

ADMIRABLE NELSON

A SIGNATURE MODEL BUILT BY DEAN CAMPBELL FOR AVANT-GARDE GUITARIST BILL NELSON HAS A FEW SURPRISES IN STORE FOR **TIM SLATER**

When a high-volume guitar manufacturer takes on a project such as building an artist's signature guitar, the bottom line is that any signature model has to sell, and sell in big numbers. While the likes of Fender, Gibson or PRS have dedicated Artist Relations departments whose sole job is to pursue the lucrative signature of the hottest new guitar-slinger in town, the more independent companies usually lack the necessary clout to reel in the serious A-listers.

Faced with this situation, smaller companies that play it smart can hook up with a raft of more accessible artists who usually appreciate the support and are prepared to get their hands dirty helping to develop their signature guitar. These mutual love-ins can often involve liberal amounts of self-indulgence on behalf of the designer and artist, and at first glance you might think the Nelsonic Transitone had fallen into that trap.

On paper, the collaboration between American luthier Dean

Campbell and British experimental rock guitarist Bill Nelson looks unlikely to light a fire under anybody unfamiliar with either man's work – it's a niche within a niche, if you like. However, from past experience we know that Dean Campbell can build a great guitar, and given Bill Nelson's reputation as both an innovator and a perfectionist, we should at least offer them the courtesy of a closer look.

BODY & NECK

Going on appearances alone the Nelsonic is a bit of a shock. The strange, offset body suggests the result of a drunken tryst between a Gibson Les Paul and a Firebird, with a dash of Strat DNA thrown in for good measure. The vaguely Gibson-esque vibe is backed up by the heavy Honduran mahogany body and the way that the asymmetrical body shape balances when the guitar is strapped around the player's neck – if you've ever played an Explorer or Firebird, or anything even vaguely similar, you'll understand instantly what we mean.

No ribcage contours means this is a solid slab of a guitar, but despite this

GBINFO



CAMPBELL AMERICAN NELSONIC TRANSITONE

PRICE: £1562.23

BUILT IN: USA

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)

NUT WIDTH: 42mm (1.65 inches)

STRING SPACING AT NUT: 35mm (1.38 inches)

BODY: Honduran mahogany

NECK: Maple

FINGERBOARD: Ebony, 318mm radius (12.5 inches)

FRETS: 22 medium jumbo

PICKUPS: 1 x Seymour Duncan SH-2 Jazz humbucker, 1 x Seymour Duncan SH-1 '59 humbucker

CONTROLS: 1 x volume, 2 x tone, 3-way selector switch

BRIDGE: Gotoh roller vibrato bridge, gold

STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 55mm (2.17 inches)

MACHINEHEADS: Sperzel locking tuners, gold

WEIGHT: 3.6kg (8lbs)

FINISHES: Rocket ship red (shown)

CASE: Hard case included

LEFT-HANDERS: Available by special order only

CONTACT:

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WHO HE?

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO BILL NELSON

■ He might not be a household name, but guitarist and songwriter Bill Nelson has carved himself a unique niche in popular music, with a small but truly fanatical fanbase.

Already inspired by the guitar playing of Duane Eddy, Nelson was turned on to the work of French filmmaker and poet Jean Cocteau while at Wakefield College of Art, and his output has always mixed rock 'n' roll with something altogether more esoteric. He first rose to prominence in the early '70s with his band, Be Bop Deluxe, who combined elements of glam, prog and synth rock. Going solo at the end of the decade, Nelson continued to move in his own often highly experimental direction throughout the '80s and '90s, exploring jazz, new wave, electronic and ambient sounds and stretching the



possibilities of home recording, despite being beset by a series of disputes, law suits and personal setbacks. These problems now resolved, Bill Nelson continues to tour, write and record.

■ The Gotoh bridge returns smoothly to pitch thanks to its roller saddles



IMAGE: Ian Dickson/Redferns



■ We like this headstock shape – it's distinctive, but also familiar

the Nelsonic Transitone still feels good to hold. Although the body is quite long, it's relatively slim across the waist, and the guitar's excellent balance helps to dispel most of the weight, especially if the player wears a nice wide strap.

The bold retro-modern styling suggests that Dean Campbell once stumbled across an old drawing from the 1950s containing somebody's doodles of what electric guitars of the future might look like. But as you grow accustomed to the Nelsonic's unique looks, it begins to take on a strange but undeniable beauty. The stunning 'rocket ship red' nitro-cellulose finish (which isn't too dissimilar to Fender's unfailingly gorgeous fiesta red) goes a long way to help this potential ugly duckling turn into a swan, especially allied to the huge khaki scratchplate and those big control knobs that look like they've been pinched from an old cooker... There are lots of reasons why it shouldn't work, but somehow it does.

The bolt-on maple neck has a comfortable C-profile and a smooth satin finish. You'd be forgiven for

assuming that any bolt-on maple neck owes its origins to Fender, but the Nelsonic's neck actually feels closer to a Gibson, partly because of the three-a-side tuner layout up at the headstock but also thanks to the headstock's slight backward pitch. The use of a volute is quite rare these days, but the Nelsonic's neck has one to help reinforce the vulnerable area where the neck tilts backwards and begins to form the headstock.

