

CLASSIC BASS

YAMAHA SB55

This '70s-vintage Yamaha was one of the company's first successful basses. Roger Newell finds out why



Yamaha's first attempt at giving their basses a more conventional look

The seventies spawned a whole host of new manufacturers of guitars and basses, accompanied by ground-breaking ideas in electronics (nascent active circuitry, etc.) and increasing use of exotic constructional materials as the decade moved to a close.

It also heralded the real entry into the international music market for burgeoning Japanese manufacturers like Ibanez (another story) and of course, Yamaha, who in spite of its trademark of three crossed tuning forks, was perhaps better known to us for motor cycles. Yamaha was a successful heavy industry company of long-standing in their home market and with true Japanese efficiency of production, were able to offer the overseas outlet top-notch workmanship in construction and quality materials, and all at favourable retail prices.

If there was a downside, strangely enough it was the circuitry, for Japan's electronics did often leave a lot to be desired. Yamaha's instruments, however, fared much better than most, giving them a degree of credibility and popularity in Britain quite early on. The SB55 represents the turning point for Yamaha basses but in spite of the various breakthroughs in design, the SB55 appeared with traditional bolt-on construction.

The SB Series Basses

The series began with the ungainly "upside down" look of the SB2A, 5A & 7A which featured in particular, a long bottom horn, and these were produced from 1967 until 1972. Thankfully, the double cutaway SB55 was the first

of the more conventional-looking double cutaway Yamahas, with the distinctive horns having a slight hook/kink at the end which was to become a trademark. Series production ran from 1973 until 1976, with retail price a reasonable £150.

The body was made from natoh, a mahogany-type wood that bears similar resonant properties. The design of the body is complex, with the structure being made essentially in two layers, but with a two piece top and a five-piece back! Using this method of construction, smaller pieces of wood can be utilised, an early effort at being environmentally friendly, as well as playing an important part in keeping down the final cost.

The neck is much more conventional: Maple with a Rosewood fingerboard, and "spade" headstock sporting very Oriental-looking half-moon keys with yet another hook at the end. There's a touch of luxury in the large tortoise-shell scratchplate and the binding to the neck, yet the serial number is rather brutally stamped into the fingerboard surface between the top two frets. There was a choice of just two finishes; regular Sunburst, and perhaps more in keeping with the image of that time, this example in a natural finish. Under the chrome plate is a typical Fender P-style bridge, as popular then as it is today.

The brace of single-coiled pickups were controlled simply by individual volumes and common tone rotaries. If the wiring was conventional, however, the scale length was definitely unusual, measuring up at a curious 33^{3/4}" – perhaps not entirely by design

"The SB55 represents the turning point for Yamaha basses"

Classic bass - Yamaha SB55



Crude but effective - the serial number stamped into the fret board

(conventional long scales measure in at 34"). After its relatively short shelf life, the SB55 was phased out in 1976 to be replaced by the SB500. Subsequent years saw the continuation of the series with the SB600, 700, 800 etc, but somewhere along the way, it lost the distinctive spade headstock. A deluxe version was also produced during the same time span - the SB75 - again produced in natural or sunburst finishes. This "superior" model featured a matoa body, maple neck and

ebony fingerboard with "arrow" block inlays, and retailed at £175.

Specific history

This particular bass came to our attention when it was brought to Martyn Booth by the owner, Paul Eaton, for some serious restoration work. It was suffering from an all too common complaint, the dreaded "banana neck" syndrome. This was way beyond any trussrod adjustment and Martyn's remedy was to remove the fingerboard in order to shave both that and the neck itself to counter the warping. Neck and board were then refitted, a complete refret was undertaken and the neck rebound. Finally, a clean-up of the body and parts revealed the full glory of the instrument, as seen here. As for ability, Martyn comments: "In terms of



Quality restoration work has returned this bass to useful service

playability, this bass has a pleasing 'soft' feel to the neck. It's a bit narrow but deep enough to feel solid in the hand. In use, it has a great 'open' sound, articulate, clear and focused, producing a very twangy effect - it sounds good even acoustically".

Even after many years of neglect it was able to be restored to live a full and useful continuing bass life. ■

Bassic info

Yamaha SB55
Original Price: £150

Body: Nato
Neck: Maple
Fingerboard: Rosewood
Frets: 20
Nut width: 38mm
Finish: Natural or Sunburst
Pickups: 2 x single coil
Controls: 2 x Volume & 1 tone
Scale Length: 33^{3/4}"
Outside string width:
27mm at nut
59mm at bridge

Thanks

Bassist would like to thank Martyn for his assistance with this article and Paul 'Guitar Guru' Day for additional information. Martyn Booth is available for quality repairs. For work enquiries call: 01787 370192.