

GEAR

Roundup!

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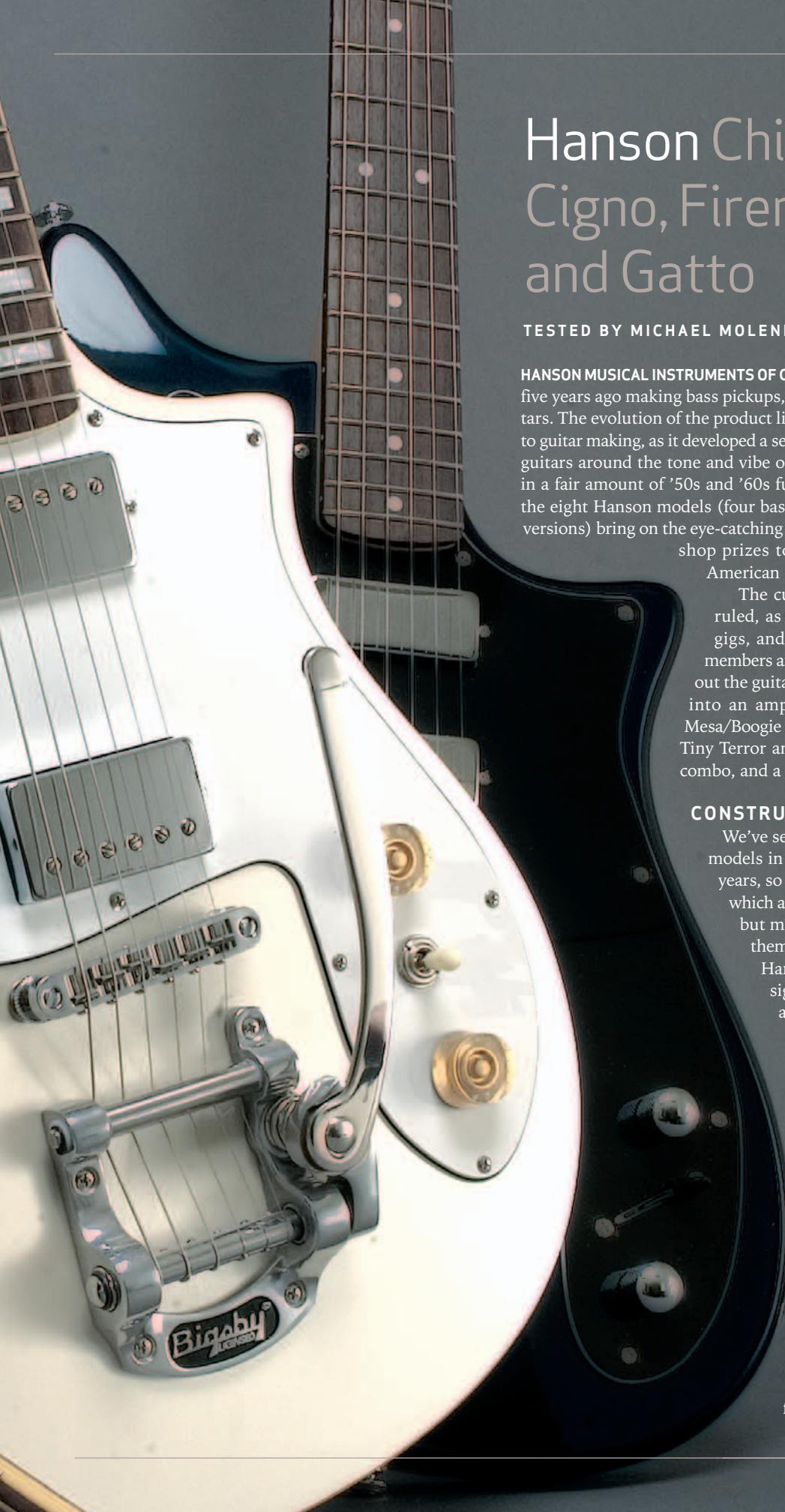
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SPECS | Hanson Musical Instruments, (773) 251-9684; hansonguitars.com



MODEL	CHICAGOAN	CIGNO	FIRENZE ST	GATTO
PRICE	\$870 direct	\$675 direct	\$599 direct	\$675 direct
NECK	Maple, set	Mahogany, set	Maple, bolt-on	Mahogany, set
FRETBOARD	Ebony	Rosewood	Rosewood	Rosewood
FRETS	Medium jumbo	Medium jumbo	Medium jumbo	Medium jumbo
SCALE	24.75"	24.75"	25.5"	24.75"
BODY	Bound maple top, back, and sides	Mahogany	Ash	Mahogany
PICKUPS	Hanson mini-humbuckers	Hanson P90s	Hanson Blade mini-humbuckers	Hanson Classic humbuckers with coil tap
CONTROLS	2 Volume, 2 Tone, 3-way pickup selector	Master Volume, Master Tone, 5-way pickup selector	Master Volume, Master Tone, 5-way pickup selector	Master Volume, Master Tone (pull for coil tap), 3-way pickup selector
BRIDGE	Tune-o-matic with roller saddles, Bigsby B70 tremolo	TonePros	TonePros	TonePros
TUNERS	Hanson	Hanson	Hanson	Hanson
KUDOS	Airy tones with great articulation. Looks retro fabulous.	Round, ballsy sound with punch. Looks ultra cool. Love that baseball-bat neck!	Mini humbuckers deliver nice focused mids with a ton of spank.	Fat, punchy humbucker tones. Sleek looks.
CONCERNS	A few minor cosmetic issues.	A few minor cosmetic issues. Neck may be too thick for some.	A few minor cosmetic issues.	A few minor cosmetic issues.



