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David Gage Czech-Ease Acoustic Road Bass

*"If you really want to cause some trouble,
if you really want to cause some pain,
then simply go down to your local airport, and try to put a bass aboard a plane."*

Jay Leonhart "Bass Aboard a Plane"

Got a couple of hours? I'd gladly tell you my horror stories of being a traveling upright bassist. In the past 10 years I've missed flights, been rerouted, verbally humiliated by airline employees and missed gigs. And why? Because I play an instrument that travels in a case that would dwarf most NBA players.

The simplest solution to this problem would be to begin playing the bass guitar, but bass players are a stubborn bunch and we like the sound that comes out of this large stick with strings and a resonator box. A solution that many bass designers have come up with has been to eliminate the natural resonance of the body and create an upright bass that is compact and narrow. The result is the Electric Upright Bass (EUB), an instrument that takes up significantly less space and can travel more easily than a full-sized upright bass. There are a number of EUBs on the market and some are quite good.

The problem with the EUB for acoustic bass purists is that it is not acoustic: The design relies predominantly on the pick-up for sound and does away with the natural resonance of the body. A handful of bass makers have been experimenting with a smaller, narrower body that might still allow some resonance, such as the instrument made by Eminence. David Gage's Czech-Ease Acoustic Road bass is the most recent instrument to try and resolve the problem of portability and resonance.

Gage first introduced the Czech-Ease bass in mid-2003 and he has continued to modify and refine the instrument. The radical innovation with this instrument is that, aside from a reduction in body size, it is, in every other respect, a traditional 3/4-sized acoustic bass. The ebony fingerboard is the proper length, the strings are full-length, the adjustable bridge is full-sized and there is a shortened ebony tailpiece that attaches to the deep body and allows for proper resonance. In keeping with its design as a travel instrument, the dark lacquer finish on its plywood body is far more durable than carved wood.

So what is radical and innovative about the Czech-Ease? Gage made the top scroll removable, reduced the size of the lower bout (the bottom part of the body) and added an extra long end-pin. All of these changes decrease the size of the instrument and make it easy to transport—the hardshell case is small enough to fit into the cargo hold of even the smallest commercial passenger plane (and I know this from personal experience!).

The reduced size makes the Czech-Ease look like an oversized cello, but all of the key structural elements of the body have been retained. The most important element, though, is how much it sounds and

feels like a full-sized bass. In order to give the instrument its wide, full-bottomed sound, Gage made some adjustments to the bass bar and this makes a difference. The Czech Ease bass has a rich, dark, warm voice and really sings whether I am playing pizzicato or using my bow. Moreover, you don't need an amp to play it. I have used it on several occasions in all acoustic settings and always with good results.

The instrument comes with a softshell Mooradian case that has a bow pocket that was far too small for my bow case. Moreover, the bass case has no pockets for rosin or any other typical bass accessories. The Czech-Ease bass can also come equipped with Gage's Realist Pick-Up (which sounds pretty good but is still not my favorite acoustic bass pick-up). The hardshell case is durable and padded in all the right places, but the locks don't always close easily and sometimes come loose in transit.

The entire package of the bass, softshell case, pick-up and hard-shell case is a bit pricey at \$5,000. But if you do enough traveling you will discover that it pays for itself in a number of ways. The price for flying with this instrument tends to be less than half of what it costs for a full-sized bass and I have even flown several times without an additional charge (including one round-trip flight to Europe). Most importantly, I have never been denied or delayed at the gate by a clerk worried that my instrument won't fit in the cargo hold—that alone makes this bass worth the investment.

DAVID CHEVAN

Saga Gitane John Jorgenson "Tuxedo" Guitar

Session musician, solo artist and guitar cult-hero John Jorgenson has a signature ax for every facet of his playing: a Takamine acoustic for countrified strumming, a Custom Fender Telecaster for the fleet-fingered chicken-pickin' he performs with the Hellecasters, and not one, not two, but three Selmer-style Gypsy-jazz-boxes by Saga Gitane. This latest model is called the "Tuxedo," and it's essentially a slightly modified version of Jorgenson's Gitane model DG-300 finished in black—a dream finish of sorts for Jorgenson, who, according to Gitane's Web site, saw a photo of a black Selmer-style guitar from the 1950s and just had to have it (or something like it).

