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## Gibson ES-300 King for a Day

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## Gibson ES-300 King for a Day

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By [ERIC C. SHOAF](#)



Top-of-the-line. The king. Top banana. The mostest. Top dog. The big daddy. All these descriptions apply to the ES-300, Gibson's first deluxe electric guitar. For a few short years in the 1940s, the ES-300 stood as the fanciest electric archtop in Gibson's stellar lineup. Now it is all but forgotten, a minor player in a major league story. But even minor players often have interesting tales to tell.

Gibson's first electric guitar, the ES-150 of 1936, was essentially an acoustic L-50 set up with a new wire coil and magnetic pickup. So new was the market for amplified instruments that Gibson hedged a bit, as did other manufacturers, waiting to gauge demand. They introduced electronics first on mid and lower-line archtops, rather than the upper-line expensive models, but the instruments caught on with the public and working musicians. When this happened Gibson was ready with upscale models and the ES-250 came to market in 1938. This electric archtop was built on the wider 17" "Advanced" body, with fancier trim. The ES-250 was short-lived, however, and was discontinued in 1940 with the introduction of the ES-300.

The ES-300 followed Gibson convention, matching retail price with names, and sold for \$300. It also introduced a new Gibson pickup which can best be described, if rather inelegantly, as a "big honker." Stretching from the bridge to the fingerboard, this pickup was the first to have adjustable poles and also featured a tortoise plastic cover. While meant to address tonal deficiencies in the ES-150 (Charlie Christian) pickup, the new model was large enough to impede playing and was not well-received among professionals to whom the instrument was marketed. Gibson quickly changed the design, and within months a new pickup of more manageable size appeared. It retained the adjustable poles and was mounted near the bridge at a slight slant, to improve treble response.

As the top-line electric Gibson archtop, the ES-300 received all the trimmings. It had the 17" "Advanced" body width and used the finest spruce for tops, and curly maple for backs, sides, and neck. Construction followed standard Gibson methods, meaning the top and back were hand-carved. The bound neck had double parallelogram inlays while the bound headstock had a pearl script logo. The 300 was the first Gibson instrument to receive the crown peghead, though some variant instruments have a modified split-diamond inlay instead. Pickguards were bound, hardware was nickel-plated, and bridges were rosewood. Top and back were triple-bound, and both sunburst and natural finishes were available.

Almost as quickly as production sped up on the new top-banana ES-300 electric archtop, Gibson was forced by the war effort to cease production of all electric instruments. Fallout from the attack on Pearl Harbor meant that by early '42 the U.S. was fortifying its industrial base to produce goods for war. Gibson contributed, and curtailed production of most instruments. Because the electric instruments used metals vital to the effort, only a few acoustic instruments trickled out of the factory during the war years.

After war's end, Gibson was ready to meet pent-up demand for musical products. Several instruments were redesigned, including the ES-300. The new version now featured a body constructed entirely of laminated maple. At some point during the war years, those working on guitar development noted that carved tops and backs are not necessary for an instrument that derives its sound from a pickup, and much construction time could be saved by using laminated woods pressed to shape. Thus, the ES-300 was given a maple top - often highly figured - when it was reintroduced in 1946.

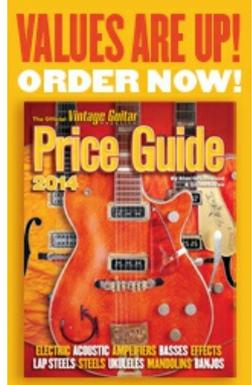
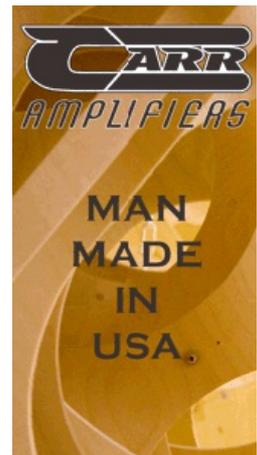
Dimensions and trim were mostly the same as the pre-war version, with three exceptions. The pickup was the newly designed P-90 with adjustable polepieces and was mounted near the neck. Tailpieces on early post-war models were fancy flat-plates with f-hole cutouts. These were likely bought by Gibson from a supplier, since metals were still in short supply after the war. A similar tailpiece is seen on some instruments made by Valco and Kay from the same period. And finally, the ES-300 had a neck constructed of mahogany.

Early post-war models were highly transitional. Some examples have P-90 pickups with nonadjustable poles, others with no visible poles at all. Some are constructed with highly figured woods, while other examples are constructed using mahogany for some or all of the body. The modern block "Gibson" logo was phased in during 1947-'48, as was a multi-ply pickguard to replace the bound one. At the same time, they added a Gibson trapeze tailpiece with raised, pointed ends.

The reign of the ES-300 ended in '47, when a new model superseded it in the lineup. The ES-350, a cutaway version of the 300, became the top electric model. Both received dual P-90s in '48, but sales of the 300 never recovered. By the time the ES-5 became the



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new electric archtop king in '49, the writing was on the wall. Few pros were using non-cutaway electrics and the 300 was discontinued in '52.

The ES-300 enjoyed a short but versatile stay at the top of the electric archtop line, introducing several Gibson innovations, like the P-90 pickup and laminated archtop body, and other features like the crown peghead inlay. Today, examples are appreciated for their high level of workmanship and their place in Gibson's history.

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*LEFT A 1941 ES-300 in sunburst finish with second-generation slanted pickup with tortoiseshell cover. RIGHT By the late 1940s, the ES-300 had introduced the P-90 pickup, and Gibson was using some of its most figured maple on the tops.*

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