





Retro Rebirth

With its amps back in the market, as well as a new range of effects, it was only a matter of time until Supro's quirky guitars returned... after nearly half a century!

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin



SUPRO JAMESPORT, WESTBURY, DUAL-TONE & CORONADO II £829-£929

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With a dizzying number of brands – National, Dobro, Supro, Airline, Custom Kraft, Oahu and quite a few more – Chicago-based Valco Manufacturing made a dizzying array of products, from resonators and lap steels through to electric ‘Spanish’ guitars and amplifiers. While Valco’s backstory is complex, and its roots lie in the National and Dobro companies back in the 1930s, it is the start of the 50s – 1952, to be precise – that interests us here. This is when Valco entered the solidbody electric guitar market and where, over the next decade and a half, it would create some of the most out-there and often innovative designs ever plugged into an amplifier.

Gone but certainly not forgotten, Valco’s creations have been championed by numerous players, from the likes of David Lindley, Ry Cooder and Arlen Roth, through to modern artists such as Jack White and Dan Auerbach, not to mention a raft of blues players including Howlin’ Wolf, Jimmy Reed, JB Hutto and more. Jimi Hendrix’s first guitar was a Supro; David Bowie was another user; so, too, was Bob Dylan.

Yet despite a huge number of instruments dropping into the US market during that time period, there have been very few contemporary reproductions outside of small number ‘boutique’ makers. Eastwood is one exception to the rule, while designers have used Valco as inspiration for their designs, notably Trev Wilkinson and his Italia creations. In terms of the electric guitar, however, there really hasn’t been a properly funded mainstream attempt to recreate Valco’s past – until now, with the reintroduction of these Supro guitars by ‘custodians’ of the brand, Absara Audio.

To kick off 2017, then, Supro guitars are back, relaunched in two ranges: the modernised solidbody Island series of three guitars, and the more expansive 10-strong semi-hollow Americana series, modelled directly after probably the most famous, if originally short-lived, of Valco’s designs – the Res-O-Glas models.

Jamesport & Westbury

The Indonesian-made Island series is straightforward with three models, all named after Long Island locations that are close to Absara Audio’s HQ in Port Jefferson, New York. They come in various colours and single- (Jamesport), double- (Westbury) and triple-pickup (Hampton) configurations. Their construction is identical, aside from a different pickup switch on the Westbury and the triple-pickup Hampton (three-way toggle and five-way lever respectively), and block fingerboard inlays compared with the dot inlays of the Jamesport.

Based on an early 60s Supro Ozark with its well-known and distinctive single-cut outline, the Island models are certainly sharply made, although the opaque colours completely hide the 41mm deep alder slab body with its chamfered edges. The maple neck isn’t bolted to the body – as the wood combination and its Fender scale length would suggest – but is, in fact, glued in. That said, the full width of the neck slots into the body, which has a round-nosed comfortable heel. It’s more like a bolt-on joint, but without the screws.

It might seem a pretty simple build, but the Jamesport has a few inherent tricks, one of which is the ‘wave’ tailpiece, “pulled from a 1962 National Westport guitar”, says

In terms of the electric guitar, there really hasn’t been a properly funded mainstream attempt to recreate Valco’s past – until now

Absara Audio’s main man, David Koltai. It features a chromed metal plate, secured on the rim only by the base strap button, and two smaller cross-head screws that simply sit above the face of the body. Screwed to that is a slightly offset aluminium anchor block, with nicely rounded edges. This block is sited further back than the standard stud tailpiece that usually accompanies the ubiquitous tune-o-matic bridge. The nut is Corian and nicely shaped, while the vintage-style single tuners certainly look the part and have a smooth enough, positive feel. It’s not rocket science, but it’s good guitar-making.