With Django-mania in a perpetual state of renaissance—Gypsy jazz is a global, historical phenomenon rather than merely a fad or even period music—Gitane found a need and filled it several years ago: As reported in *The Music Trades* [Oct. '06], there were plenty of Gypsy-jazz guitarists emerging but no affordable Hot Club-worthy axes around. The Holy Grail-like prospect of finding an original Selmer was always looming, but that's sort of like telling a player he or she needs to recover an original Segovia just to play "Bouree." Perhaps most important, Gitane manufactured these quality instruments in China, a move that, while turning off collectors, kept production costs down and the guitar in the reasonable \$900-\$1,400 price range.

And although Gitane could've reinvented Gypsy-jazz-box design and created something that *kind of* looked like a Selmer and *sort of* played like one, the company paid close attention to recreating and modernizing the archetypal Selmers. The results are genuine instruments that Django-philes can pay just a grand for and still feel legit: That's certainly not something traditional archtop players can say about the budget instruments in their niche. If you want to sound like Bucky Pizzarelli or Jimmy Bruno, get ready to fork over some dough for a custom archtop.

The Tuxedo is the latest of Gitane's genuine fake Selmers, and it's a jewel. With its high-gloss black finish, white pearloid body binding and elegant headstock inscription ("Modele John Jorgenson"), the Tuxedo feels closer to something a custom shop or independent luthier might turn out than a factory in China (the cheap-looking silver-plated tailpiece, however, screams "mass production"). The small "oval" soundhole provides excellent volume and resonance, though it lacks singularity and style of the D-hole, available on Jorgenson's 14-fret DG-320 model.

Where the past two Jorgenson models featured figured Brazilian rosewood sides and spruce tops, the Tuxedo boasts mahogany

sides and back and a spruce top. The mahogany is a decidedly more conventional dreadnought construction approach, and although that doesn't add a very noticeable tonal difference, it does lend the guitar the dark, rumbling lows and mids associated with your standard steel-stringed acoustic. The spruce top retains the light, velocity and snap indicative of the Django sound, but because of the mahogany, the Tuxedo also handles the strummed open chords of folk and country surprisingly well (although the "0" fret right in front of the nut takes some getting used to). Of course, I doubt too many players are going to fork over \$1,395 retail for a Gypsy-jazz guitar to play Dylan covers.

You'd most likely purchase this Gitane to shred through "Nuages," feverishly comp the changes to "Shine," and cry yourself to sleep with a lyrical solo arrangement of "Tears." (Admittedly, it sounds best when engaging in sledgehammer Hot Club-style rhythm work, a perfect exercise for the guitar's mid-heavy tone). The guitar feels right in all these contexts, with a hearty, U-shaped neck underlying strings supported by a high-sitting moustache bridge. The standard 26 5/8-inch Gypsy-Gitane scale length provides steady

intonation and 21 frets; both assets when sweep picking like Django around the 12th position. As with Gypsy-jazz guitars

in general, the action is purposefully high and heightens rapidly as you approach the bridge. Gypsy guitars aren't the easiest instruments to play, but that's kind of the point: Many of Django's signature bends and inflections—as well as those moments when his mind seemed to move faster than his hands—were simply moments when his mastery struggled against an unforgiving instrument.

Guitar technology eventually caught up to Django's playing; nevertheless, it's fun (and historically interesting) to explore what the *original* shredders played. The Tuxedo affords guitarists that opportunity. **EVAN HAGA**



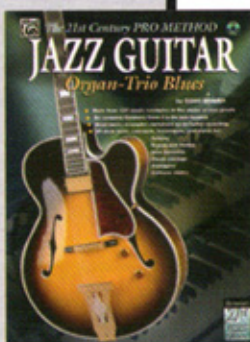
Tito Puente Book/DVD

From Hudson music comes the *Tito Puente: King of Latin Music* combo pack, a book/DVD set featuring an 88-page biography rife with personal stories, Latin-jazz history and the timbales-master's rich humor, as well as a 45-minute DVD comprising exclusive interviews and unaccompanied solos for study. The multi-media pack retails for \$22.95 and is available in drum shops and music stores. www.hudsonmusic.com



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