

THE BOTTOM LINE[®]

PERFORMANCE TESTING BY TOM MULHERN & ASSOCIATES, CAMPBELL, CA (408) 374-1353

AT A GLANCE: The Martin D-1 and D-1R offer guitarists incredibly affordable instruments employing innovative design and construction techniques to produce a commanding sound and exquisite playability. High quality and attention to detail make these excellent guitars for all players.

By Tom Mulhern

Every guitarist at one time or another dreams of owning a Martin guitar. After all, Martins have been the benchmarks, the ultimate acoustic guitars since 1833. Martins have been in the hands of the greatest guitarists, from folkies to bluegrassers, jazzers to rockers. High quality doesn't come easily or cheaply, as everyone knows. However, Martin has introduced a new guitar, the D-1 Dreadnought, which stands established thinking on its ear. Following time-proven external design criteria, the D-1 is truly a traditional Martin from headstock to strap button, but with new interior construction and a new approach to creating its sides. And its lowest price in the Martin line makes it accessible to pickers who may have been looking elsewhere, thinking they couldn't afford a real, live Martin. It takes more than great looks to convince a picker that this is a fine guitar, and the D-1 handles itself sonically at least as well as it does visually.

This guitar comes in two forms: The D-1 has a two-piece solid mahogany back and 3-ply laminated mahogany sides; and the D-1R, which employs laminated Indian rosewood sides and back (the D-1R costs slightly more than the D-1). Both guitars look like every great Martin Dreadnought you've seen before: the "tortoise"-bound spruce top, "tortoise" pickguard, traditional headstock shape, stately soundhole. The biggest departures from other Martins aren't visible unless you take a look inside. Martin has inaugurated a new, patent-pending neck-to-body mortise joint which incorporates an "A-Frame" pattern of bracing that ties directly into a laminated alder neck block, adding support to the soundhole area. A buttress extension designed to enhance structural support of the fingerboard is incorporated into the neck block, too. Other modifications to make the top vibrate more freely while maintaining structural integrity were added throughout the interior.

They may not look it, but the sides are definitely different. Instead of bending a single piece of thick mahogany or rosewood for each side, Martin employed a 3-piece laminate with mahogany inner and outer facings on the D-1 and rosewood facings on the D-1R (the core wood on both models is genuine mahogany, which is highly unusual and tonally advantageous). This results in a very rigid frame for the construction of the guitar, plus it reflects sound in the guitar's interior very well. Other structural elements similarly combine strength and tone-creating capabilities. A look at the interior bracing finds tapering (so it looks knife-like in sharpness, and overlapped in a solid joint without gaps, in the fashion of vintage X-braced Martins), which help to reduce weight and enhance the tone while making sure that the strength of the bracing isn't undermined.

Other significant changes include a new bridge design, in which the bridge pins are parallel to the saddle angle, to prevent cracking of the bridge across the bridge-pin holes. Also, a ramp for each string equalizes the down-bearing pressure of the strings against the saddle, so even if the saddle is ever cut extremely low, the downward pressure wouldn't be adversely affected (this is very important if you intend on adding a bridge-saddle transducer). The neck-set on the D-1 and D-1R is actually built into the body, resulting in easier playing in the high registers without the excessively

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Martin's D-1 And D-1R Acoustic Guitars



D-1 Dreadnought

Martin's D-1 And D-1R Acoustic Guitars

high action that often results from a standard fingerboard installation's "drop-off."

When combined in a real-world guitar, what do all these design elements mean to the sound? Well, the most important measures of a guitar are its sound and playability, and that's why it's necessary to sit down, roll up your sleeves, and run through some of your repertoire. Because of its price and departure from traditional Martin construction, I expected the D-1 to sound less lively, with less volume and a constricted tone. After all, it wouldn't be the first guitar to be made in the image of great Martins and miss the mark. My anticipated criticisms vanished as soon as I started playing the D-1. In fact, I was surprised by how good it sounds—regardless of price, who made it, or any other considerations. I started out with a flatpick, listening for anomalies and unevenness, and even whacked some big, brawny chords to see if I could get anything rattling. The D-1 held up extraordinarily well, keeping its tone, even when I plunked as hard as you might expect any guitarist to attack an instrument onstage. Loud chords come out with a powerful, well-supported texture, plus partial chords and fill-in licks proved just as clearly defined.