Hanson Chicagoan, Cigno, Firenze ST, and Gatto

TESTED BY MICHAEL MOLEND A

HANSON MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS OF CHICAGO STARTED OUT APPROXIMATELY five years ago making bass pickups, then guitar pickups, and, finally, guitars. The evolution of the product line informed the company's approach to guitar making, as it developed a series of pickups first, and then designed guitars around the tone and vibe of each pickup. They obviously tossed in a fair amount of '50s and '60s funkiness into the designs, as well, as the eight Hanson models (four basic platforms with stoptail and Bigsby versions) bring on the eye-catching cool of everything from bizarre pawnshop prizes to wacky Italian art pieces to classic American silhouettes.

The curb appeal of the Hansons definitely ruled, as I brought each model on a series of gigs, and never once failed to have audience members and fellow guitarists come up and check out the guitars—often before I even plugged them into an amp. I tested each Hanson through a Mesa/Boogie Stiletto and Marshall 4x12, an Orange Tiny Terror and Egnater 1x12, a Club Amps 1x12 combo, and a Vox AC15.

CONSTRUCTION

We've seen excellent workmanship on a lot of models in the \$500 to \$900 range the past few years, so it was no surprise that the Hansons—which are designed and “finished” in Chicago, but manufactured in Indonesia—presented themselves as serious gigging instruments.

Hardware is solid across all models—no significant pickup rattles or loose knobs and switches. The finishes are very nice—especially the translucent burgundy on the Cigno—and any finish glitches were limited to a jagged edge or two on a pickguard and a touch of overpaint on the neck of the Cigno on the binding near the neck heel. The Cigno also had a small gouge on the neck binding at the 15th fret that may have occurred when the frets were inserted. [*Editor's note: We received a very early version of the Cigno, and any cosmetic issues may have been amended by the time you read this review.*] The frets are well seated, but they aren't as polished or as smooth as I like, and there were a few rough edges on each model as I



Gatto

Firenze ST

Cigno

Chicagoan

ran my fingers down the sides of their necks. Nothing serious, here, but makers such as PRS have shown us all how good the frets can be on a \$600 guitar. The bolt-on neck on the Firenze ST is locked down and super tight. All models had reasonable setups right out of the box, although there were a few very slight fret buzzes on various points around their necks—nothing that some basic string-height adjustments wouldn't cure immediately. I should also mention that none of the Hansons fretted out—all bends rang

cleanly and with reasonable sustain.

THE CHICAGOAN

Perhaps the most conventional design in the line, the Chicagoan echoes classic Gretsch, Epiphone, and Gibson semi-hollowbodies, although the Chicagoan's mini-humbuckers change up the tone recipe a bit. It's an articulate guitar with an airiness that enhances clean-toned strumming and arpeggios no matter which pickup you use—perfect for some roots-rock and singer/ songwriter

shows I played. Obviously, the bridge pickup gives you more of a snappy vibe, while the neck pickup adds some round pop to the clean equation. I had been "off" ebony fretboards for a spell—preferring rosewood for the last few gigs and studio sessions—but I was pleasantly surprised to be reintroduced to the taut, crystalline ring that an ebony board wraps around every note. Cranked up with amp overdrive and distortion pedals, the Chicagoan elicited a wonderful growl while still maintaining enough clarity for

each note on open chords to punch through. It was also easy to work the dedicated Tone and Volume controls for the bridge and neck pickups to dial in smoky jazz, roadhouse blues, and garage-rock timbres. The Chicagoan is pretty feedback resistant onstage. Even when crammed against a wall on a wood stage while backing a singer, I didn't get any low-mid howling whenever I took my hands off the guitar (which is a nice way to *keep* your gig when backing vocalists using a semi-hollow or hollowbody). However, when I wanted some punk-rock squalls, the Chicagoan delivered the goods when I turned it directly into the Stiletto and Marshall 4x12 combination.

The Chicagoan feels great to play. The girthy neck was a good match for my stubby fingers, allowing me to fire off runs and funky chord lines without a hint of resistance. Access to the entire fretboard is easy, although the Volume and Tone controls were just a tad hard to reach if I wanted to do some volume swells or Tone-control-wah-tricks on the fly. The Bigsby was very responsive, and tuning integrity was average for Bigsby-equipped guitars. I tend to use the Bigsby at some point in every song, and if I didn't bash the strings too hard, I could get through about two numbers without having to retune.