The second plus here is the placement of the single pickup, just a little south of a middle position, rather than directly in front of the bridge. And then there’s the actual Supro Gold Foil single-coil pickup itself that is humbucker-sized (handy if



1. The distinctive single-cut outline features vintage styling and timeless curves

2. The Island series uses an original Supro headstock design with its badge logo that appeared in the mid-50s

3. These pickups inwardly ape an original Supro pickup, known as a Kingston, and originally featured a cover with a centre fixing screw





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4. The 'wave' tailpiece features a chromed metal plate, secured on the rim only by the base strap button and a pair of smaller cross-head screws



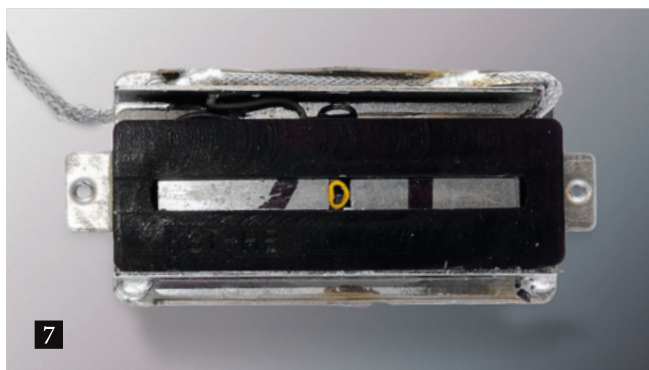
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5. These vintage-style tuners certainly do the job and, thankfully, instead of the original reinforced but non-adjustable 'Kord-King' neck, the guitars have adjustable truss rods

6. The absence of polepieces in the pickups creates a less direct, more dissipated sound



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7. The magnetic flux is directed through the coil via its baseplate. The strings move through the field, off to the side of the magnet, rather than directly through it

Supro pickup design

The Supro pickups used here were originally designed by Ralph Keller in the 50s. His Vista Tone design, as it is known, was patented in 1954 and cited by Seth Lover in his 'PAF' patent. The design has been used and heard by thousands of us.

"Its unique construction has a very direct impact on its tone, feel and interaction with the strings, namely what happens when you hit it hard," explains Ken Calvet at Roadhouse Pickups, who created these designs for the new Supros. "Having the magnet off to the side, with its axis perpendicular to the coil, sets up a unique magnetic field. The strings move through the magnetic field off to the side of the magnet rather than directly over it, as in the Fender single coil or the P-90. The magnetic flux is directed through the coil via its baseplate and screw poles on one end of the magnet and a keeper plate on the other [far] end. The result is an overall magnetic field with a large sensing area. As it's on its side, it's not particularly strong, or in better words 'stiff'. It is a very touch-sensitive pickup with a rather large range of capabilities."

And what about the Gold Foil? "In my catalogue, this is called a 'Kingston'," continues Ken. "It utilises the same coil as the Vista Tone. The differences all lie within the magnetic field setup. All of the pickups utilised Alnico V magnets. The Kingston has a baseplate that aids in directing the field around the coil and the pickup is also 'pole-less'. This creates a pickup that senses the strings no matter where they are and also means it can be used, and was used, for basses."



The Westbury's 60s voice is a real 'time travel' sound, and is a perfect driver for those vintage-style effects on your 'board

you want to retrofit something else) and mounted via a chromed ring to the body.

The simple electronics mount to the three-ply scratchplate – which, here, is just a single 250kohm volume placed very close to the pickup and a 500k tone on the lower tip. Only the upper bass-side edge of the scratchplate looks a little unfinished and square edged, although, of course, on the other designs it's cut away to surround the neck pickup. The side-mounted output jack sits on a neat chromed metal football plate: it really is a tidy job with a very working guitar feel about it.

The Westbury is exactly the same, aside from its dual pickups – placed in standard bridge and neck positions and controlled by a three-way toggle that sits between the volume and tone.

Dual-Tone

On its launch in 1954, this guitar was called the Duo-Tone and described as a “super-powered electric Spanish guitar”. By the following year, it was known as the Dual-Tone and it had put on some body

width and acquired the bass-pointed head that we see on today's Island series. Aside from a couple of minor changes, it stayed pretty much the same until the Res-O-Glas version was launched in 1962, originally with plain pickup covers before changing to the silk-screened covers that we see on our 2017 reincarnation. The guitar was discontinued in 1966.

