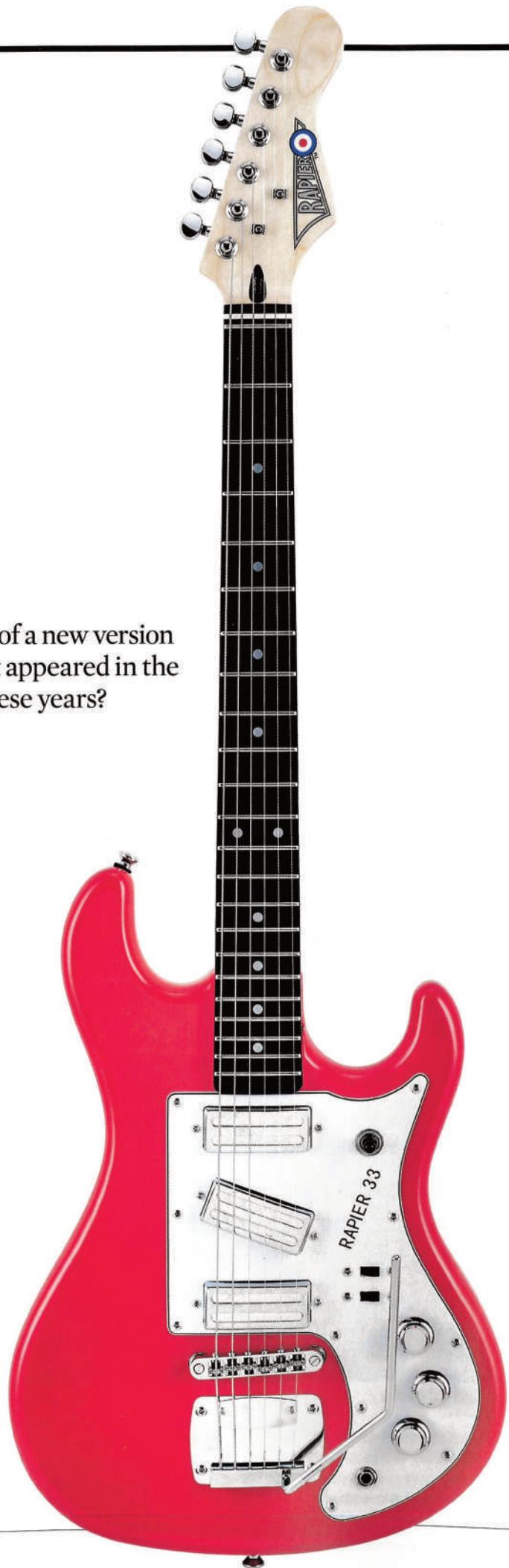
A blast from the past in the form of a new version of a British-made guitar that first appeared in the late 50s. Is it still valid after all these years?

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Olly Curtis

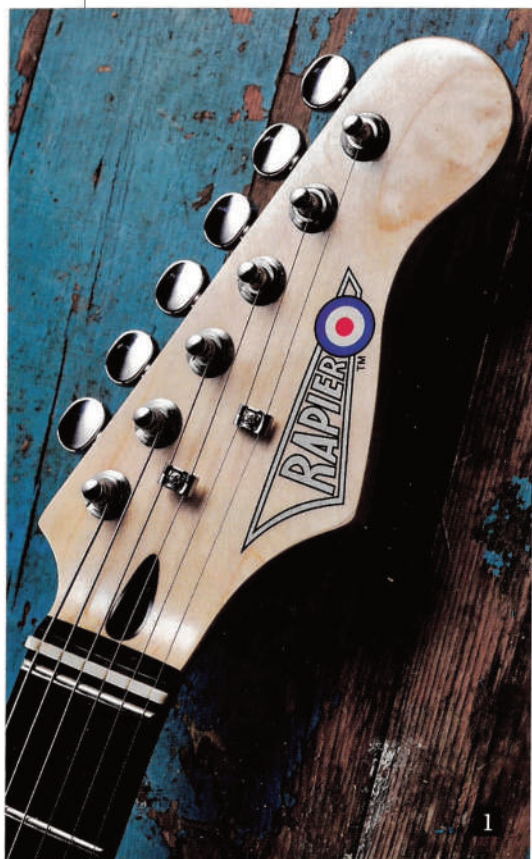
Gentlefolk of a certain age might well remember Watkins' Rapier models the first time around. For the rest of us, they're a footnote, a nod back to the time when us Brits made guitars in considerable numbers. But like any modern retro repro, the backstory is irrelevant to the quality and price of the instrument on offer – and that's what we're concentrating on here. Although at a lowly full list price of £429, this new Chinese-made Rapier 33 doesn't exactly inspire confidence...

