

LTD MH-401QM

BC Rich
Draco

Group Test

Bargain vs bling: metal axe face-off

Hear our prayers, ye metal gods, and rain down upon us four electric guitars that shalt smite our audiences in a quest for TG's coveted Group Test award!

WORDS HENRY YATES

Peavey PXD
Tragic II



Flip the page to
find out which one
won our Group Test
head-to-head

Cort KX5

Playing a metal gig is like going to war. The flash of pyro burning your retinas. The crack of the snare drum ringing out like mortar fire. The sweat in your eyes. The dry ice in your lungs. If you haven't got the right artillery, you're gonna get hurt out there. While it might be acceptable for bluesmen to tickle a '64 Gretsch, the go-faster, play-harder nature of metal demands a lean, mean, modern killing machine that soaks up the brutality of your right hand and captures the nuances of your left. Anything less and you'll face a recreation of the 'you suck' scenario from *Guitar Hero* – with real spit and flying bottles.

It's easy to be demanding when you're Dave Mustaine. The mission statement of this Group Test is to discover how the metal market treats the rest of society, from the frustrated middle-manager who rocks out at the weekend, through the semi-pro with

horns tattooed on his forehead, down to the minimum-wage hoodie whose fingertips still hurt from fretting powerchords. What happens when you throw four different electrics at four disparate price points into the same bearpit? Can you really gig a guitar that costs less than £300? Should you seriously fork out for an axe that is pushing a grand?

This is a social experiment, carried out by metallers in lab coats. Stand well back.

The four horsemen

While the rest of the world goes to hell in a handcart, the metal industry is positively buoyant, enabling TG to select a quartet that would do any

mosher proud. We wanted to get our hands on at least one axe that would scare the children – and found it with the new BC Rich Draco (£715) – but elsewhere we've redressed the balance with three models that prove metal guitars can be mature, beautiful and tasteful.

For an embodiment of those qualities, look no further than LTD's MH-401QM (£829). This top-dollar stunner might be the most expensive in the group, but it'll need to fight dirty to beat off the much-cheaper Peavey PXD Tragic II (£562) and the cheaper-still Cort KX5 (£269). Could this be the biggest upset since Wrexham knocked Arsenal out of the FA Cup in 1992? ■

"WHAT HAPPENS WHEN YOU THROW FOUR ELECTRICS AT FOUR DISPARATE PRICE POINTS INTO THE SAME BEARPIT?"

LTD MH-401QM £829

What overdrafts were invented for



Body
Shock-rockers won't appreciate the clean lines, but technicians will find the LTD a great platform

Pickups
The combo of active EMG 81 and 85 humbuckers is one of metal's greatest partnerships

Neck
The LTD's set-thru neck gives superior sustain and feels bulletproof, but you'll pay for it

At a glance

LTD MH-401QM

BODY: Solid mahogany with quilted maple top
NECK: Maple, set-thru
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with block inlays
SCALE: 25.5"
PICKUPS: Active EMG 85 (neck) and 81 (bridge)
CONTROLS: Master volume, master tone, pickup selector
HARDWARE: Black nickel
FINISH: Blue [pictured], Red
CONTACT: Selectron UK 01795 419460
WEB: www.espguitars.com

Along with leather trousers from Prada and a nose ring from Tiffany, the luxurious LTD MH-401QM is the automatic choice of the executive metallar. If this guitar were any more expensive, it'd be an ESP.

The sizzle: LTD doesn't mess about by pretending that all axes are created equal. Take a squizz at the website and you'll find the MH-401QM at the head of the MH family, confirming its flagship status with a spec whose



highlights include a set-thru maple neck, svelte mahogany body topped with quilted maple, active EMG 81/85 humbuckers (powered by a nine-volt battery for monster output) and a Floyd Rose Special bridge. And

the second indication of how seriously LTD takes this model? The hefty £829 asking price – a prohibitive figure confirming the great unwashed need not apply.

We say: TG has tried several MH models, but this is a different class. It doesn't look overtly metal, but plays a blinder, with the ergonomic doublecut giving total freedom and the Floyd and speedy U-profile neck suggesting that if you can't sound good on this guitar, give up. We all know about the malevolent grind of

EMG's 81 and 85, and here they sound even more dangerous, flavoured by the mahogany and the sustain of the neck format. What surprises is the edgy shimmer of the clean voice... like an iron fist in a velvet glove.

Technically, it's the best guitar in the Group Test. But at £829, it damn well should be.

SUMMARY

For: Luxurious feel, glorious tone
Against: Too expensive for many



TG says: For the gentleman mosher

BC Rich Draco £715

Mummy, I'm scared!



Body
The outrageous body is inspired by the tail of a dragon: how metal is that?

Pickups
The neck rail is decent, but the Rockfield Fat Ass represents this model's trump card

Volume control
The lack of tone dial and no option of selecting both pickups is frustrating

At a glance

BC Rich Draco

BODY: Solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, thru
FINGERBOARD: Ebony with dot inlays
SCALE: 25.5"
PICKUPS: Twin rail (neck) and Rockfield Fat Ass (bridge)
CONTROLS: Master volume (with push-pull pickup selector)
HARDWARE: Black nickel
FINISH: Onyx [pictured]
CONTACT: Rosetti 01376 550033
WEB: www.bcrich.com

There aren't many axes that can make the Dean Razorback look like a butter knife, but the States' BC Rich has done it with the new Draco. Test it? We're scared to even touch it...