The Americana's construction (Dual-Tone and Coronado II) is totally different to the Island series. The semi-hollow body, with a thick overall depth of 48mm, is split in two halves and separated by a white or black (depending on body colour) rubbery plastic gasket. This is stapled internally to the bottom mahogany half, which is 24mm thick at the rim with a 90mm wide centre section, and reduced in between those points to approximately 12mm. The top half is moulded plastic, around 2.5mm thick, but quite rigid with its own wooden (seemingly maple) centre block – approximately 18mm thick and, like the back, 90mm wide. Four wooden blocks are glued in place to accept the screws that come in through the back to seal the structure. If you want to access the electrics, good luck: you have to take the neck off, then separate the two body halves.

Both the Island and Americana use '50s' (also known as vintage) wiring, along with, says David, “a lot of one-meg ohm pots used because there are multiple controls and master volumes, and if you use 250k you start getting a lot of mush”.

“By using this '50s' wiring,” David continues, “you're running the tone knob essentially off the wiper of the volume knob and as you turn the volume down that gives you a natural high-passing effect that counteracts the low-pass effect of the loading of the tone control. So this is a simpler way to solve the problem, as used by Gibson and on vintage Supro guitars, that is otherwise done by some people with a capacitor and resistor across the volume control, which leads to all sorts of resonance

things going on and more loading – and it doesn't work so nice with these original single-coil pickups.”

Under the black finish, the neck appears to be maple, not mahogany as per its spec, and it's attached via two cross-head bolts. Instead of the original's curved joint, here the slightly fluted end of the neck sits very tightly – and quite high off the body – into a shallow rectangular slot in the top's centre block. On our samples, it's a very tight, secure fit. Scale length is shorter, too, plus we have a bigger headstock and a zero fret.

The pickups are different as well. We're told pretty much the same coil is used (backed up by a similar DC ohms reading) as the Island series pickups, but these Vista Tones have polepieces: the outer two simply rotate (they don't move up or down), but allow the height of the pickup to be raised or lowered as well as holding it in its tall (17mm) moulded plastic mounting ring, which is recessed into the top of the guitar.

The combination of that neck height and these pickup mounts means that the strings sit some 30mm at the apex of the jazz-style wooden-foot, two-piece bridge. The thick foot is screwed to the top, not that firmly, on the treble side, so under string tension you can move it to hopefully set your intonation correctly. A typical example of a guitar you're best to restrung one string at a time.

Coronado II

While the Dual-Tone's body is slightly broader than the Island series, the Coronado's is bigger still (see the dimensions chart, p100). Aside from that, construction seems identical, certainly for the neck, pickups, bridge and 'stairstep' tailpiece. The control layout is different, with the three-way lever pickup selector on the upper shoulder and a Gibson-style four-control layout with top-mounted output jack. By contrast, the Dual-Tone's individual pickup volume and tones are placed on the upper bass-side with the master volume,



pickup switch and output jack in the usual control position.

Sounds

Both Island series guitars (Jamesport and Westbury) are nicely weighted and are pretty Les Paul-like in size with a very conventional, familiar feel, seated or strapped on. The neck, too, isn't taking any chances, recalling a more vintage-y clubby feel, but with more mainstream depth. The satin neck back (which appears to simply be the gloss finish cut back with abrasive paper and wire wool) feels super-smooth and will no doubt return to a pretty burnished glossy feel with playing. Another nice touch.

Aside from being bigger-bodied as described, the Americana guitars (Dual-Tone and Coronado II) have slightly thinner-depth necks, but are still nicely shaped with a flatter C profile. These necks are bound in a bright white plastic and

the fret gauge is pretty similar in width, although these are just a touch lower. Intonation is a little funky, although you can move the treble side to get more precise intonation. The post spacing suggests you could retrofit a tune-o-matic and then really secure the base.

A quick unplugged strum reveals a long and quite smooth sustain on the Island series guitars, which is a little plunkier, but louder, than the semi-hollow Americanas.

Despite a 9.16kohm DC reading from the Jamesport's pickup – this is a single coil, remember – our amp stays clean and we're met with a bright but not over-spiky single-coil voice that is less in your face, less direct-sounding or strident than any Fender references we listened to. Jangle it does and we're reminded more of a Danelectro voice, although here it's bigger: spiky yet smooth.