Well, let's scotch that right here and now: this is not only a very tidily made guitar, it also has a very in-tune vibrato system and one of the most creatively bonkers control circuits we've ever encountered. Straight out of the box it plays really well, it's nice and light in weight, and has oodles of off-kilter pawn-shop style.

The woodcraft is simple. The body looks like an artist's impression of a Stratocaster – close but not the same. With slightly pulled-in horns, the 'almost there' impression is aided by the depth, which, at 38mm, is slimmer than the standard 45mm of a Fender. There are no contours, either, just a large edge radius. Wood choice might seem unusual as the body is made







1. The headstock outline is more like Vintage's redrawing of the Fender outline than the original Watkins style. The Rapier logo is borrowed from the originals with the additional RAF roundel

2. The very retro-looking knobs emulate those used by Eko back in the day and certainly suit the vibe. Don't forget you have two volumes here and a master tone. This is not a Stratocaster!



from okoume (also known as Gabon from where it originates), known as a 'mahogany' variant used by an increasing number of makers such as Music Man, Nik Huber and Eastman – a trio of names that gives it serious credibility. We have no idea what's under the polyester finish, but, as we said, it's light in weight and there's nothing odd about its part in the acoustic response. It's a lively guitar.

The Fender-scale bolt-on neck is a more generic, untinted maple with an all over gloss finish, while the rosewood fingerboard is a deep, dark chocolate colour. The fingerboard radius ties in with that roller saddle tune-o-matic with a measurement of 305mm (12 inches), and the headstock is based more on JHS's Vintage line than the original, longer Watkins outline (probably a wise choice). But we do have a polarising zero fret here, and a Graph Tech NuBone string guide. It might be period correct, but zero frets can wear, especially with vibratos, and we'd question why the design doesn't feature a standard nut. The thing is, that's about the only thing we can find to criticise.

The unusual pickup switching and dual-volume controls give considerable scope

The simple-looking vibrato is based on the original's 'Hi-Lo' type with an anchor bar into which the arm screws – we look at that in more detail in *Under The Hood*. But it's the scratchplate-mounted pickups and controls that draw our attention. What on Earth is going on?

As designer Alan Entwistle tells us, the pickups here don't ape the originals – these are dual-blade mini-humbuckers, with partial covers showing off the silver foil-covered tops, and are height-adjustable in the usual manner. The middle pickup is slanted, like the originals, and in theory that increases both the treble and bass response as well as giving a strong visual statement: this is *not* a Stratocaster.

In typical modular style, the pickups, controls and output jack are all mounted on

the three-ply scratchplate with a standard-looking toggle switch, two smaller slide switches and three rotary controls with rather flashy looking chromed knobs with rubber grips. But what do they all do?

Starting with both mini-switches pushed down away from the strings, the 33 acts as a two-pickup guitar with just neck and bridge pickups selected by the toggle switch in the usual fashion. The upper rotary control is a volume (let's call it volume 1), the lower knob a master tone. Slide the neck-facing mini-switch up and the middle pickup is introduced and controlled in level by that middle rotary, volume 2, while the upper volume 1 does the same for the bridge and neck pickups. Pulling up the bridge-facing mini-switch introduces a bass-cut, like a Jaguar, but for the bridge and neck pickups only. We think Rapier needs to supply an instruction sheet!

Feel & Sounds

To be fair, once we worked out what the controls actually do, the drive isn't as difficult as it might seem. Basically, the

IN DESIGN

Just how did a cult British-made guitar end up being reproduced in China? Let's find out

It's fair to say Alan Entwistle is a walking encyclopaedia of the electric guitar with considerable knowledge of the instrument's early years. But rather like Trev Wilkinson (the pair have considerable shared history), until the pandemic Alan spent most of his time working in China, designing and developing guitars for a number of brands.

"I constantly travel back and forth from China," Alan tells us, "although currently I can't get back due to the pandemic. I work with a couple of factories in China: the main one produces Burns and Revelation, and the other one produces the high-end Burns guitars. I've been doing that for about a decade now. I was working with Tanglewood, too, but that stopped, which is why I revived the Revelation brand, including a version of the original Hohner Revelation – where we first met all those years ago. They do very well."

"The original had an unusual single coil, so we went with mini-humbucker and a bass-cut switch"

How did the Rapier project start?

"I'd bought a couple original Watkins Rapier models over here in the UK when I was visiting from China – a 33 and a 44. At that time, it wasn't my intention to remake them, it was pure nostalgia. I thought, 'Okay, I used to have one of those.' But I got them back to China and began to think maybe it would work to make a contemporary version. We built a couple of prototypes and they sounded good once we'd sorted out a half-sensible wiring system."

