

MICHAEL KELLY VALOR CUSTOM

TESTED BY DAVE HUNTER

SPECS

- 1 24/32" nut width
- 24 3/4"-scale bound ebony fretboard with 12" radius
- Three-piece mahogany neck with "C" profile
- 22 medium-jumbo frets
- Solid mahogany body with carved maple top
- Two Rockfield SCW humbucking pickups with alnico V magnets
- Master Volume and Tone controls with pull/push switching for coil splitting, 3-way pickup selector
- Fully adjustable TonePros wrapover bridge
- Factory strings: D'Addario EXP, .010-.046
- 7.6 lbs

INSTANT GRATIFICATION MICHAEL KELLY VALOR CUSTOM

WHO'S IT FOR?

Contemporary rockers and blues-rockers seeking powerful humbucker performance on a budget.

KUDOS

Impressive build quality for price. Captures classic Les Paul-like tones. Coil splitting increases sonic options.

CONCERNS

Loose and wobbly knobs.

PRICE

\$750 retail/
\$499 street

CONTACT

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FIFTY-FOUR YEARS AND COUNTLESS DESIGNS

later, a maker still comes down the pike every so often that feels they have a worthy new twist on the affordable, set-neck solidbody electric. You'd have thought the market might have had its fill of low- to mid-priced humbucker-clad rock guitars, but a marriage of American design and ever-improving Asian manufacturing standards is constantly raising the bar on what you can get for your money. Having established itself as a supplier of good-value f-style mandolins and acoustic basses, Michael Kelly is now making serious inroads into the electric guitar market with models such as the Valor Custom, which leaps in as a top contender at the \$500 price point.

CONSTRUCTION

Outwardly, the Valor echoes Paul Reed Smith's McCarty model, but there are enough original touches to make this guitar its own beast. The asymmetrical double-cutaway body is made from solid mahogany with a deeply carved, highly figured maple top that's beautifully finished in translucent amber (four other options—walnut, gloss natural, black fade, and lava red—are available). What appears and feels like a through-neck design is, in fact, a set neck with a tightly fit, heel-less joint. This configuration provides an easy and unobstructed grip right into the cutaways, but because the neck is set rather deeply into the body, access to the 21st and 22nd frets

still requires something of a finger stretch. Compromises are always made in this department between fret reach, neck stability, and tonal coupling, and the Valor Custom displays impressive work here.

The mahogany neck wears a black-bound, jet-black ebony fretboard with stylish and unique abalone and mother of pearl position markers, a low-friction synthetic nut, and 22 medium-jumbo frets. These have faultlessly smooth ends, although the crowns of a few were a bit furry mid-neck (an issue that resolved itself after a few minutes worth of energetic string bending). With its comfortable "C" profile, this is a neck that lends itself well to a low action and fast fingering, but it also offers enough grab for chunky, aggressive work. A figured maple veneer finished to match the body faces the back-angled headstock, which also carries the understated trussrod cover.

Michael Kelly has addressed two of the frequent failings of offshore manufacturing of the past by giving extra attention to the pickups and the hardware on this model. The direct-mounted, zebra-coil Rockfield SCW humbuckers sport U.S.-made alnico V magnets and parts, and are slightly overwound to 9.15k DC resistance (bridge) and 8.45k (neck) to deliver hot-PAF-style tone. (Rockfield pickups are now available separately.) A fully adjustable TonePros bridge combines easy intonation adjustment with



A heel-less neck joint aids smooth playing up towards the highest frets.



the solid resonance and easy bending of a traditional wrap-around unit, while diecast Grover tuners keep the strings secure at the other end. Switching is simple, but effective. A 3-way toggle selector provides the usual options, and push/pull switching in the master Volume and Tone pots allows you to split the coils of either humbucker independently. The use of set-screw knobs on split-shaft pots has resulted in wobbly and loose knobs.

With the hardware and electronics admirably covered, all you have to do is get the woods and build quality right, and Michael Kelly's Korean manufacturer appears to have scored in both departments. This reassuringly light guitar packs a good amount of resonance, ring, and sustain even before you plug it in. The guitar arrived with a very playable setup right out of the box, with some room to go higher or lower with the bridge to accommodate personal tastes.

PERFORMANCE

Right from the get-go it's obvious that Les Paul comparisons will be impossible to avoid with this style of guitar, and, indeed, the Valor Custom delivers many of those hallowed sounds. In 'bucker mode, the neck pickup sounds plump and full through a Dr. Z Z-28 set to crunch. It sings effortlessly when you dig in and get the tubes working, and it offers a vocal sustain that really eases the playing experience. Flicking to the bridge unit in double-coil mode puts you in much gnarlier territory, coughing up the kind of grind that excels at anything from punk rhythm to grungy lead work. With both pickups selected, the Valor Custom produces round, slightly scooped sounds that blend a useful mixture of warmth and edginess.

Coupled to a Mesa/Boogie Dual Rectifier or a Marshall TSL 2000, the bridge pickup offers no end of eviscerating cut and sizzling sustain.

It's not an entirely refined humbucker sound, but it steers clear of harshness or grating jaggedness, while offering plenty of gutsy, dynamic response. This is the meat 'n' potatoes of a great many rock sounds, but what really surprised me on this guitar was the virtue of its split-coil sounds. Too often, a split humbucker pales in comparison to a decent single-coil. That's not the case here; in split mode, the SCWs yield a funky yet full and biting twang that's a useful tonal alternative. Through a tweed Fender Bassman, the split-coil neck pickup achieved reasonably satisfying bluesy Strat impersonations, and the tapped-neck and full bridge combination got me into passable Les Paul Junior/P-90 territory.

VALOR IN THE FIELD

This is a surprisingly versatile instrument for sure, but flicking back to full humbucking mode reminds you of the greater strength here: The Valor Custom is a 'burst-flavored workhorse that comfortably rivals many instruments costing a fair chunk more. I'm



not saying the Valor Custom achieves all the nuanced tonal depth and dimension of a high-end example of the Paul-inspired breed, but for half a grand, you're getting pretty close without breaking the bank, and *that* should put a smile on plenty of players' faces. 🎸

A deeply carved arch and a rich, transparent amber finish bring out the best of the Valor Custom's highly figured maple.