



REVIEW OF SKYLARK AND SONGBIRD FAN FRET MODELS

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We first met the Avian range of acoustics around the middle of last year when I sat down to review a trio comprising the Skylark, Dove and Songbird models. In essence, these are designer instruments that are manufactured in China under very stringent quality control, meaning that purchasers can access boutique style guitars at very reasonable prices. I remember being surprised and delighted by the quality on offer in the range, but now it's time for something a little different because two of the Avians have a new trick up their sleeves in the form of fan fret variations.

If you're at all unfamiliar with the fan fret – or “multi-scale” – concept, I'll attempt to clarify matters in the briefest way possible. Far from being a new gimmick among luthiers, the fan fret idea has been around for hundreds of years. It's an attempt to aid intonation by offering a slightly different scale length for each string, meaning that the player has all the benefits of rich, tuneful basses and sweet trebles without the compromise usually necessary with a standard fretting arrangement. Players like Andy McKee and Tony McManus are enthusiastic about their own fan fret instruments, declaring that drop tunings in particular are more stable from an intonational perspective. I'll admit up front that I'm a fan fret novice; I had never played one until these two Avians arrived on my doorstep and so we'll be embarking on this voyage of discovery together right from the start!

Avian Songbird Fan Fret

We'll begin this adventure by looking at the Michael Bashkin designed Songbird. When I looked at its non fan fret stablemate a year or so ago I noted at the time that it was a very flexible instrument that adapted well to pretty much any playing style. I was particularly taken with its sweet, airy and focused sound. This, of course, augers well for the new model and I'm curious to find out how the different fretting strategy has enhanced things...



Build Quality and Features

When I last laid eyes on the Songbird, there was a question about its body shape, Avian calling it a “medium jumbo” and my own opinion that it was closer to an OM. Looking at it again now, I can see where the “jumbo” definition originates in that the lower bout does have that slightly ballooned quality to it that marks that particular body style. In any case, the Songbird's Sitka spruce top looks very fine indeed, with a broken circle rosette, the shallow demi-cutaway and comfort bevel. As far as the cutaway is concerned, fashioning it like this means that the body of the instrument retains much of its cubic capacity whilst still giving the player access to the top of the fretboard. It's a clever and effective device which is unusual on instruments in this price range. The bevel's presence speaks for itself – if you've ever found that prolonged playing produces discomfort in your right arm from the pressure of the guitar's upper bout, your problems could be cured with this simple little maneuver.



The Songbird's back and sides are mahogany which, like the front face of the instrument, has been neatly bound at the edges with rosewood. All the lines here are crisp and clean in that you can sense the presence of a designer's flourish, but not overly so.

On to the neck now and whereas you might think that the fan fret concept would imply some changes to the overall structure here, you'd be wrong. From the back, the Songbird looks absolutely the same as a regular guitar with mahogany split by a maple stripe, the long lollipop style headstock complete with six Avian embossed tuners.

From the front, of course, things do look a little different! Visually it takes some getting used to and it does make me wonder by how much I'm going to have to modify my playing style in order to adapt to the slanting frets. We'll find out in a little while, but for now, the rosewood fingerboard has 20 fanned frets with an offset bone nut mirrored by the bridge and string saddle at the body end. So, having addressed the shock of the new, let's see how it sounds.

Sounds and Playability

It's the honest truth that within a few minutes of picking the Songbird up to play it, I had completely forgotten that the fretting was any different. From a player's perspective, you don't really see it and what the eye can't see, the fingers don't worry about. This was a surprise, as I suspected that the transition period would be at least mildly troublesome. Of course, standard tuning isn't really what this guitar is all about and so I placed a fair amount of emphasis on drop tunings. I began with DADGAD, which has almost become my home turf, and found that the Songbird's basses were strident and well rounded, while the trebles remained sweet and pure. But I wasn't going to let things rest there. One of my pieces involves dropping the bass string to C which means that tuning has to be absolutely spot on otherwise things can go very badly awry. On the Songbird this was not anywhere near being an issue; I merely tuned the bass down to C and the string tracked the bass throughout the piece with no infidelities at all. So it's full marks for fan fretting as a concept and to the Songbird, too, as tonally it was well up to the mark.

There is a B-Band Crescent Dual Source pickup fitted to the guitar which enjoys the benefits of both an under saddle transducer and a soundboard sensor all overseen by an 800Hz crossover. The controls allow the player to blend the two sources to achieve a perfect mix of bass and treble and I must say that the soundhole-mounted controls didn't give me any trouble at all and I soon had the guitar set up and sounding great. Electronically, the bass is good without being domineering and the trebles retain their dulcet personality, too. So both amplified and unplugged, the Songbird certainly sings sweetly.

Technical Specification

Manufacturer:	Avian	Frets:	20
Model:	Songbird Fan Fret	Tuners:	Avian sealed back
Body Size:	Medium Jumbo	Nut Width:	45mm
Made In:	China	Scale Length:	635mm – 654.05mm
Top:	Sitka spruce	Onboard Electronics:	B-Band Crescent II Dual Source
Back and Sides:	Mahogany	Strings Fitted:	Elixir .012s
Neck:	Mahogany/maple stripe	Left Handers:	Yes
Fingerboard:	Indian rosewood	Gig Bag/Case:	Optional molded hard case

Pros: Designer flourish and some great sounds, ideal for drop tuning

Cons: Nothing to make a fuss about!