We understand that, because Watkins still exists, you couldn't use that name. But you did purchase the rights to the name Rapier after the previous owner had let them lapse...

"Yes, that was about three years ago, I think. The registration of the body design – which wasn't actually legal because it wasn't a new body design – lapsed in 2014. If you look on the models after about 1969, instead of having Watkins on the headstock they had Rapier. I borrowed that logo and added the RAF roundel for good measure and went from there. So, basically, it's the Rapier Guitar Company because we do plan to do more repros of some of the other Watkins models."



Like the originals and many European guitars of the time, the Rapier uses a zero fret (a larger gauge piece of fret wire) to save production time in cutting the correct nut slots. The 'nut', then, is actually a string guide

Why use okoume for the body?

"I prefer it to what is referred to as 'basswood' in China, which, frankly, can be anything. It's a little bit cheaper than Gabon mahogany. It's very resonant, as you can probably tell, and it's kinda like mahogany – the same kind of structure, I suppose you'd say. It's also very clean, so you don't get loads of knots in it. We use okoume on the current Revelation guitars. I believe it's also used on some of the Vintage guitars, too."

Why go with mini-humbuckers?

"I wanted it to be a fairly low-noise guitar. The original pickup was an unusual single coil [see Under The Hood over the page] so I thought, 'No, let's do it with a mini-humbucker that doesn't have a large DCR and then use a bass-cut switch to get more jangle.' I thought that would have a broader appeal."

Where did you find those control knobs?

"They're actually in the style of the old Eko-made Vox knobs. One of the factories I work with was doing some stuff for Eko a few years ago and I saw these and said, 'Right, we're having them!' They look so right."

And the vibrato looks very similar to the original unit, doesn't it?

"Yes, it's re-engineered from the two originals I took to China. It's a good vibrato and I wouldn't mind using it on other things, to be honest, but the only drawback is that – like the original – it isn't adjustable [in terms of tension]. I did consider making it adjustable, but then I thought, 'Should I?' Obviously, you can add an extra spring, but you do have to take the vibrato off the guitar to do that – it's easy enough and, of course, that's the same with the original vibratos."

What's next?

"We do plan to offer versions of other Watkins guitars and basses from this period, but I'm just hoping that early next year the Chinese government is going to say, 'Okay guys, you can come back.' Because when I'm not in China I can't inspect stuff – I've been inspecting it on Zoom! – and until the time that they allow us back in, that's an ongoing problem. I have an apartment in China and a workshop there... so we'll see."

For more on the history of Watkins and original Rapier guitars, go to www.watkinsguitars.co.uk

UNDER THE HOOD

Despite the complex switching options, this is a pretty simple guitar

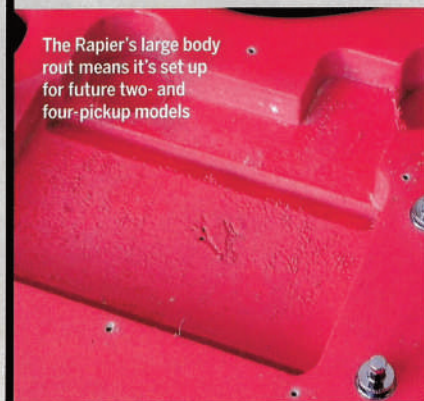
Removing the scratchplate, you can see that the body machining underneath is a little rudimentary and there's a 'swimming pool' rout, which certainly indicates future two- and maybe even four-pickup versions. There's no ID on the pickup bases, but the wiring is really pretty tidy using 500k mini-pots, a single .015 microfarads (153J) tone capacitor and a .002 microfarads (222J) bass-cut capacitor, both common green Mylar polyester film types. Bearing in mind the seemingly complex control system, it's actually a very simple circuit.

Under those pickup covers we have a standard humbucker, although Alan Entwistle tells us that each coil uses a steel blade polepiece and a ceramic bar magnet, and they're wound with 44 AWG wire. Measuring the DCRs at output we get 7.59kohms (bridge), 6.99k (middle) and 6.93k (neck). Like the guitar, the pickups are made in China, a part of the expansive Entwistle range.

The original Watkins Rapier single coils pickups were very different. "They kind of have a relationship with the Burns Tri-Sonic," says Alan of the original pickups, "in that they used a bobbin-less coil – a very messy one at that – and a magnetic baseplate. But the resemblance ends

there; they certainly didn't sound like a Tri-Sonic. They used four large Alcamax magnets and one smaller magnet with reverse polarity, which, in practice, gives a kind of 'out of phase' sound to the G, B and E strings. It almost worked, except that there was, understandably, some output loss on the top strings."

