

# Guitar Player

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**GEAR** Bench Test

## Asher Ultra Tone T Deluxe

TESTED BY MICHAEL ROSS



**BILL ASHER IS BEST KNOWN AS THE MAN WHO** makes slide guitars for Ben Harper—instruments based on Weissenborn lap steels from the late '20s. Less recognized is his line of standard electric guitars, which includes the Ultra Tone series T Deluxe on review here. The styling of the T Deluxe is reminiscent of Leo Fender's prototype Telecaster—the one with the three-on-a-side headstock configuration. Historic coolness notwithstanding, I found the Asher's thinner headstock balanced better with the body lines than the paddle-like clumsiness of Fender's primal Tele. Small, open-backed Waverly-style tuners add an extra vintage touch, at the same time matching the headstock for delicacy. Despite their diminutive size, the tuners felt solid and worked smoothly.

The Ultra Tone's satin-finished maple neck and its maple-capped fretboard evidenced only slight flame and birds-eye. Minimal finish and figuring on an instrument topping three grand may seem odd to some, but they represent a commitment to sound and stability rather than flash and filigree. The neck and body are sealed with nitrocellulose lacquer—an expensive process that lets the wood breathe for improved resonance. As to stability, many heavily fig-

ured necks tend to warp at the slightest temperature change. Should you request extra flame, the Asher neck's two-piece quartersawn construction will help mitigate any drift.

Bill Asher maintains that the one-piece swamp ash body was hand selected for its light weight. And though not feather-light, the test instrument definitely fits in the lean-and-mean weight class. With its truncated pickguard, and rear-routed controls, the Ultra Tone definitely has a look of its own. But the most striking items on this guitar are the two pickups and the pointer-style (a.k.a. "chicken head") rotary knob that joins the traditional, metal-domed Tone and Volume controls.

Pete Bilotto of Vintage Vibe pickups helped Bill Asher with the design of the pickups. Sporting blades instead of individual polepieces and black tops with white binding, they recall the classy styling of the old "Charlie Christian" pickups on the Gibson ES-150. "I was looking for a traditional Tele bridge tone with just a bit more lows and midrange, while maintaining that great twang," says Asher. "I wanted a neck pickup that offered dynamics, with a clear punchy bass response. Quite a few of my clients coveted the Teisco Del Ray pickups from the '60s—like the one in Ry Cooder's Coodercaster. These have the clear bass response I was looking for."

The pointer knob controls a ToneStyler switch made by Stellartone. This passive 16-contour tone selector shifts the pickup's resonant frequency and adjusts the treble roll-off point in 1/3-octave steps. Before plugging in the T Deluxe, I marveled at how the excellent fret work and setup made a chunky neck comfortable for a player with average-sized hands, such as myself. To determine the success level of Asher's quest for tone, I ran the instrument into an Orange Tiny Terror and a Reverend Hellhound.

I had experimented with the ToneStyler in the past, and plugging in the Asher made me remember how much I liked it. With 16 increments, you must listen closely to

SPECS   Asher Guitars & Lap Steels, (310) 821-2888; asherguitars.com	
<b>MODEL</b>	<b>ULTRA TONE T DELUXE</b>
<b>PRICE</b>	\$3,200 retail/Street price N/A
<b>NUT WIDTH</b>	1 5/8"
<b>NECK</b>	Birdseye Maple
<b>FRETBOARD</b>	Birdseye Maple, 25.5" scale
<b>FRETS</b>	22
<b>BODY</b>	Swamp ash
<b>PICKUPS</b>	Asher/Bilotto Vintage Blade
<b>CONTROLS</b>	Volume and Tone, ToneStyler 16-position switch
<b>BRIDGE</b>	Glendale Vintage Blackguard
<b>TUNERS</b>	Waverly-style by Gotoh
<b>KUDOS</b>	Plays perfectly. Tones for days.
<b>CONCERNS</b>	None.

hear the difference among adjacent settings, but they do exist, and every notch is sweet and musical. The first setting bypassed the control, while the following clockwise settings offered slight modifications of the high end. Counter-clockwise positions yielded variations on darker, lo-fi tones, perfect for old blues, or adding character to more modern tunes. The lack of any labeling around the knob, however, made it difficult to quickly recall favored settings.

The neck pickup's warm, balanced sound, made me understand why Cooder loves the Teisco model on which it was based. The bridge pickup had its advertised enhanced lows and midrange, but these EQ bumps worked better for me as the amp moved into distortion than in clean settings. Rockers will dig the sound, while players seeking ice-pick country tone might want to request the Seymour Duncan Antiquity option for the bridge position. Somehow, when combined with the neck pickup, the extra mids and lows were mitigated, making for a clean chime, great for funk or jangle.

The Asher Ultra Tone T Deluxe combines vintage vibe, come-hither playability, and terrific tone. If roots music—jazz, blues, country, classic rock, etc.—is your playground, and your wallet can handle the tariff, the T Deluxe should top your list of axes to audition. 🎸

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