Overall: A great instrument – a very good quality build with considerable tonal depth

Star Ratings

Sound Quality: 4/5 stars

Build Quality: 4/5 stars

Value For Money: 5/5 stars



Avian Skylark Fan Fret

All aboard the Skylark now and this Harry Fleishman designed instrument caused quite a stir when I reviewed its straight fretted counterpart last year. Decidedly more pot-bellied than the Songbird I opined that once you get over the sleek, slightly left field looks, there's a lot of worthy attributes to be explored and enjoyed. I'm expecting the fan fret version to deliver a few more surprises...



Build Quality and Features

I guess that "medium jumbo" doesn't really convey too much in terms of body dimensions and so I'll bare all with a ruler. The Skylark's upper bout is 287mm and the lower is 380mm with an average depth (i.e. at the waist) of 105mm. Part of the design initiative on the "straight" Skylark is that the lower bout is a perfect circle with the bridge in the centre in order to distribute vibration evenly over the soundboard. Here, of course, the bridge is offset and the presence of the bevel deceives the eye as to whether the same is true at least in principle here. I'm thinking that it is, though!

As before, the Skylark's top is Sitka spruce with neatly bound edges. Naturally the eye is immediately drawn to the offset semi-triangular soundhole and this is something that you're either aesthetically drawn to or not. Lovers of the near perfect symmetry on a standard acoustic might not take to it, but I like it.

The Skylark's back and sides are Indian Rosewood with plenty of the dark brown stripy grain associated with this particular tonewood. The bevel and scooped cutaway both share the same wood, too, giving the guitar a dark, austere look overall.

The neck is mahogany with a maple stripe down the centre, exactly as before with a wide and fairly thin C profile. I might have even detected a very soft V too, but it's difficult to be sure.

There are Avian tuners on the headstock with a rosewood veneer to the front and the attractive company logo on the top. Once again, the fretboard is Indian rosewood and both the slanted nut and string saddle are made from bone.

As far as the pickup is concerned, I wondered why this model was fitted with a different B-Band model to its partner. The answer is that the controls for the Crescent II Dual Source simply wouldn't fit the Skylark's soundhole and so here Avian have opted for the B-Band A2.2 instead. With this pick-up the controls are a far more compact two thumbwheels that sit quite nicely at the soundhole's lower side. I'm not sure that this is optimum for use on stage as it's possibly further back than you'd expect, but most players would probably get used to it quite quickly.

Sounds and Playability

When I reviewed the Avian's last year I thought that the necks on these guitars were very probably all made together from the same exact dimensions, but strangely I found that swapping a capo from the Songbird to the Skylark involved a little compensation and so they must be slightly different in depth. Interesting; obviously quality control here is as tight as I had been led to believe!



In any case, last time I met the Skylark I was quite taken with its tonal attributes and the fan fret version tells a very similar story. To my ears the rosewood back and sides have added an airy sustain to the sound picture and the trebles are possibly even more tightly focused, too. In terms of bass, there's certainly enough and it's quite crisp, without any noticeable bulges in the midrange.

I applied the same drop tuning tests to both guitars and came up with very similar results. There is definitely an improved amount of tracking with even quite subterranean drop tunings, adding up to an adventurous fingerstylist's dream come true.

Through an amplifier, the B-Band A2.2 is a really easy drive with just two controls to work with: one for volume, the other to blend the under saddle with the sensor. As such, I was up and running in no time and interestingly I think this guitar is a bit louder than its counterpart – certainly that was what I found by AB-ing the two, anyway. In any case, it was easy to find the right blend and just play – I'm still not quite sure about where the controls have been positioned, though.

Conclusion

If I was asked to choose, I might go for the rosewood backed Skylark, although my curiosity would insist on me trying the rosewood option on the Songbird, too. Both guitars make an excellent introduction to the fan fret concept and at this kind of price, each would be a relatively non-risky investment to make. Good design with tip-top manufacturing make this brand definitely one to watch!

Technical Specification

Manufacturer: Avian	Model: Skylark Fan Fret
Body Size: Medium Jumbo	Made In: China
Top: Sitka spruce	Back and Sides: Indian rosewood
Neck: Mahogany/maple stripe	Fingerboard: Indian rosewood
Frets: 20	Tuners: Avian sealed back
Nut Width: 43mm	Scale Length: 635mm – 654.05mm
Onboard Electronics: B-Band A2.2 Dual Source	Strings Fitted: Elixir .012s
Left Handers: Yes	Gig Bag/Case: Optional molded hard case

Pros: Adventurous fingerstylists will love this for its tone and flexibility

Cons: Preamp controls maybe slightly awkward to reach

Overall: All the benefits of fan fretting delivered at a remarkable price point

Star Ratings

Sound Quality 4.5/5 stars

Build Quality: 4/5 stars

Value For Money: 5/5 stars