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# Sonics



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## ROADIES:

A bunker view

Washburn  
Stage  
Series

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The Australian music magazine dedicated to the art and craft of sound

# Washburn Stage Series



Photography — Ivy Hansen

GEORGE WASHBURN was a guitar maker and luthier in Chicago around the late nineteenth century. His first fully-handcrafted designs rolled off the work bench over a century ago and into the arms of guitarists, banjo pickers and mandolin players all over the USA. George did good. Washburn was!

In these latter days, a couple of enterprising musicians/business partners took over and expanded the Washburn Company, seeking a fusion of the traditional craft with the realities and practicalities of late twentieth century technology and artistic demand. They also acquired George Washburn — (or at least the use of his name) for their new generation product. Despite 100 years of manufacture in the USA, Washburn is little known in Australia and must fight like any newcomer to find a place in the shops and to earn the nodding, comfortable acceptance of the profession/loose fraternity of Australian musicians. There's already been a significant degree of Washburn acceptance over the last couple of years — since the striking design of the electric solid body Wing Series first showed its new shape on the local scene.

Though the product is fully manufactured and assembled in Japan (while being designed in the USA where the final quality control and setting up also takes place), Washburn guitars have rapidly bitten their own slice of the retail market



because of three basic attributes — design, sound and price. Fortunately these attributes are still present in the product, especially as illustrated in the new Stage Series of solid body electrics.

#### Stage review

The instrument submitted for review was a cherry sunburst A-20V ("V" stands for vibrato) six string electric guitar. Made from ash with a two piece flamed-maple top, the guitar features a three piece rock maple and rosewood neck which passes unbroken through the full length of the body itself.

Two dual coil humbucking pickups and the bridge are set directly into this continuous neck, pursuant to the philosophy that such construction promotes rigidity, harmonic frequency transmission and sustain.

Finally, the top surface of the guitar head is of rosewood and the fingerboard is a polished ebony with ring shaped brass position markers. A creme coloured plastic binding circumnavigates the guitar body, fingerboard and head.

As for hardware, the machine heads are Washburn's own, being screw-adjustable, sealed and permanently

lubricated, with a 13-1 ratio gear (nice and tight). Tremolo is provided by a three spring Stratocaster system (the arm of which may just be set a little too low for full leverage) and the bridge has six pieces with individual adjustment for height and length on each string.

The electric heart of any guitar is, of course, the pick-ups — if these are not of the highest standard, the rest of the guitar remains a mere academic exercise, a hollow shell which may nevertheless be a delight to behold, but for all practical purposes is simply not worth the trouble.

Recent years have seen an upsurge in the development and manufacture of independently crafted pick-ups — DiMarzio, Schecter, Mighty Mite, EMG, Bill Lawrence — so well established that they form part of a guitarist's "household vocabulary". It's therefore surprising to

find that Washburn is manufacturing (or, alternatively, commissioning the manufacture of) their own pick-ups. To undertake such an enterprise at a time when most of the smaller manufacturers have simply thrown-up their hands and followed the trend to reputedly desirable replacement pick-ups comes as a welcome surprise. It's also an overwhelming challenge to subjective forms of criticism and comparison. Well, how do they shape up? ▶

