



Collings 290 £1,849

Collings ditches the glitz for a very fine interpretation of a vintage classic by Dave Burrel

The rivals

Gibson 1960 Les Paul Special s/c	£1,960
PRS Singlecut Standard Soapbar Satin	£1,999
Martyn Booth Special	£1,495

Available in TV yellow and faded cherry the VOS Special is as close as it gets to the real thing. Unlike the Collings we get the 'correct' wrap-over bridge/tailpiece too. PRS's Singlecut Standard Soapbar Satin is all-mahogany with choice of Stop-Tail or vibrato. Street prices are very attractive and it's the least posh PRS available – another player. Booth's Special, with its downsized ES-335-like body outline and dual soapbars, is certainly worth investigation. From one of our finest builders, the Special is one we're waiting to try.

Named after a Texas highway, the 290 is the entry point into Collings' small electric range.

It's based on the classic fifties Gibson single-cutaway Les Paul Special, but in typical Collings style updates the design and, of course, is built to the uncompromisingly high standards of the company's flat-top acoustics. Yet it remains dangerously close to the original.

"Yes it's close," admits Collings' general manager Steve McCreary. "It's like with our flat-tops. For many years we've obviously been paying tribute to those that have come before. Hats off to Martin and Gibson in the body shapes we've done – as have a lot of other guitar makers! But we like shapes that have stood the test of time and proven to function well. We have our own spin on things in trying to match weights in regard to the neck to the body, comfort and aesthetics too."

The subtle changes start with the scale length – 24 7/8ths inch – that is very slightly longer than the Gibson original and has probably been chosen because it's close to the Gibson scale but already used by Collings on its 00 12-fret flat-tops. But comparing the outlines of the 290 with Gibson's original – from the 16th fret (at which the Gibson neck joins the body) – the Collings shape is really quite different. The shoulder is more rounded and curves forward of the 16th fret to allow

It's the chewy, tube-like voice of the neck pickup that is this guitar's pearl. It's expressive, beautifully rounded but with enough articulation to cut through

an offset heel joint that reduces some, but not all, of the notoriously clunky heel joint. And again working from that 16th fret position on both designs the Collings body is a little shorter, the waist slightly forward of the Gibson design. You'll also notice a smaller – more vintage Tele-like – edge radius and on the rear of the guitar we have a quite angular rib-cage contour on the bass-side lower bout and an unusual leg-cut on the treble-side waist. Both quite dramatically change the classic slab body of the Special in favour of more comfort – especially seated – but the front-on visual remains perfectly classic looking.

The body depth is clever too: from the base to around the neck pickup it's standard issue 45mm but forward of this point it tapers down to 42mm as the top face mirrors the slight neck pitch and results in a very clean line between the 'board and the body face – again less clunky than the original.

Like the original single-cut Juniors and Specials the full width of the neck extends into the body necessitating that slight lip on the treble side of the body. But due to the offset heel, the lip is less intrusive here – another neat design improvement.

It's quite a big neck in terms of width and depth with a deep 'C' to 'D' shaped profile. Slight 'V'-ing to the shoulder would reduce the apparent bulk but if, like this reviewer, you like bulk then this is home. The unbound fingerboard is beautifully fretted with a wide and slightly low wire (approximately 2.6mm wide x 1.15mm high) with simple grained ivoroid position dots slightly smaller than the Gibson originals. Unusually – and like PRS until very recently – we only get one side dot at the 12th fret. Odd. But the deep chocolate brown of the board is very inviting and the top edge is slightly rolled, as it should be on a quality guitar like this.

The 290's headstock is typical Collings class: ebony faced with the simple Collings script logo inlay, thin elliptical truss rod cover and again a slight taper to the thickness. Although offered in a range of colours our review sample arrived in this faultless yellow/cream 'TV yellow' nitro finish that adds to the Gibson-esque vibe. As with the original limed mahogany Gibson finish it's slightly translucent, letting a little of the grain show through. The guitar is so clean and unfussy: a simplicity that provides beautiful elegance.



COLLINGS 290	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** Perfect interpretation of classic guitar; great build, sounds and vintage vibe

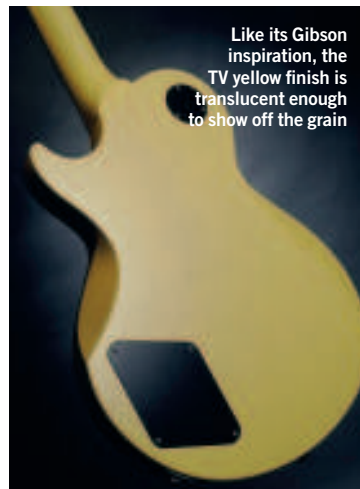
■ **WE DISLIKED** Too close in appearance to original Gibson?

