

TWIN PEAKS

Sterling by Music Man SB14 and Ray34 basses

BY ED FRIEDLAND

THESE DAYS, more and more manufacturers are selling imported versions of their U.S.-built wares to break into the lower-priced market. The build quality has steadily improved in Korea, China and Indonesia, to the point where some of these instruments are creating serious competition for their American counterparts. But the key ingredient to the success of an import model is a final inspection and setup, as these two Sterling by Music Man basses demonstrate. The new Sterling line is built in Indonesia, with some hardware made in Korea, but the finishing touches are applied in Orange, California, and that's why these axes come out of the box ready to rock.

FEATURES

THE STERLINGS ARE immediately familiar to Music Man fans. Like the Music Man Sterling model, the SB14 has a Jazz-width neck, 22-fret rosewood fingerboard on a maple neck, sculpted five-bolt neck joint, compact body, ceramic humbucker (with hidden phantom coil for quiet single-coil operation), three-way pickup selector (Parallel, Single-Coil and Series modes), three-band EQ, Ernie Ball-designed bridge and open-back heavy-duty tuners. Except for the basswood body and absence of compensated nut, the Sterling is virtually identical to the U.S. model. The Ray 34 is also a dead-ringer for its American cousin, the StingRay. It has a swamp ash body, P-width maple neck, 21-fret rosewood fretboard on the natural-finish model (a maple board on the black and Honeyburst finishes), six-bolt neck joint, alnico humbucker, three-band active preamp and the same rugged hardware as the SB.

Both axes have sexy matching headstocks, easy-access truss rod adjustment wheels, and a smooth satin finish on the back of the neck. The Sterling folks have taken great pains to recreate the formulas that have made the U.S. Sterling and 'Ray treasured classics. They tell me the preamps are identical to the Ernie Ball designs, and the pickups are wound with the same wire and number of turns, using bobbins and covers sup-



MANUFACTURER:
Sterling by Music Man,
sterlingbymusicman.com

SB14

LIST PRICE: \$849.00
BODY: Basswood
NECK: Maple
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 22
SCALE: 34 inches
PICKUPS: Ceramic humbucker with phantom coil
ELECTRONICS: Three-band EQ with three-way pickup selector
NUT WIDTH: 1 1/2 inches

RAY34

LIST PRICE: \$919.00
BODY: Swamp ash
NECK: Maple
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 21
SCALE: 34 inches
PICKUPS: Alnico humbucker
ELECTRONICS: Three-band EQ
NUT WIDTH: 1 3/4 inches



plied by Ernie Ball. Their Asian heritage and limited color options help keep the final cost down. A StingRay 5 model, the Ray35, is also offered in a natural finish.

PERFORMANCE

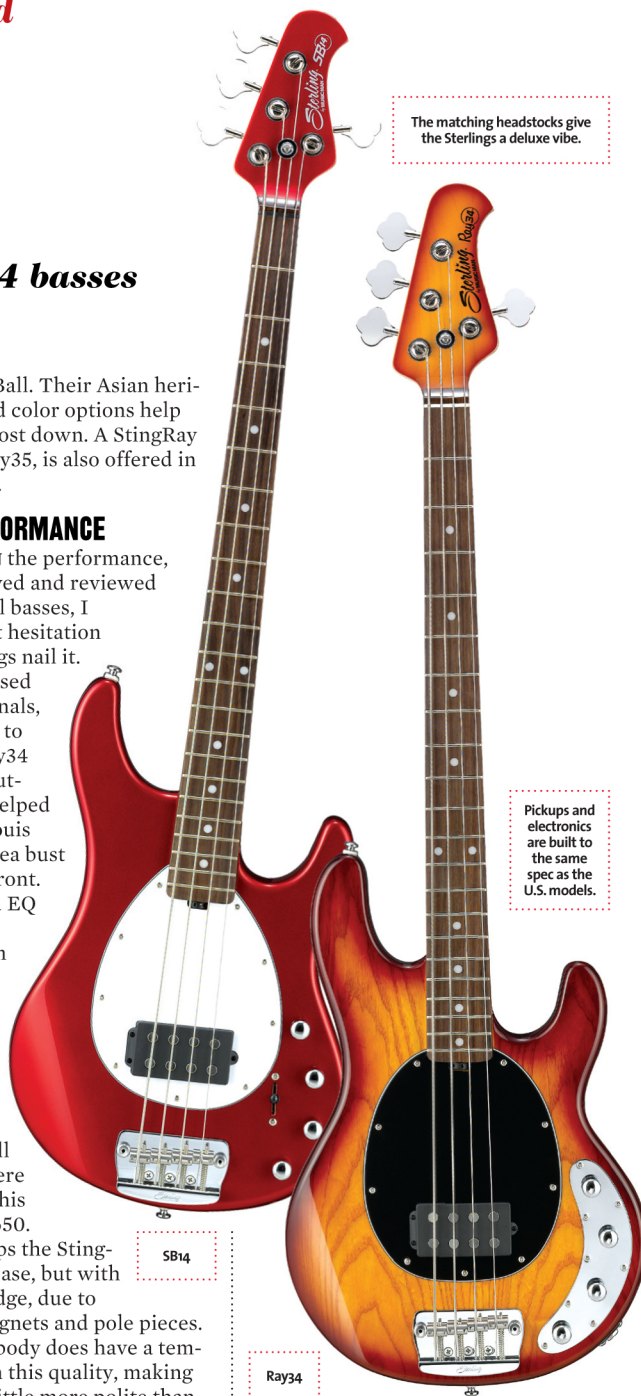
THE PROOF IS IN the performance, and having played and reviewed many Ernie Ball basses, I can say without hesitation that the Sterlings nail it. If you've ever used one of the originals, you know what to expect. The Ray34 has the crisp, cutting tone that helped slappers like Louis Johnson and Flea bust out to the forefront. The three-band EQ lets you dial in everything from scalpel-like highs to focused mids to subterranean lows. The neck feels solid in the hand, the finish is well applied, and there is no hint that this bass sells for \$650.

The SB14 cops the Sting-Ray tone with ease, but with slightly more edge, due to the ceramic magnets and pole pieces. The basswood body does have a tempering effect on this quality, making this Sterling a little more polite than its U.S. doppelgänger. The slimmer, J-profile neck is fast and easy, and the extra fret and scooped cutaway make playing up in the "no-money zone" very tempting indeed.

The three-way pickup selector adds extra versatility. In Parallel mode, the SB produces the classic Music Man tone for slap, finger or pick playing. Switching to single-coil operation (completely hum-free, thanks to the phantom coil), you get something similar to the bridge pickup on a J-Bass, and in Series mode, both coils combine to give you a gut-punching attack that will rock any band.

The matching headstocks give the Sterlings a deluxe vibe.

Pickups and electronics are built to the same spec as the U.S. models.



SB14

Ray34

THE BOTTOM LINE

IF YOU'VE EVER dreamed of owning a Music Man but couldn't afford one, now is your chance to get ridiculously close to the real deal. If import-phobia is the only reason you'd stay away from the Sterlings, give them a blind-fold test. They go well beyond the expectations of "bargain" axes and are highly satisfying to play. 🌟

PRO	CON
CLASSIC MUSIC MAN TONE, LOOKS AND FEEL FOR A DEAL	LIMITED COLOR CHOICES; NO DUAL-PICKUP MODELS