

BAD TO THE BONE

Axl Guitars Badwater solidbody electric guitars

BY CHRIS GILL

WITH THEIR PREFAB distressed finishes and worn-looking hardware, artificially aged “relic” guitars deliver the look and feel of a well-loved, broken-in instrument. When big-name companies started offering relic models about 10 years ago, most were faux vintage instruments that cost a considerable penny (at least 200,000 pennies, to be exact). Custom guitar builders started applying aging techniques to their unique creations as well, and over the years, the prices for these guitars have continued to rise.

Axl Guitars reverses this trend with its Badwater Series guitars. Sold at the insanely low list price of \$199.99—what you’d pay for a shiny new entry-level ax—Badwater guitars have features and detailing similar to what you’d find on a custom instrument, and they are finished with aging techniques that make the guitars look like they’ve survived World War III, Armageddon and the apocalypse. The result is anything but run of the mill, and it’s a first for the budget-guitar market.

FEATURES

I HONESTLY HAVE no idea how Axl can make these guitars and sell them at such low prices; the aging process alone involves more labor than what goes into the standard budget guitar. Although these instruments may look like they’ve been left outdoors in hurricanes, floods, forest fires and sandstorms (in a good way), it takes a lot of effort and care to create a distressed finish and hardware, certainly more than you’d expect for such an inexpensive guitar.

Axl offers three Badwater models, each with identical features but finished and distressed in different ways. Finish options include an antique-looking warm brown, a faded off-white and a brown-and-white snakeskin-style crackle finish. Almost every inch of these guitars is distressed, aged or antiqued in some way, from the burnished look of the headstocks to the rough and rusty aesthetics of the tuners and tremolos to the battered backplates. Only the pickups, output jacks and Axl logos appear to have escaped unscathed.

The Badwater models are essentially alder-bodied Superstrats with EMG-designed passive humbucker bridge and single-coil middle and neck pickups, a vintage-style tremolo, and modified Strat-style bodies with sharper cut-

away horns and a deeper treble-bout cutaway. The 25 1/2-inch-scale bolt-on rock maple neck has a rosewood fingerboard with dot inlays and a comfortable C-shaped profile. Controls consist of a master volume, tone knobs for the bridge and neck/middle pickups, and a five-position pickup selector.

Construction and attention to detail is surprisingly good for a guitar in this price range, although I did notice a few minor flaws typical of many budget models. For example, the tuner for the high E string on one of the guitars was out of alignment, and the neckplates seem like they should be trimmed a few millimeters, as they overhang very slightly at the cutaway.

PERFORMANCE

IT’S ONE THING to make a guitar that looks broken in and another thing altogether to build one that *feels* broken in. Axl’s Badwater Series guitars could easily fool subjects in a blindfold test into thinking they were playing a well-loved instrument that’s survived a few thousand gigs. The necks, in particular, have a smooth, slinky feel, like they’ve absorbed several gallons of gig sweat. There’s also a distinctly expensive feel to the necks, an elusive quality that normally doesn’t rear its head in guitars that list for less than \$1,000.

The EMG-designed pickups sound expensive as well. Generally you can count on budgeting a few extra bucks for replacement pickups when you buy a guitar costing two bills or less, but the pickups on the Badwater models are keepers. Bright, punchy and loud, the humbucker gives you the definition and power you want from a bridge ‘bucker, while the single-coils deliver biting, aggressive Strat tones that will satisfy most Hendrix, Trower and Vaughan fans. Pickups that sound this good usually cost more than an entire Badwater guitar.

THE BOTTOM LINE

AXL’S BADWATER SERIES guitars provide the look and feel of a custom distressed ax, and they sound much better than comparably priced instruments. They’re great choices for first-time buyers looking for something unique or for gigging musicians wanting an inexpensive backup that sounds and feels like their battle-scarred main guitars. 🌟

PRO	CON
INEXPENSIVE, WORN-IN FEEL, OUTSTANDING PICKUPS	SOME ATTENTION TO DETAIL COULD BE IMPROVED



AXL BADWATER SOLIDBODY ELECTRIC GUITARS

LIST PRICE: \$199.99
MANUFACTURER: Axl Guitars, axlguitars.com
SCALE LENGTH: 25 1/2 inches
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays
FRETS: 21
BODY: Alder
NECK: Rock maple
BRIDGE: Vintage-style tremolo
PICKUPS: EMG-designed humbucking (bridge) and single-coil (middle and neck)
CONTROLS: Master Volume, bridge Tone, middle and neck Tone



The rock maple necks feel smooth and broken-in like an old favorite ax.

The EMG-designed pickups provide big, beefy tones.

The distressed, antiqued body looks like it survived several decades of gig abuse.