Although the original had a one-piece wrap-over bridge/tailpiece, here we get a nickel-plated Tone Pros tune-o-matic bridge/stud tailpiece set-up and nickel-plated Sperzel tuners – not locking – with beautiful ivory-coloured buttons. There's a thick-metal chromed square jack plate in the usual side position and standard chromed strap buttons.

The dual P-90 soapbar single-coils are Jason Lollar's standard issue but the cavities are routed parallel to the top, not to the angled string line as the originals would have been – about the only thing that looks 'wrong' with the design. The black plastic top hat knobs, pickup covers and scratchplate certainly ape the original – the scratchplate rather too closely perhaps – although the three-way shoulder mounted toggle switch doesn't have a collar.

Removing the rear backplate you'll not only find the serial number but a neatly machined, and totally unscreened, cavity. The area surrounding the pots is left deeper than the rest, presumably to add maximum strength to the top that could be compromised with this four control, rear-mounted layout.

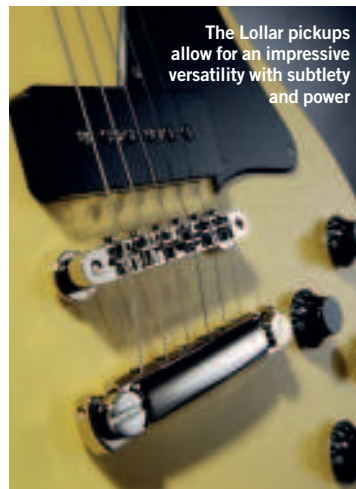
SOUNDS: Capturing the look and feel of a Special is relatively easy but getting close to its sound and resonance can prove elusive. This correct weight 290, however, gets closer than most. In fact it absorbs the original and spits out an expanded range of sounds that will satisfy even



Like its Gibson inspiration, the TV yellow finish is translucent enough to show off the grain

the most tone-hungry players. Specials and Juniors are slightly pigeonholed by the classic seventies rock styles – that crunchy, organic soulful blues-rock tone that the 290 captures without trouble. The bridge pickup is a little spikier compared to a fifties Junior but turn down the tone control, which on both pickups is beautifully graduated and doesn't strangle the sound in any way, and the sound is uncannily accurate. The neck pickup is a little underpowered but you soon find that's to your advantage – simply turn down the bridge pickup to match then you always have something in reserve when you switch back to the bridge for a solo. But it's the chewy, tube-like voice of the neck pickup that is this guitar's pearl. It's expressive, beautifully rounded but with enough articulation – even with quite a gained amp tone – to cut through.

The versatility of the guitar is brought into focus when you switch to a clean Fender-like channel. You step back a decade or so into snappier blues/soul tone – there's bite and sparkle aplenty, contrasted with that darker textured neck tone. Both pickups on – hum-cancelling with both pickups on full volume – creates, with the volume reduced on both and a lift



The Lollar pickups allow for an impressive versatility with subtlety and power

on the tones, a really vibrant Tele/Strat mixed sound and jazzier voices are easily evoked with tone reduction. Here's a guitar that can move all the way from a whisper to a roar with effortless authority.

Verdict

Simple is best? For many, ourselves included, the answer is yes. By cloning and improving on a real classic electric guitar Collings has produced an electric that's not only equal in standing to its fine contemporary acoustics but also to the guitar it 'models'. The previously reviewed I-35 simply didn't capture the same vibe with its oh-so-posh aesthetics. The 290, on the other hand, is quite simply 'a player'. No, it's not cheap, but we think it's very fairly priced for a fully professional workhorse.

If you're into this style of guitar but don't want to pay silly 'vintage' prices for the originals then the 290 fits the bill – it's one of the few modern guitars of its type that actually gets close to the look, feel, weight, sound and resonance of those old guitars without any of the playing issues. Superb. **A**

Collings 290

Guitarist RATING



COLLINGS 290

PRICE: £1,849 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway

solidbody electric

BODY: One-piece mahogany

NECK: One-piece mahogany, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 632mm (24.875-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.2mm

FINGERBOARD:

Rosewood, grained

ivoroid dots, 305mm (12-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium-heavy

HARDWARE: Tone Pros

tune-o-matic and stud

tailpiece, Sperzel tuners

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Two Lollar

P-90 Soapbar single-

coils, three-way toggle

pickup selector switch,

volume and tone for each

pickup

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.3/9.5

OPTIONS: Pearlloid

pickguard and truss rod

cover (£POA); pearlloid

pickguard and peghead

vener (£POA)

RANGE OPTIONS: The

ES-335 inspired I-35

starts at £3,799, the

Deluxe version costs

£4,749. The Les Paul

inspired City Limits series

starts at £3,099

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Tobacco

sunburst, crimson,

orange, TV yellow (as

reviewed), jet black,

black w/ white grain-fill

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