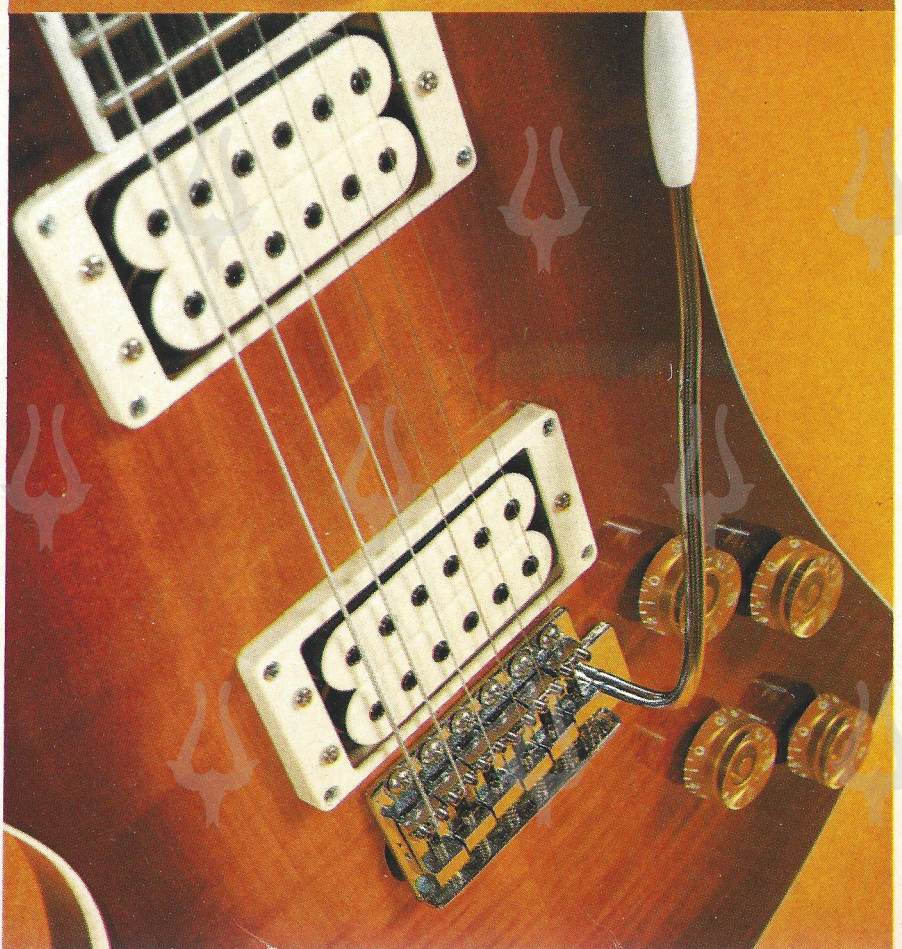
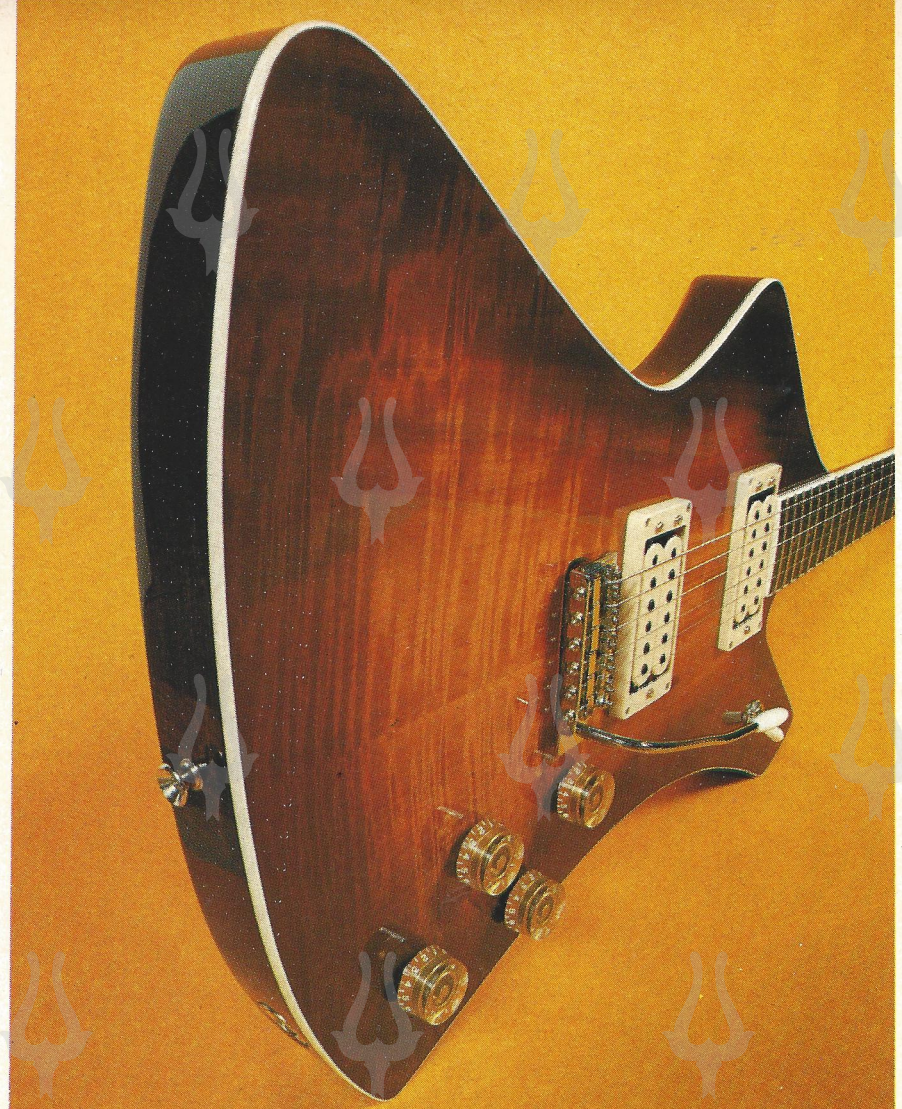
Both pick-ups are identical dual coil high out-put humbuckers, called "Power Sustain" pick-ups by Washburn. They give a strong sound which is distinctly clean and hard. There's a real chunky sound for chording on this guitar, which would make it a great driving percussive rhythm instrument if set up with medium gauge strings.