Switching to the dual-pickup Westbury, the bridge pickup's closer proximity to

the bridge unsurprisingly gives us, well, a bit more spike and bite, while the neck pickup (with a lower DC reading of 7.9k) restores the low-end but still with that slightly textured clarity. The pickup mix here typically adds some hollowed Tele-like bounce, as you'd expect – a less direct sound than either pickup voiced on its own. The thing is, we miss that almost middle-placed 'sweet spot' sound of the Jamesport.

It's a different sound from the benchmarks of the Fender single coil and the Gibson humbucker, although it's the former that it's closest to, albeit with less susceptibility to pickup hum. These are pretty quiet, and in the Westbury's mixed position, quieter still. But it's presumably the absence of polepieces in the pickups that creates this less direct, more dissipated sound. Where you get that hugely percussive Strat neck pickup sound, for example, the Supro diffuses that punch, but

SUPRO dimensions (in mm unless stated)



JAMESPORT



WESTBURY



DUAL-TONE



CORONADO II

	JAMESPORT	WESTBURY	DUAL-TONE	CORONADO II
Nut width	44.2	43.78	43.29	43.03
Neck depth 1st fret	21.5	21.4	20.5	20.8
Neck depth 12th fret	23.4	23.5	22.4	22.4
Bridge spacing	51.5	51.5	50.5	50.5
Body size (width x length)	330 x 445	330 x 445	343 x 457	381 x 483
Weight (kg/lb)	3.52/7.74	3.52/7.74	3.24/7.2	3.45/7.6
Bridge pickup DC res (k ohm)	n/a	9.10	9.19	9.27
Middle pickup DC res (k ohm)	9.08	n/a	n/a	n/a
Neck pickup DC res (k ohm)	n/a	7.95	8.11	8.19



8



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8. The Dual-Tone and the Coronado II feature vintage-style Supro tuners with 'Butterfly buttons'

9. One of the many original features that has been re-tooled for these Americana guitars, the so-called 'Tone Switch' is simply a three-position lever pickup selector

10. The control setup is expansive with these individual pickup volume and tone controls placed by the pickup; the master volume and pickup selector are in a more standard control position

11. The jazz-style rosewood bridge is a feature on the Dual-Tone and the Coronado II

12. The stairstep tailpiece has an Art Deco aesthetic



10



11



12



adds a more harmonically complex voice. For chiming trebles – especially in an older school amp setup with tremolo and lashings of reverb – you might well get addicted. It's a hugely 60s, roots-y, indie voice: way more Chicago blues and far from smooth jazz. It's a real 'time travel' sound – not dissimilar to Supro's amps and effects – and not only is it a perfect driver for those vintage-style effects on your pedalboard, but if you want to lose the 'rock' and access the lo-fi grunge and plenty more, these are perfect tools.

Now, the Americana series guitars share very little with their siblings, yet their

sound is almost *more* conventional with a shade more attack and single coil-like percussion than the Island series. The construction seems to add a little more girth and depth that sits on the fuller, less attacking side, compared with our Strat, and sounds like a 'lower wind' version of a dual P-90-equipped PRS SE Semi-Hollow, which is a little fuller in the lower mids. Again, though, there's plenty of jangle here in cleaner settings, very rockabilly and early rock 'n' roll. There's a little more power to the high strings, too, especially with a couple of tweaks, which makes for some

great old blues leads, not least with a Supro Drive kicked in. There's a bit more power, especially on the bridge pickup, although, again, careful setting of the heights between the two guitars is essential to really compare. The Coronado sounds a shade more 'hollowbody' and feels more familiar in both size and with that control layout, if you're an ES-335-style player.

There's a really nice taper to the volume and tone knobs on the Island series' controls that seem less predictable on the Americana's. To be honest, we've kept things pretty much full up and let our pedalboard take the strain. At volume, too, the Americas ease into feedback, although not microphonic squeal.

