

Product Review *Kinal Mini Voyager* by Vince L. Mendoza • Photos by Naomi S. Mendoza



The 14.5" Kinal Mini Voyager

What if you wanted a guitar with the portability of a Gibson Les Paul, but with all the warmth, resonance and sweetness of a hollowbody archtop? Sure, there's the Ibanez GB-10, the guitar that has borne George Benson's signature for nearly 30 years. But if you desire that extra something one could get only from a custom-made handcrafted instrument, there's the Mini Voyager, designed and built by Mike Kinal one at a time to customer specs in his shop in Vancouver, BC. Read on and find out more about this extraordinary archtop guitar.

Construction

The Mini Voyager that I tested has a solid Sitka spruce top and back and sides of flamed maple, which also shows some quilt grain pattern. The guitar came with an arched top and back, though it's also available in a less expensive flat back version. The bridge and the tailpiece are hand-carved ebony; in addition, the tailpiece wears two elegant strips of maple that nicely contrast with the ebony. The finger rest is also ebony, as is the pickup mounting ring laminated to it; together, the two give the impression of a "one-piece" carved unit. Nice!

It's easy enough to tell that Mike loves wood, as even the guitar's volume and tone controls were made from turned ebony, while the instrument's body is bound front and back with maple and a thin strip of holly. So much about the Mini Voyager seems to say "Plastic: Off-limits here," though Mike is quick to offer that celluloid binding is available as an option, and looks especially nice on instruments finished in sunburst.

The two teardrop-shaped soundholes reveal the same neat job in the guitar's completely hollow interior—the basswood kerfing that joins the instrument's sides to its top and back was properly seated, and no sawdust or excess glue could be found anywhere inside. For the test instrument, Mike used an x-brace that is better suited to the soloist. He can, however, make a parallel brace for the accompanist who plays in a more chunky rhythm style.

The 3-piece neck of flamed maple/walnut veneer/flamed maple joins the body at the 16th fret via

a tapered dovetail, with the neck heel bearing an ebony cap (another nice touch). The slotted headstock itself consists of multi-layered maple and walnut. Gold Gotoh 510 Magnum machine heads with ebony buttons adorn the headstock three on each side. A volute lends elegance to the instrument, while providing extra strength and rigidity at that junction where the headstock meets the neck at an angle. Neatly seated on the ebony fingerboard are 21 frets; typical of Kinal guitars, the fretwork is neat, with no sharp ends.



Details of highly figured neck and back wood

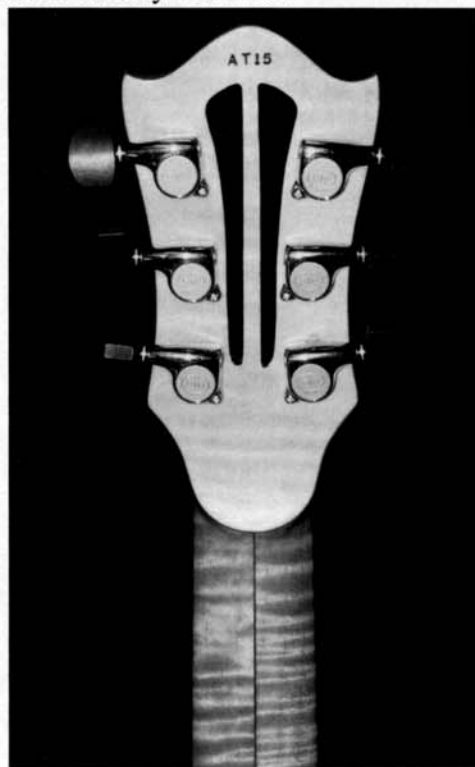
Our test instrument had a natural nitrocellulose finish, which only further accentuates the breathtaking beauty of its wood. However, the Mini Voyager may be ordered in other colors, including amber and tobacco sunburst.

