

# SOUND CHECK

the gear  
in review



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## A Cut Above

ESP AC30E QM ACOUSTIC-  
ELECTRIC GUITAR By Chris Gill

▶ **THE ESP GUITAR COMPANY** will always be inextricably linked with electric guitars. After all, the company's name stands for "Electric Sound Products." So when ESP introduced a new line of acoustic guitars earlier this year—it's first since it released the AC-300 and AC-250 about 10 years ago—the announcement suggested that the company may be diversifying and looking beyond its roots. However, apart from one guitar—the D-5—all of the new acoustic models feature built-in pickups and preamp systems, so ESP really isn't straying too far from the exclusively electric realm.

ESP currently offers three series of acoustic guitars under its affordable LTD Xtone line: the AC, Dreadnought and Exotic Wood series. The AC Series offers four models, with the AC30E QM reigning as its top-of-the-line model. All ESP AC acoustics have a curvaceous grand auditorium-style body with a generous cutaway, but the AC30E QM stands above the pack with its quilted maple body and B-Band T55 four-band preamp.

**FEATURES** The AC30E uses quilted maple for its top, back and sides, and the purfling, fingerboard inlays and rosette are of abalone. These features, plus the gold-plated tuners with amber-pearl knobs, →

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make the guitar appear to be very expensive. The big surprise is that the AC30E sells on the street for just \$399, which is about the price you would have paid only a few years ago for a plain-Jane acoustic with laminated materials and no built-in electronics.

The mahogany neck has a 25 1/2-inch scale, 20 extra jumbo frets, a rosewood fretboard, and a thin, rounded U-shaped contour,

a high-end B-Band Electret Film Transducer undersaddle pickup and B-Band T55 four-band preamp. The inclusion is astounding when you consider that a pickup/preamp system with a similar set of features can cost as much as this entire guitar. The preamp has bass, middle, treble and presence controls with +/-12dB of boost/cut, as well as an adjustable notch filter,

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all of which should make it feel very comfortable to players accustomed to electrics. The rounded cutaway provides easy access to the upper frets without adversely affecting bass and treble response, thanks in part to its deep and large grand auditorium-style body, which I feel produces the most well-balanced tone when it comes to cutaway acoustics.

The AC30E is equipped with

a volume control, and a built-in chromatic tuner with a backlit LED. The output jack includes both a 1/4-inch high-impedance unbalanced output *and* an XLR low-impedance balanced output.

**PERFORMANCE** It boggles the mind to think that the ESP AC30E sells for less than \$400. The guitar sounds great whether played acoustically or amplified,

and its action and playability compare favorably with ESP electric axes endorsed by numerous pros.

But the exacting and meticulous workmanship is the biggest surprise for a guitar in this price range. Whereas low-priced guitars from just a few years ago suffered from globs of glue on the braces and kerfed lining strips, the AC30E's interior is impeccably clean and tidy. The frets are smoothly trimmed, crowned and polished. The hardware, bridge and even the bridge pins are all perfectly aligned, and the mirror-like finish is unblemished, with no orange peel, ripples or stray specks and smears.

More importantly, the guitar sounds as good as it looks. The grand auditorium-style body lets the AC30E pump out considerable volume, and you can strum the strings hard without overdriving the maple top, making this guitar perfect for players with aggressive rhythm styles. But even when played with a light touch, the AC30E delivers powerful (but not booming) bass, sweet mids and crisp treble. While some maple acoustic guitars can sound overly bright and somewhat thin, the AC30E sounds surprisingly warm, full and balanced, offering an assertive attack plus generous sustain and resonance.

The B-Band pickup/preamp system does a great job of preserving the guitar's natural tone, although you can tweak the sound significantly with its versatile EQ controls. The tuner works well and is easy to see on a dark or bright stage, although the tiny "in-tune" symbol can sometimes be hard to see. The notch filter is very helpful for eliminating feedback, especially in a solo or small ensemble context, but note that the guitar's deep body and large sound hole make it difficult to eliminate feedback entirely when playing onstage with a variety of loud amplified instruments.

**CHEAT SHEET**

- **LIST PRICE** \$570  
**MANUFACTURER** ESP GUITARS, [ESP GUITARS.COM](http://ESP GUITARS.COM)
- A stunning grand auditorium cutaway acoustic-electric guitar, with quilted maple top, back and sides, as well as a mahogany neck and rosewood fretboard and bridge
- The deep cutaway makes it easy to reach the upper frets, and the thin, U-shaped profile and extra jumbo frets provide the familiar feel of an electric guitar neck.
- B-Band T55 preamp with controls for bass, middle, treble and presence, and an adjustable notch filter and built-in tuner with backlit LED
- **THE BOTTOM LINE** The ESP AC30E QM delivers incredible value with its high-quality materials, impeccable construction, well-balanced tone and versatile B-Band pickup/preamp system.