

# OLD-SCHOOL MAVERICK

*Michael Kelly Guitars Patriot Custom electric guitar*

By **Emile Menasché**

**Y**OU'D THINK THAT after more than a half century, there would be nothing more to add to the design of the single-cutaway, set-neck solidbody. At its best, it's a sublime combination of beauty and brawn, a guitar that is dressy yet ferocious enough to tear your head off. Sort of like *La Femme Nikita*, but louder.

And yet here is the Michael Kelly Patriot Custom, a guitar that gives pause to traditional thinking with its subtly different shape, versatile electronics and bright tone.



**KA-CHING!**

**LIST PRICE:** \$715.00  
**MANUFACTURER:** Michael Kelly  
Guitar Co., [michaelkellyguitars.com](http://michaelkellyguitars.com)

## Features

This incredibly affordable U.S.-designed, Korean-built instrument has all of the ingredients of the classic top-of-the-line single-cut: a mahogany body, an arched maple top, a mahogany neck, ebony fingerboard and twin humbuckers.

The Patriot's materials and workmanship are impressive. The flame-maple top glimmers, thanks not only to nicely grained wood but also to a finish that brings out each lick of the maple's fire. The headstock is capped with

## Product Manager Todd Rockfield on the Patriot

### How are the pickups different from traditional humbuckers?

We wanted a vintage PAF sound on steroids. So we over-wound using U.S.A. Alnico V magnets and U.S.A. wire. It articulates better than most PAF-style pickups.

### The guitar is heavier than most single-cuts. Why?

The body is 1 3/4 inches deep, with a 1/2-inch carve on the top, which gives us more body and tone and sustain. The neck joint is also extra tight to increase sustain.

the same maple as the body, with only a tastefully simple logo to interrupt the wood's dramatic grain. And the five-ply binding on the body, neck and headstock outlines it elegantly.

But this is no cookie-cutter Les Paul lite. In fact, the guitar is very heavy, which may be an issue if you're used to lighter axes. The body shape is also a little different, more angular, with a sharper cutaway than a traditional Les Paul. Despite the weight, the guitar feels balanced when strapped on, and it cuts a striking figure onstage.

As is the convention, the Patriot features a 24 3/4-inch-scale fingerboard, and sports 22 meaty medium jumbo frets. The ebony board is adorned with block abalone inlays. The neck feels good, with just the right level of chunkiness for those who love to rock. Action on the test guitar was very low and speedy, making it an excellent vehicle for rock, country, fusion and blues. The cutaway, along with the angled neck, allows for good access to the upper frets. The TonePros bridge is a traditional, fully adjustable Tune-O-

Matic-style setup with a stop tailpiece; the Grover tuners worked smoothly and kept the test guitar in tune consistently.

The Patriot's pickups are of a pair of Rockfield SWC (Select Wound Custom) humbucking pickups. These are designed to be similar to traditional PAFs but are customized to take advantage of the Patriot's qualities while they produce a higher output (thanks to the USA parts and slight over-winding). Atypical for a single-cut, the pickups are mounted directly to the body to better capture the guitar's vibration. As I discovered during my tests, this combination of factors gives the

Patriot a brighter, punchier tone than some mahogany/maple guitars, articulate in the top end, but still capable of delivering sharp lows. Controls include a three-way pickup toggle and master volume and tone knobs that pull up for single-coil operation. The knobs are recessed, a nice feature that facilitates on-the-fly adjustments.

## Sound

Unplugged, the Patriot had a bright, even tone, with plenty of bite. With the guitar plugged in, this sound is captured well by the Rockfield SWC pickups. The Patriot sounds good both clean and dirty, and it drives a tube amp with nicely progressive dynamics. With the amp's front end set for crunch—or beyond—you can control the gain by your own touch, with a little help from the Patriot's basic control set. While the streamlined electronics simplified operation, I missed the ability to blend sounds by staggering the volume and/or tone settings of each pickup. That said, all three pickup positions sound good and complement one another: the neck pickup is warm but not dark; the bridge pickup cutting but not shrill, and the combination of the two twangy but not thin.

Splitting the humbuckers produced crystalline tones that, while not exactly of the Fender variety, were ideal for funk, country picking and clean rhythm parts. The ability to tap each pickup separately makes up somewhat for the single volume and tone knobs.

## The Bottom Line

The Patriot is a beautiful guitar that sounds good and plays well. It rewards both technique and expression and lets you play a traditional style of guitar without looking like a copycat. Factoring in an incredibly low price for this level of quality, the Patriot is an amazing value. ■

**PRO:** Beautiful materials, design, and finish; versatile sound; superior value

**CON:** Heavy; only one volume and one tone control