Campbell has addressed the thorny problem of how to come up with a new headstock shape by not making an issue of it, opting instead for an elongated mutation of the traditional six-a-side design, with a couple of baroque scoops to break up the standard rectangular outline. It's vaguely Zemaitis-like, but thankfully not so overdone as to spoil the overall effect.

The fingerboard is an impressive slab of ebony with a grain so tight and dark that it almost looks and feels like a phenolic resin. You don't often encounter this quality of timber on mass-produced guitars these days and it is a sumptuous bit of wood. The 12.5-inch fingerboard radius is even flatter than Gibson's own 12-inch standard radius, and the Nelsonic feels very easy and comfortable to play, especially thanks to the fine finish of the frets, which feel perfectly smooth.

The pair of small 'atom' inlays at the 12th fret are apparently fashioned from red sea

coral. It's a brilliant bit of work, but we hope that the coral was obtained via an eco-friendly source!

HARDWARE & PARTS

Let's return to the headstock for a moment, where we find a set of gold-plated Sperzel locking tuners allied to a low-friction graphite nut. Sperzels are among the best – not only do they maintain stable tuning, but their locking string posts, operated by user-friendly knurled locking nuts, make quick string changes easy.

The heavy emphasis on tuning stability extends to the Nelsonic's vibrato system, a vintage-inspired fulcrum design made by Japanese aftermarket parts giants Gotoh, with roller bridge saddles to help further reduce friction and keep the guitar in tune when the player gives the whammy bar a good workout.

The electronics are based around a pair of Seymour Duncan humbuckers with gold-plated covers (an SH-2 Jazz at the neck and an SH-1 '59 at the bridge) linked to individual push-pull coil taps beneath those cooker-style tone knobs. A standard three-way pickup selector switch on the upper bout is set so that the switch operates from side to side, rather than up and down as you'd normally expect on most twin-pickup guitars. It's a quirky touch, but it doesn't interfere with the guitar's normal playability.

The tiny master volume knob, positioned very close to the bridge, takes some getting used to, as does pulling out the push/pull tone knobs – though they're easy to turn, they're slippery to grab hold of. Nevertheless, acclimatisation is part of playing a new guitar and we daresay that after a few days you'd adapt to it.

DETAILS

SOUNDS GREAT, FEELS GREAT AND LOOKS... FAR-OUT!



■ It's a quirky touch, but the pickup selector moves horizontally rather than vertically



■ The neck join made us think of Fender, but the Nelsonic has a feel all of its own



■ All the hardware is gold-plated, from the tuners to the jack socket. Feel the quality!



GBOPINION

CAMPBELL AMERICAN NELSONIC TRANSITONE

GOLD STARS

- ★ Superb tones
- ★ Great playability
- ★ Quirky yet surprisingly practical design

BLACK MARKS

- The tiny master volume knob and coil-tap switches are a bit fiddly at first

IDEAL FOR...

Anyone who appreciates super smooth and versatile tones, albeit in an unusual package

SOUNDS

We'd associate Bill Nelson with Gibsons and Yamahas – humbuckers all the way for him – and the Nelsonic's full-flavoured tone certainly reflects Bill's taste for a big yet clear tone. Strummed acoustically the guitar has a feisty resonance and an impressive amount of natural sustain. When amplified, this sustain really becomes a major selling point. Used with a lot of overdrive and a touch of compression, both pickups individually demonstrate masses of sustain, which you might expect from a guitar made from such top-notch materials as Honduran mahogany.

The Seymour Duncan Jazz neck pickup does that eerie endless sustain so beloved of King Crimson's Robert Fripp (an associate of Bill Nelson), and with a bit of delay added you can wail away for ages in a style that any mystical new-age guitar guru would be proud of. In this reviewer's opinion, the '59 bridge pickup is a much better all-round pickup than the hotter Seymour Duncan JB humbucker, often favoured by guitar makers as a partner for the Jazz unit at the neck. The '59

still has plenty of character and bite, with a distinctive mid-range honk that chops through a mix like a hot knife through butter, while making individual notes sound clean and punchy. However, it doesn't sound as overblown, aggressive and one-dimensional as the JB often can.

Clean sounds are equally impressive, and again the Nelsonic is all about warmth and dynamics, and plenty of 'em. The coil taps are useful for creating sharper, more cutting tones if required, but they aren't a necessity. The humbuckers alone are enough to cope with most rock 'n' roll situations with no feeling that you need anything extra to enhance the already superb range of sounds on offer.

GBRATINGS

CAMPBELL AMERICAN NELSONIC TRANSITONE

BODY & NECK	★★★★
HARDWARE & PARTS	★★★★
PLAYABILITY	★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★
GBVERDICT	★★★★

GBCONCLUSION

QUIRKY APPEARANCE CONCEALS CLASSIC QUALITY

■ **When we first laid eyes on the Campbell American Nelsonic Transitone, we took it to be quirky and self-indulgent. We were completely unprepared for the highly pleasurable experience of playing it. The high-quality parts and materials, effortless playing feel and versatile, highly responsive sounds have completely won us over.**

The Nelsonic's unusual mix of Fender flavours (the scale length and vibrato system) and Gibson influences (the two humbuckers and mahogany body) works really well, while still managing to generate the feel of something that's a bit different from the rest. The sounds and playability are both so good that this guitar feels almost addictive. It's very hard to put down once you start playing it, and when you grow used to the fact that beneath the quirky image lies an achingly gorgeous and highly usable guitar, there's almost no going back. **GB**