The vibrato is pretty simple here, too, with three small springs to counter the string tension. While there's no tension adjustment, Alan tells us it's good for standard 0.009 and 0.010 string gauges, although if you're thinking of stringing up with heavier gauges you'll need to add one or two more springs – as you would with a Strat-style vibrato.



The Rapier's large body rout means it's set up for future two- and four-pickup models



The simple circuit here belies its complexity



With the vibrato removed, you can see the springs on the underside

33 functions as either a two-pickup or three-pickup guitar, and with both mini-switches down the mini-humbuckers are well voiced. The neck is nice and Fender-y but with a smooth attack, and its narrow aperture typically provides a leaner single-coil-like snap. The bridge has more kick and adds some humbucker thickness, but, again, it's narrower sounding than a full-size humbucker – and the mix works really well, too. Played clean, the guitar covers a lot of ground: the neck does jazz if you need, the mix is rich and bouncy (both are really good rounded funk tones, too), and that bridge pickup moves from older-style biting blues to a Rickenbacker-like clean punch. The pickups don't sound like they're heavily potted – which may be a problem if you're using high gains – but it adds to the lively nature of the instrument, particularly if you're chasing more retro-y lower-gain sounds.

Engage the bass-cut and, well, it's not called the 'strangle switch' for nothing! In this two-pickup mode it really thins out the sound, producing a wire-y, almost out-of-phase character begging you to kick in a fuzz or gnarly overdrive. Bring the middle pickup into play here and immediately



The simple vibrato here features a screw-in arm and is re-engineered from the original Hi-Lo vibrato. Thankfully, a modern roller saddle tune-o-matic is used, which also lightly rocks on its posts as you use the vibrato



These Entwistle mini-humbuckers certainly suit the retro vibe but are hum-cancelling, unlike the original single coils. The large toggle switch selects the neck, both and bridge pickups only



RAPIER 33

ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric bolt-on
BODY: Okoume
NECK: Canadian maple, soft 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone/42.9mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid dot markers, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium, plus larger gauge zero fret
HARDWARE: Original-style Rapier Hi Lo vibrato with roller saddle tuneomatic-style bridge, Wilkinson E-Z-Lok tuners – chromed-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm
ELECTRICS: 3x Alan Entwistle EWR64 mini-humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector, 2x slide switch (middle pickup on/off; bass-cut), volume 1 (bridge and neck), volume 2 (middle), master tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.44/7.58
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Fiesta Red (as reviewed), 3 Tone Sunburst, Arctic White, Daphne Blue – all gloss including neck back and headstock

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PROS Good build; excellent feel to the neck with slick playability and stable vibrato; nicely voiced hum-cancelling pickups; lots of sounds beyond the 60s clichés

CONS We'd prefer a standard nut rather than the zero fret; here's hoping that Rapier doesn't ignore the left-handed player

things thicken up as you wind it into any of the pickup selections – with or without that bass-cut. There are considerable subtle shades to play with as you adjust the volumes playing off the bridge and neck (volume 1) with the middle (volume 2). If you're into your parallel pickup combinations, you'll have a field day here – especially with the bass-cut engaged.

It's a perfectly good player, too. Our sample is well set up, and while you can hear a few 'pings' from that zero fret as you bend strings when you're unplugged, plugged in they're just not audible. The 'offset' vibrato brings its own character – bends seem to take a little longer to hit the note and sustain appears slightly short, again Jazzmaster-like.

The neck is a little thicker in depth than you might expect – 21.8mm at the 1st fret thickening up to 24mm by the 12th – with a well-shaped C profile. The fingerboard edges are lightly rounded and the fretwork is perfectly competent, even though the string guide's edges are left rather sharp. The vibrato is light and smooth and, with the strings stretched, holds its tuning. We've been left with a very positive impression: irrespective of its past, this is

a perfectly valid guitar that's a good player with plenty of good sounds.

Verdict

This new Rapier is heavily inspired by its 60s forerunner and may simply be another slice of nostalgia. But not unlike Danelectro or even Gretsch, the appeal isn't just for those old enough to remember the originals. Far from it. Aside from the style, the unusual pickup switching and dual-volume controls give considerable scope – with or without the bass-cut engaged. It does take a little while to get your head around the possibilities, particularly because your head expects a more Strat-like function.

For the price, though, the simple build is rather good. It's a great little player, and while the zero fret might be a retro step too far, in reality it doesn't affect anything plugged in and the vibrato has a light, expressive feel with really very good out-of-the-box stability and return-to-pitch. So, nicely retro with expansive and diverse sounds that are all hum-cancelling. You can't help thinking you're getting a lot of guitar for the money, and it's a refreshing change to the multitude of more standard Strat-inspired electrics out there. **G**