



IBANEZ AZ224F

Has Ibanez perfected the contemporary double-cut?



£1,069

Look, we could open this review by banging on about how Ibanez is synonymous with shred gods Joe Satriani, Steve Vai and Paul Gilbert, but we all know there's more to the Japanese guitar giant than pointy headstocks. Over its six-decade history, the company has found favour with guitarists of all stripes – the jazz-friendly Artcore, the indie delight that is the Talman – but the AZ series marks its most laser-focused attempt to create the ultimate 'players' player' guitar, courtesy of four years' R&D and input from six-string savants such as Tom Quayle, Martin Miller and Andy Timmons. But can one guitar be all things to all players?

Just sitting down with the AZ is a revelation; the looks may be classic, but the comfort and fretboard access is unprecedented. Ibanez's super all-access neck joint means you'll have no problem up at the dusty end, while an ergonomic back contour makes for a guitar that melds into your body. That neck will be a surprise to anyone used to Ibanez's legendary, super-skinny Wizard profiles, however; the oval C, bordering on D, profile is certainly more of a palm-filler, but we reckon it has a more universal appeal while still being svelte enough for fretboard heroics, especially with its incredibly light sealer finish. The vibrato is a joy to use, too; even if you tend to shun

“THE AZ'S PLAYABILITY IS IMMEDIATELY GRATIFYING...”

The AZ224F clocks in at the more affordable end of the line-up, with an Indonesian build and basswood (rather than the upper-end Prestige's alder) body, but still delivers the core of what makes the AZ range such a winning prospect: in short, everything. We're talking a roasted maple neck and fretboard, complete with hard-wearing stainless-steel frets, glow-in-the-dark side dots and a non-stick Graph Tech TUSQ XL nut; Gotoh Magnum Lock machineheads, with height-adjustable posts for optimum string angle behind the nut; a Gotoh-designed vibrato, with a lockable tremolo arm that doesn't flop around; an included hybrid hardcase/gigbag... oh, and a set of newly designed Seymour Duncan Hyperion pickups with nine (!) selectable positions.

whammy, you may find yourself adding in subtle shimmers, such is the smoothness of the system and stability of the tuning.

While the AZ's playability is immediately gratifying, the pickup switching takes a bit more thought, and the key lies in the Alter Switch. Flick it down, and the selections are as you'd expect from an Alnico V-equipped HSS guitar: a clutch of fat, hi-fi single-coil tones that excel at contemporary clean sounds. But switching in the other direction opens up four additional tones: position five runs the two singles in series to approximate a humbucker; next is the neck and single humbucker coil nearest the bridge; then the singles in series with the humbucker; followed by the single humbucker coil nearest the neck; then the humbucker as normal. ➔

1 ALTER SWITCH

The AZ224F boasts a whopping nine tonal variations courtesy of this mini-toggle and the five-way selector

2 TUNERS

Gotoh's Magnum Lock tuners are onboard here, complete with Height Adjustable Posts to precisely set the tension for each string

3 SIDE DOTS

Ibanez has thought of everything – the AZ's side dots even glow in the dark, so there's no excuses for missed frets on dark stages

AT A GLANCE

BODY: Basswood body w/ flamed maple top

NECK: Roasted maple

SCALE: 648mm (25.5")

FINGERBOARD: Roasted maple

FRETS: 22

PICKUPS: 2x Seymour Duncan Hyperion single coils, 1x Seymour Duncan Hyperion humbucker

CONTROLS: 1x volume, 1x tone, 5-way pickup selector switch, Alter Switch

HARDWARE: Ibanez/Gotoh T1502 vibrato, Gotoh Magnum Lock machineheads w/ H.A.P. Graph Tech TUSQ XL nut

LEFT-HANDED: No

FINISH: Brown Topaz Burst (shown), Blue Iceberg Gradation

CASE: Hybrid hardcase/gigbag

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Feel the steel

What's the big deal with stainless steel frets?

The majority of guitars you've played have likely featured nickel frets – the industry standard for decades. Ibanez, however, has equipped its AZ series with stainless steel frets, which used to be found only on boutique offerings from Suhr, Anderson and Vigier, but are becoming more commonplace on guitars from the likes of Ernie Ball Music Man and Schecter, too. The reasons are simple: stainless steel frets offer a smooth feel and increased corrosion resistance over nickel frets, meaning decreased wear from fretting and sweat. You won't need to refret stainless steel frets as frequently... if ever! The trade-off is that because the material's so durable, it can damage luthiers' tools – so if you do need any fretwork done, it'll cost you extra.

That grants you access to darker, jazzier neck tones, punchy all-pickups-on sounds, and thinner single-coil snap. Combined with the standard positions, there's an unparalleled choice of tones – if you can't find a mid-position quack you like here, it doesn't exist.

That versatility makes the AZ a dab hand at just about any kind of playing – although it is worth noting that while the humbucker does the classic rock thing extremely well, it's not the most high-output pickup in the world, so metal players might want a



Ibanez's super all-access neck joint means you'll have no problem at the dusty end



boost in their signal chain for seriously high-gain sounds. What's most striking is how well-balanced the pickup sounds are across the range – nothing's overly dark or spiky. It all adds up to an inspiring set of tones that retain their character through gain.

It's hard to think of an area where Ibanez could improve here – sure, ebony fretboard and hardtail options would be nice, and some players may just prefer a simpler coil-split to a whole extra set of pickup positions – but that's testament to the company's meticulous attention to spec. We

love the subtle output jack, hidden in a recess near the strap button, and the thumbwheel to lock the whammy bar in position. With the AZ line, Ibanez has created a guitar that has the potential to appeal to just about any player – and in an age of division, that's a very welcome achievement.

Michael Astley-Brown

SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

ALSO TRY...

FENDER DELUXE STRAT HSS

£779

While traditional Strats can't boast the same versatility, this HSS model features noiseless single coils and an S-1 switch to split the bridge 'bucker.



CHARVEL PRO-MOD DK24 HSS

£939

New for 2018, this speed machine is similarly well-spec'd, with a roasted maple neck, Seymour Duncan pickups, a Gotoh Custom 510 vibrato and locking tuners.



SCHecter SUN VALLEY SUPER SHREDDER III

£869

The Super Shredder lives up to its name, with a Floyd Rose locking vibrato, plus an HSS set of cutting-edge EMG Retro Active pickups.