Verdict

Both series of these new Supros guitars are smartly made. The Island series models certainly have a more contemporary feel about them and are slightly sharper in fine details (the fret-dressing, for example), but we're splitting hairs. The Americas do a great job of replicating the originals, adding a better neck joint and an adjustable truss rod, although the wooden bridges and the lack of easy access to the electrics might bother some. There are limited colours available on the Americas and no lefties in either range. There are no included gigbags, either, which doesn't help the impression that these guitars are on the high side, price-wise.

But Valco's original guitars were never a head purchase, were they? They were about the heart, and these have both character and vibe in spades, not least in the sound department – a voice that, if not forgotten, is certainly overlooked, and extremely valid for the player looking back to the 60s to create different and new sounds. And with a raft of designs from the past to draw on, we suspect Supro is back for the long haul. We certainly hope so – we haven't had as much fun as this for ages! **G**



13. Bearing in mind that these Res-O-Glas guitars were released in the early 60s and were quite modernist in design back then, this original-style 'jazz guitar' bridge seems out of place



SUPRO JAMESPORT

PRICE: £829
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT: Corian
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, dot inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic-style bridge, 'wave' tailpiece, individual vintage Kluson-style tuners
ELECTRICS: Single Vintage Gold Foil pickup, volume and tone controls
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: Along with our reviewed guitars the Island series includes the 3-pickup Hampton (£999)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Bronze Metallic (as reviewed), Ocean Blue Metallic, Antique White and Jet Black

8/10

PROS Smart build and modern retro vibe: hugely rock 'n' roll power, single-coil voice

CONS No gigbag or lefty option available; not cheap



SUPRO WESTBURY

PRICE: £929
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT: Corian
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, block inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium
HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic-style bridge, 'wave' tailpiece, individual vintage Kluson-style tuners
ELECTRICS: 2x Vintage Gold Foil pickups, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone controls
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: See Jamesport
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Ocean Blue Metallic, Turquoise Metallic and Antique White (as reviewed)

8/10

PROS Ditto the Jamesport, but dual pickups on this Westbury hugely increase the versatility

CONS No gigbag or lefty option available; not cheap



SUPRO DUAL-TONE

PRICE: £829
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Single-cutaway semi-hollow electric
BODY: 'Acousti-glass' (ABS high impact plastic) moulded top on semi-hollow mahogany back
NECK: Mahogany, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
NUT/WIDTH: Corian
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, block pearloid inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 21 (plus zero fret), medium
HARDWARE: Rosewood bridge, stairstep tailpiece, 3-on-a-strip vintage-style Supro tuners with 'Butterfly' buttons
ELECTRICS: 2x Supro Visa Tone single coil pickups, 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and individual pickup volume and tone controls
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The small body models include the single-pickup Sahara and Belmont (£649), the Belmont Vibrato (£749) and the Holiday Vibrato (w/piezo, £929), and the dual-pickup Holiday (£829)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Ermine White only w/ black neck (as reviewed)

8/10

PROS Close Res-O-Glas replica with improved neck joint and adjustable truss rod; evocative, versatile sounds

CONS Limited colours; bridge; no gigbag or lefty option; not cheap



SUPRO CORONADO II

PRICE: £829
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Large single-cutaway semi-hollow electric
BODY: 'Acousti-glass' (ABS high impact plastic) moulded top on semi-hollow mahogany back
NECK: Mahogany, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 629mm (24.75")
NUT: Corian
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, block pearloid inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 21 (plus zero fret), medium
HARDWARE: Rosewood bridge, stairstep tailpiece, 3-on-a-strip vintage-style Supro tuners with 'Butterfly' buttons
ELECTRICS: 2x Supro Visa Tone single coil pickups, 3-way lever pickup selector switch, individual pickup volume and tone controls
OPTIONS: Coronado Vibrato (£929)
RANGE OPTIONS: The other large bodies in the series are the top-of-the-line Martinique (£1,099) and the Martinique Deluxe Vibrato (£1,199), both with piezo
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Jet Black only (as reviewed)

8/10

PROS Close Res-O-Glas replica with improved neck joint and adjustable truss rod; evocative, versatile sounds

CONS Limited colours; bridge; no gigbag or lefty option; not cheap