The sizzle: Winning features like the mahogany thru-neck, ebony fretboard and twin rail neck pickup all support the second-highest price tag, but it's the Rockfield Fat Ass bridge 'bucker that offers most potential. "The



Rockfield was designed for players that have those crazy super-acrobatic styles that we all stare at in amazement," notes the website. "The custom bobbins house larger polepieces

that help transfer string vibration from pulls, bends and leads for less tonal drop-off and better articulation and note definition."

We say: While it's visually as divisive as Marmite and should probably offer a vibrato, the Draco balances better than you'd think and impresses with the bend-friendly fretboard and the endless sustain of the thru neck. A combined volume/pickup selector gives the choice of neck or bridge – but not both – and

the absence of a tone further squeezes options, but who needs tweakability when the default setting rocks this hard? The rail is thick and thumping, but it's the Fat Ass that hits hardest, matching the claims of pin-sharp clarity and lending unique sneer to solos. We like.

SUMMARY

For: Eye-popping visuals, bridge tone
Against: You risk looking ridiculous



TG says: So good, it's scary

"THE CORT KX5'S NECK AND FINGERBOARD ARE A JOY, SUPPORTING ANY TECHNIQUE"

BARGAIN VS BLING: METAL AXE FACE-OFF **★ GROUP TEST**

Peavey PXD Tragic II £590

Triumph or tragedy?



Body
The Tragic body has an Explorer vibe, but plays like a go-faster version of Gibson's design

Afterburner
The Afterburner is a cool touch, but its tonal impact is more subtle than we'd hoped

Pickups
There's no knocking active EMGs, but the Tragic's clean voice doesn't have the character of some

At a glance

Peavey PXD Tragic II

BODY: Solid mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, set
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays
SCALE: 24.75"
PICKUPS: 2x EMG active ceramic pickups
CONTROLS: 2x volume, Afterburner, pickup selector
HARDWARE: Black nickel
FINISH: Black [pictured]
CONTACT: Peavey Electronics 01536 461234
WEB: www.peavey.com

When a guitar arrives in a coffin flight case, it's always a good sign. When the Grim Reaper appears beside you in a puff of foul-smelling smoke and asks if he can "have a go", it's an even better one.

The sizzle: Peavey envisages the PXD Series as the "perfect complement" to its existing 6505 amps, as cranked by Trivium, Machine Head et al. and though TG is running it through a Marshall, we're hoping the



firm's claims still ring true. "With supercharged active pickups anchored to menacing slabs of tone-sustaining mahogany," trumpets the Peavey marketing department, "PXD guitars are built for speed, slicing leads and

razor-sharp riffs." Of greatest interest to technophiles is the innovative EMG-AB Afterburner tone circuit, which claims to "boost input gain up to 20dB for the highest levels of saturation".

We say: The Tragic is reasonably priced, well built, won't tie you to metal and combines bulletproof foundations with flashes of whimsy – the sensible choice. Visually, you'll draw parallels with an Explorer, but there's actually better access, a neck profile that gobbles up virtuosity and

a matte finish that stops you sweating like a pig.

The Tragic's clean voice isn't as subtle as the LTD, but you'll forgive it when you make those EMGs angry and get a Hetfield crunch and brittle Hammett leads. The only letdown is the Afterburner, whose tone-shaping is hardly the stuff of revolution.

SUMMARY

For: Great value for a spec like this

Against: Clean voice, Afterburner

★★★★★

TG says: It's not Tragic – it's magic!

Cort KX5 £269

Meet the giant-killer



Body
The no-frills design does the job and supports developing technique

Pickups
They lack the kudos of EMGs, but these Motherbuckers pack a versatile punch

Neck
The maple neck is tough and professional – just what you need when you're starting out



At a glance

Cort KX5

BODY: Solid basswood
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays
SCALE: 25.5"
PICKUPS: 2x Zebra Motherbuckers
CONTROLS: Master volume, master tone (with coil tap), pickup selector
HARDWARE: Die-cast
FINISH: White Pearl [pictured], Black Metallic
CONTACT: HC Distribution 003 535 991 34268
WEB: www.cort-guitars.co.uk

You may have noticed the numbers tumbling as this Group Test gathers pace, leading TG to our logical conclusion with Cort's rock-bottom KX5.

The sizzle: Inevitably, given the price tag, Cort can't wave aftermarket pickups or premium timbers in our faces, but it can be proud of a spec sheet that's tough and professional. The subtext is that, no, you wouldn't choose the KX5 if the record



label gave you a blank cheque but, yes, it's plenty good enough for serious gigging and will die for your cause. "Our KX Series has a sleek body design that is lightweight and well-balanced,"

notes Cort, quietly. "Its string-thru body design with Tone Pros locking bridge system delivers endless tone and sustain."

We say: Let's be frank. The KX5 is not the best guitar in this test, but it's our winner because this giant-killer represents the best return on £269 in living memory. The neck and fingerboard are a no-nonsense joy, supporting any technique. The humbuckers deliver a balanced punch that fairly flaps the trousers. For once,

the coil tap is genuinely useful, offering classy singlecoil tones and ensuring you don't just chug like a moron. OK, it doesn't look that 'metal', but even that mild criticism dissolves when you realise there's a black vibrato model for £299. Poor people have never had it so good.

SUMMARY

For: Price, watertight performance

Against: Not the most metal styling

★★★★★

TG says: Breadline rockers' heaven