After a few days with the D-1, I knew for sure that among its greatest attributes is its ability to handle dynamics exceedingly well. Whether fingerpicked to bring out individual voicings, or smacked by a hard flatpick to attack the daylights out of it, the guitar retained its even-tempered personality. As I settled into a routine of trying different styles, the D-1 showed far more of its tonal range than a quick strum or two could ever indicate (that's a hint for anyone trying the D-1 in a store—really put it through all its paces, rather than just giving it a quick once-over!). If a guitar keeps surprising you with its "singing" abilities after a few days of intensive scrutiny, then you know it's got an awful lot going for it.

The balance among the strings is exceptional, with even the "cross-over" of the G string being almost nonexistent. Rich, tight bass harmonizes with a clear, strong midrange and a sweet top end, making this a great choice both as an accompanist's guitar in ensembles and as a soloist's instrument. In addition to their strengths in traditional tuning, I particularly like the way the D-1 and the D-1R handle different tunings, including some that employ a low D or C#. The bottom remains tight and robust, retaining the definition demanded by a tuning with the low E dropped.

How do the D-1 and D-1R compare? In terms of playability, they're virtually identical. After all, they follow similar design and construction. The tone is the difference: The D-1, with its mahogany sides and back has a brighter, crisper, more trebly tone than the D-1R, which has a stronger bass response and more warmth like a vintage "Herringbone" Martin. Flatpicking on the D-1R coaxes lively harmonics that come from the "rosewoodiness," giving it a little extra edge for a solo player who uses a lot of single-note lines.

For overall playability and tone, it's difficult to imagine a guitar for twice the price being able to offer any more than the D-1. The fact that it's a real, live Martin is more than icing on the cake, too: With a universal reputation as the maker of the world's finest flat-top guitars, Martin has now brought a new level of affordability to guitarists in the form of the D-1 and D-1R, while maintaining the high standards of quality that have been the heart and soul of Martin Guitars since 1833. A

guitar like this is an investment that will undoubtedly pay off over the long haul. Whether you're experiencing your first Martin or looking for a "performance" guitar that lets you keep a rare, old Martin safe at home or in the studio, the D-1 and D-1R are excellent choices for any picker. ■■■



The D-1R employs a rosewood back and sides and is designed to create tones reminiscent of vintage "Herringbone" Martins.

INSIDE MARTIN'S D-1 AND D-1R ACOUSTIC GUITARS

Type of guitar: Dreadnought steel-string acoustic

Top: Solid spruce

Bracing: New Martin "A-Frame"

Special features: Innovative neck block, neck/body joint, and bracing pattern

Back: Solid mahogany (D-1) or laminated East Indian rosewood (D-1R)

Sides: Laminated mahogany (D-1) or laminated East Indian rosewood (D-1R)

Neck: Solid mahogany

Neck shape: Low-profile with adjustable truss rod

Fingerboard: East Indian rosewood

Bridge: East Indian Rosewood (unique design with ramps)

Finish: Satin finish on neck and body

Binding: Tortoise-color (with rosewood heel cap)

Bridge and end pins: White with tortoise dots

Pickguard: Tortoise-color

Number of frets: 20

Number of frets clear of the body: 14

Total length: 40 $\frac{1}{4}$ " (1022.4mm)

Body length: 20" (508mm)

Body width: 15 $\frac{5}{8}$ " (396.9mm)

Body depth: 4 $\frac{7}{8}$ " (123.8mm)

Neck width at nut: 1 $\frac{11}{16}$ " (42.9mm)

Scale length: 25.4" (645.2mm)

Tuning machines: Chrome-plated, enclosed

Strings: Martin M540 Light Phosphor Bronze

Case: #640 Hardshell

Manufacturer's address: The Martin Guitar Company, 510 Sycamore St., Nazareth, PA 18064 USA