Electronics-wise, the Mini Voyager sports a single Bartolini PBF-55 pickup mounted directly on the body and controlled by volume and tone buttons located just above the treble side soundhole. A 3-way mini toggle switch allows for greater tonal variety—from full humbucking, to parallel humbucking, to traditional single coil sounds. Mike says that, for even easier reach and greater tone options, he can install the volume and tone controls right on the finger rest as well as change the pickup wiring system. (Remember: Kinal Guitars is first and foremost a custom shop.) The instrument's bottom strap pin doubles as an end pin jack for hooking up the guitar to an amp.

Playability

When I asked Mike about his original intention with the Mini Voyager, he replied: "I wanted to build a guitar that was comfortable to play, easy to transport, and retained the archtop sound." By all indications, he has succeeded. Whether seated or standing, I found the

Mini Voyager extremely comfortable and well-balanced. Playing it was a joy—thanks in no small part to its 2 1/4" deep hollow body, a lower bout measuring only 14 1/2," and an overall weight of just five pounds! Plus, its soft Venetian cutaway provides easy access all the way to the twenty-first fret.



Headstock volute provides extra strength

Despite its diminutive size, however, the Mini Voyager doesn't require much getting used to. That's because it has a full 25" scale length similar to a Gibson Johnny Smith, and the same 1 11/16" nut width found on a Les Paul, an ES-175 or a 335. The lone oddity? On hitting certain notes on the E bass string, I noticed some fret buzz above the 12th fret, which could have been due to my heavy fretting finger and vibrato (I'm a bass player) or the guitar's moderately low action.

In any event, what the Mini Voyager proves is that the guitarist can now play the same full chords, perform the same wide stretches, and execute the same lightning speed single note solos on its slim neck sans a massive guitar body to restrict the player's movements—or his/her creative process. It's just the kind of instrument that inspires you to woodshed because it's so hard to put down and because it would be a shame to play it with less than perfect chops!

Sound

Unplugged, the Mini Voyager is surprisingly loud and lively (Mike reports I'm not the first to make this remark). In fact, I fell in love with its acoustic sound

that I spent just as much time playing the guitar this way as plugged in.

Hooked up to a 1970 Fender Deluxe Reverb, the guitar gives a more electric vibe—a sound consistent with its body-mounted (as opposed to a floating) pickup. Of the three tone options offered by the toggle switch, I prefer the first position's full humbucking sound. In this mode, the Mini Voyager's tone is quite complex—managing to be clear while sounding fat and round, staying full-bodied without being dark or muddy. For the kind of chordal work and single note soloing that I do, the full humbucking does the job.

Switching to the second position, the parallel humbucking with its slightly boosted mids and more potent highs, one hears the tone by which many jazz guitarists swear—that which Jimmy Bruno once aptly described as “not having a ping sound come off the E string, not having the bottom too bright or too dark, and one that doesn't have a glass sound on the D and the G even if your amp takes the mud out of the E and A strings.” True enough, with a little help from the tone control, my sound (certainly not my playing!) made quite a convincing Benson-Bruno impression. I found I could

even get a little circa '70s nasal Martino (think *Footprints*) by introducing only the slightest treble.

Finally, the third position delivers (to my ears) a much-improved single coil sound. Though it's my least favorite tone of the three—and believe me, it's more a matter of taste than the tone actually sounding bad—I was surprised to find it sounds richer and less thin than the single coil I've been accustomed to hearing. I was even able to coax some Bill Frisell country-fied sounds from it, so country and rockabilly players may also want to check out the Mini Voyager.

Final Comments

Mike has pulled off yet another neat trick with the Mini Voyager, with its winning combination of superb craftsmanship, exceptional playability and modern sounds. Next time you think of having a guitar custom-built for you—especially if it's an archtop that plays as easily as it transports—give Mike a call. The Mini Voyager may just be the platform you need from which to launch your many musical voyages, whether in jazz, rock, even in folk and country.

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