Be that as it may, this Washburn also makes a fine lead guitar and has one of the best bridge (treble) pick-ups I've ever heard on almost any guitar. To look for a comparison, it's most like the Gibson Flying V — strong and clear without being what you might call "sizzling" or "hissy" (like a lot of the newer dual-coil humbuckers are when mounted in the bridge position). It's a real beauty, gaining best use of the heavy body woods to produce an even, flowing sustain. Just for this aspect alone, the Washburn Stage is a guitar well-worth a play if you're looking for dynamic treble sounds that are easy to obtain and yet full and gutsy.

However, the neck pick-up, due basically to its position, is not as spectacular. In fact, to put it bluntly, it's an eminently forgettable sound that droops from that end of the guitar. Not that it's especially bad, but with such a strong treble sound at the bridge, it would be nice to be able to switch in a warm, middle ranged mellow sound at the neck. Try as I might, I don't think that that full sound is anywhere in this guitar.

The guitar also boasts split coils in the humbuckers, so you have the choice of single or dual-coil sound. It's a feature of Washburn guitars that this function is activated by push-pull switches built into the two volume controls, keeping the control of the guitar limited to the minimum number of extraneous pieces — as opposed to the "flight-deck" philosophy, which goes as much for the visual impact of a maze of switches as for the function they in fact perform. Needless to say, the switches work well to give a single coil sound best described as a mixture between a Fender single-coil and the out-of-phase sound of two Stratocaster pick-ups. This function is not to be confused with the other common feature found these days, where the two coils of a humbucker can be switched out-of-phase to each other. The Washburn push-pulls disconnect one coil of each pick-up. From a practical on-stage point of view, there's little real difference, as far as this particular guitar is concerned, between its single coil function and a true out-of-phase sound.

Both 'Power Sustain' pick-ups have the same hollow, somewhat thinner and more piercing sound that makes for a good crisp rhythm and that with a flick of the proverbial wrist, can be transformed into a raging dual-coil lead sound.



The final point worth mentioning about the pick-ups is that there are no individual pole-piece adjustments, though there's substantial total height adjustment provided by sprung screws on opposite sides of the pick-up. This absence will annoy some guitarists more than others, but I found that the balance between the strings was nice and even without this facility.

## Feel

As an instrument to play, my impressions of the Washburn are mostly positive. The guitar was set up with a low action skimming over the top of 22 deep 'jumbo' nickel silver frets. The frets themselves were well shaped for the fingers to slide over effortlessly, yet there remained a slight roughness on the sides (just above the binding). Perhaps this was due to heat expansion (it was a hot day!).

The neck itself is most reminiscent of a Les Paul neck, only slightly shallower and having an even depth for most of its length. The neck joins the body at the 16th fret (on the top) and the 19th fret (into the cutaway). And while this is normal and the heel of the neck is quite small, there's just that extra bit of difficulty stretching out to the 21st and 22nd frets. This is because of a combination of the width of the neck at the join, the sharp rise in the body design at the top and the fact that there are further frets continuing after the initial join.

Moving along the neck to the head, you notice with fascination the splaying of the strings as they pass over the graded brass nut on their path to the machine heads. Though this radical angle of dispersion is necessitated by the vulture-nose droop of the guitar head — which has spread the placement of the machine heads over a wide range roughly perpendicular to the nut — it may have minute effects on string tension and neck torsion (twisting forces). By contrast, the Fender approach has been to have all six strings travel the length of the guitar — from emergence at the bridge to termination at the pegs — in a straight line.

