



in gear

by John Montalbano

the bass bin

Michael Kelly Firefly Acoustic Bass

The Acoustic Bass Guitar for the Masses

Before *MTV Unplugged* inspired the “acoustic set,” playing an acoustic gig on bass meant either playing a standard electric bass at an extra-low volume or playing upright bass. When the craze hit, several acoustic guitar manufacturers saw the opportunity, and the acoustic bass niche finally had some contenders. Some slapped a longer neck on a guitar body, changed the strings, and called it a bass! The result was, and still is, a poor-sounding instrument with a very unstable neck, good for a camping weekend, ending up in the blaze on Sunday morning. Some builders did extensive design research and came up with revolutionary designs that sound great but are quite expensive. Unless the acoustic bass guitar is going to be “your sound,” it is hard to justify spending a grand or two. Michael Kelly has overcome the gap between the junky novelty and museum piece investment with his affordable line of acoustic bass guitars.

The photos that I had previously seen of the Michael Kelly Dragonfly Fretless Bass were absolutely breathtaking. There is NO false advertising here! The quilted maple top and intricate inlays are all of the eye candy you could ever want on ANY instrument at five times the price. The highly figured quilt-

ed maple top is the top laminate of an all-maple construction. People often associate the word laminate with poor quality. This is a mistake. Actually, some of the nicest quilted maple is by itself extremely unstable. However, a thin sheet laminated to some very stable hard maple allows you to enjoy its beauty without concerns of cracking or warping. The laminate construction on this bass proves to be very stable and projects the sound nicely.

Looking at the inside of the bass, the bracing is neatly glued and well constructed. Most acoustic basses in this price range have minimal bracing, if any, with the exception of a piece of wood slapped across the underside of the bridge. The neck is a single piece of mahogany with the limited edition mother-of-pearl Firefly design inlaid in the rosewood fingerboard. Even the rosette around the soundhole is inlaid abalone. With close inspection, the finish is impeccable, including the seams of the three-layer body binding! I couldn't find a flaw on the instrument, regardless of the price range.

So, how does it sound? There are certain physical limitations to projecting bass frequencies without amplification. That is why a 100W guitar amp can shatter windows, but a 100W bass amp couldn't

shake Jell-O. Aside from the cavernous designs of some of the higher-end basses, the Dragonfly does have a fairly large body. In comparison to some of the other acoustic basses I tried of similar design, the projection is the best I have heard yet in this price range. By itself, it has a ringing, full tone, especially with the phosphor bronze acoustic strings. The fretless swell and dynamic makes it even more rewarding. Acoustically, the overtones seem to be more prominent. From a practical standpoint, though, for most gigs the bass will be plugged in. For this, the bass is equipped with a Fishman Classic 4 with three-band EQ and a “brilliance” control. Plugged in, it has an even response across the strings, the fretless overtones translate very nicely, and the bass is not overly sensitive to feedback. The Dragonfly Fretless also records very well, with minimal noise and a full acoustic tone.

From the acoustic bass perspective, I have played the “holy grails” as well as “hollowed firewood.” I have made the mistake of purchasing a “campfire” version. So, my expectations of any so-called lower price range acoustic bass guitar have been very low. Michael Kelly has raised the quality bar on the affordable acoustic bass guitar. Check out www.michaelkellyguitars.com. 🎸

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