THE CIGNO

The Cigno was reportedly the first guitar the Hanson folks designed, and it's a wonder of kitschy, '60s-influenced pawnshop majesty. Although all the Hansons elicited comments from club goers, the Cigno was hilariously consistent in its ability to stop people dead whenever I took it out of its case. It's a seductive mix of wonky and sophisticated, with its platoon of cream P90s and huge blocky inlays offset by a gorgeous burgundy finish and a gold-hued pickguard. But while the Cigno's looks might carry you back to the era of Beatle boots and drainpipe pants, its tones are versatile in the extreme. The Hanson P90s sound wonderful—a fabulous blend of complex yet punchy mids, clear highs, and warm lows. Of course, you have *three* of these puppies to mix-and-match with a 5-way pickup selector, which is a whole lotta sonic bliss. Just for starters, I used the bridge setting for aggro punk (Stiletto); bridge/middle for beefy, Duane Eddy-style single-notes (Club amp); bridge/neck for a psychedelic Robby Krieger-influenced workout (Orange); middle/neck for a bluesy chord vamp (Vox);

and neck for some soft jazz-esque comping behind a singer/songwriter (Club). At first, I was bummed that I couldn't choose the middle P90 by itself, but this turned out to be an unfounded concern, as I had no problem cranking out lots of great tones with the pickup-selector configuration as it stands.

With its baseball-bat neck, the Cigno plays like a marriage of a '50s Les Paul and an old Sears catalog model—which is totally groovy in my book. I like having a chunk of wood to grab for chords, and the girth doesn't impede soloing as I'm not exactly going to blow away any shredders with the school-zone mph of my lead playing. Overall, the Cigno is just a very comfy guitar to play. It balances well on a strap, and even though it has a stubby lower wing that might not appear to offer enough "thigh contact," it also feels just fine when you play it sitting down. The Volume control is well positioned for pinky-manipulated volume swells (even when working the Bigsby), and the pickup selector can be easily reached for rapid tone change-ups. The Tone knob is too far out of reach for any pinky play, and the position of the Bigsby makes it difficult to grab the control for fast adjustments.

THE FIRENZE ST

The Firenze is Hanson's spin on the classic bolt-on design—using three mini-humbuckers, rather than a stack of single-coils or one of the various hum/sing combinations. However, the Hanson mini-humbuckers—which are actually blade-style pickups—can deliver enough high-end shimmer to get you into the range of seminal single-coil tones. You can't really get a quacky, Knopfler-esque out-of-phase sound, but you can get all Yngwie if you want to. The Firenze ST's pickups appear to be voiced on the aggressive side, with a pretty hot output, a ballsy midrange emphasis, and tight low-mids. It was a blast playing solos on a rev'd-up amp with the Firenze, because a twist of the guitar's Volume knob—or stomping down on a volume pedal—would offer get me into the soaring, far sustain typified by Mick Ronson or even David Gilmour. But this is far from just a rock machine, as the Firenze's 5-way selector delivers a fair amount of versatility in a rock-oriented arena. It may be tough to expect the Firenze to cough up jazzbo timbres, but selecting the neck pickup and taking down the Tone knob at least gets you into a moody, introspective place for comping over pop tunes. You can also dial in some

snarky blues tones with killer sting, a bit of jangle, and Red Hot Chili Peppers-influenced funk-rock skanks.

It should be no surprise that the playability of the Firenze favors shredmeisters. The contoured body feels good, it's a relatively light guitar, and the slim neck is ripe for launched fusillades of supersonic solos and spidery riffs. The controls are way down at the lower edge of the body, however, so one thing you won't be doing very fast is changing pickups or adjusting the Master Volume and Tone knobs.

THE GATTO

The Gatto is a two-humbucker version of the Cigno, which somehow makes it a more sophisticated looker than the Cigno with its triple-P90 configuration. It's funny how pickups catch our eyes and definitely influence one's assessment of a guitar's vibe and design. But, of course, the Hanson folks don't just give you a pure humbucker machine, they add a pull-knob on the Tone control to provide some coil-tap tones. As a result, the Gatto serves up some "big cat" sounds—punchy mids, fat low-mids, and bell-like highs—with the option of coil-tapping your way into some jagged, shimmery, or skanky tones (depending on your pickup selection). Maybe it was simply because the Gatto's white finish looks oh-so-neat-and-sharp, but I tended to bring it to pop sessions, even though it can certainly handle a rough-and-ready rock or punk gig. Playability is, of course, pretty identical to that of the Cigno.

BOTTOM LINE

The Hanson crew definitely designed a big ol' dump-truck-load of fun into their guitars, and priced them within an affordable range that shouldn't harsh anyone's mellow. They play well, look hip (well, if your definition of "hip" is wrapped around the iconography of '50s hot rods and spaceships), and sound pretty darn fabulous. Hanson also managed to serve the tonal needs of many players with four basic models—perhaps, as stated earlier, a benefit of the company's pickup-design focus. My personal favorites were the Chicagoan and the Cigno, and I was never let down by them during a gig on any level. I may not be as "shred" as the Firenze, and the Gatto was left out of my hot list only because of the Cigno's three P90s, but these two were awesome guitars, as well. Hard to lose here, folks—they all rule! 