Nevertheless, this spider-legs splaying adds to the prevailing machismo guitar-hero pose of the guitar. All the angles are dramatic and designed for visual effect — the slash of the body (owing as such to the Ibanez Iceman as it does to the Gibson Firebirds and Explorer series), the spreading strings and the rake of the head.

The dynamic body design is accentuated by the somewhat gaudy paint job — a bright and well executed cherry sunburst over the flamed maple top piece. The flamed maple is most effective visually, as the stain picks up narrow swirls in the wood at right angles

to the prevailing direction of the grain. Yet, when this is added to the differing textures, grains and colours of the other four woods represented in this instrument, it makes the guitar ... striking. As a total package, the Washburn Stage is a successful total image — but beauty (fortunately) remains in the eye of the beholder. For the shy and contemplative would-be-guitar-hero, the Stage comes in basic, Henry Ford black too.

While the paint and design have their own image, the general finish of the guitar creates its image also, revealing a philosophy as much of manufacture and economics as of craftsmanship. The body of the guitar is encased in a thick lacquer distancing the player from that intimate feel of a deep woodgrain. I personally don't think of this guitar as a beautiful musical instrument. It is a 21st century missile, a dart of resonating technology, a cold and somewhat remote alien body.

The value of this sort of heavy finish is, of course, in a hot n'sweaty pub. It makes the Washburn a tough unyielding guitar that can take life on the road and, with a wipe down, be as good as new. Indeed, I know a chap with a treasured Gibson "Trini Lopez" semi-acoustic who bought a Washburn for the rougher, dirtier places he was playing.

While this type of finish makes the guitar eminently functional, the approach is not consistent throughout. It's immediately apparent that the mounting rings do not form a good dirt seal around the pick-ups. This is a fatal error as all dirt, sweat and grime (not to mention the beer that the passing admirer is going to spill on it one day) can wreak havoc on the delicate windings and can lead to rusting of the pole pieces. A better seal, please Washburn.

## Washburn's warranty

As a final point of interest, the guitar comes with what Washburn calls a Limited Lifetime Warranty. This follows the commonplace form of a warranty against defects in material and workmanship to the original purchaser, so that the company will repair or replace at its option any Washburn instrument or part thereof which is found by Washburn to be defective. The definition of what is defective excludes, of course, damage by the natural properties of wood (through climatic changes and so on). Such a warranty must be read (for the Australian market) in the light of our consumer legislation and, most notably, with reference to the Federal Trade Practices Act.

By Section 74D of that Act, the manufacturing corporation is liable to compensate a consumer (or any person who derives title to the guitar through or under the consumer) for loss or damage

caused by reason that the guitar supplied is not of 'merchantable quality' (ie it's not suitable for the type of use and application for which such a product is commonly bought). While this is the merest sketch of the developing legal position, its essence is that if anyone is sold a dud they have the basis of an action against the manufacturer (if that's a corporation) for compensation.

"Good", you say. "Then who needs a Warranty Card?"

Well, it's one thing to shout at the manufacturer and say "This guitar, which has previously been owned by five other people, is a lemon and I'm going to take you to the Trade Practices Commission!" (which is quite proper, but nevertheless must be proved by you), it's quite another to march into the manufacturer's office, thrust your warranty card under his nose and state the fact that he has obligations in writing to you.

The moral of the tale is that having legal rights is one thing but it still can be much more practical to point to your own bit of paper. In recent times, largely because of these new rights, guitar manufacturers are starting to drop the seal of a formal written warranty. Well, Washburn hasn't.

## Conclusion

The Washburn Stage Series guitar has the three great features: professional sound, image design and an accessible price. It's an instrument that's made a fundamental leap from the seething morass of no-name, kitset copies to the league of functional instruments for the professional. Recommended retail price: \$495.00 (excluding case). Distributed by Warehouse Sound (Melb), 222 Brunswick St, Fitzroy, VIC. 3065

<b>Scale length</b> .....	460mm
<b>Fingerboard width</b>	
at nut .....	43mm
at 12th fret .....	52mm
<b>Depth of neck</b>	
at nut .....	20mm
at 12th fret .....	25mm
<b>String spacing</b>	
at nut .....	35mm
at bridge .....	51mm
<b>Action as supplied</b>	
treble .....	1.5mm
bass .....	2.0mm
<b>Number of frets</b> .....	22
<b>Frets clear of body</b> .....	15
<b>Fretwire</b>	
height .....	1mm
width .....	2mm
<b>General width of body</b> .....	45mm

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