

# TO BOLDLY GO...

AN UPMARKET ELECTRO-ACOUSTIC SHOWS **LOUIS THORNE** A CREDIBLE ALTERNATIVE TO TRADITIONAL ACOUSTIC GUITAR DESIGNS

## GBINFO



### BOULDER CREEK SOLITAIRE ECR3-N

PRICE: £800

BUILT IN: China

SCALE LENGTH: 650mm (25.6 inches)

NUT WIDTH: 43mm (1.69 inches)

STRING SPACING AT NUT: 38mm (1.5 inches)

TOP: Solid cedar

BACK & SIDES: Solid mahogany back, laminated mahogany sides

NECK: Mahogany

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood

FRETS: 20 medium

BRIDGE: Rosewood with compensated saddle

STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 53mm (2.1 inches)

ELECTRONICS: Undersaddle transducer, AB4-1 balanced preamp with XLR & jack outputs

MACHINEHEADS: Closed-back die-cast 18:1 ratio

WEIGHT: 2.4kg (5.3lbs)

FINISHES: Natural high gloss (shown)

CASE: Moulded hard case included

LEFT-HANDERS: Not yet

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**...** If you attended the London Guitar Show earlier this year, you may already have seen this novel design from Boulder Creek. American-designed and Chinese-built, the Solitaire features a top bracing system that is radically different to the X-braced design introduced by C. F. Martin at the end of the 1800s and used on the vast majority of steel-strung acoustics today.

Instead, the Solitaire uses two aluminium rods suspended under the soundboard, which does away with almost all of the wooden bracing seen inside traditional acoustic guitars. The soundhole has been moved to the upper side of the body, allowing for an uninterrupted solid top, and a preamp with both balanced and unbalanced outputs further add to this guitar's innovative credentials. But will this be enough for Boulder Creek to challenge the status quo?

## BODY & NECK

With a body depth of about 4.5 inches and a 14th-fret neck-body join, the Solitaire is firmly in the modern 'dreadnought electro with cutaway' mould. The guitar has a solid cedar

top, a solid mahogany back and laminated mahogany sides. The choice of laminated sides is apparently dictated by the need for extra strength, an especially important consideration given that the Solitaire's soundhole is pretty much right in the middle of its bass side. If you haven't guessed, this soundhole – pointing as it does towards the player and away from an audience – is the reason behind the 'Solitaire' moniker.

The guitar's cedar soundboard looks very attractive, with a straight and bold grain. Where you might otherwise expect to find a soundhole, the Solitaire logo has been inlaid in white shell. While this certainly helps to break up the otherwise plain expanse of wood, this kind of aesthetic detail is sure to divide opinion. The guitar's black front and back body binding looks very smart, while on the cedar top it's augmented with a large strip of synthetic abalone.

The rosewood pinned bridge accommodates a compensated synthetic saddle. Inside the guitar, a plate underneath the bridge is fixed to the two aluminium bars that form the mainstay of this guitar's unique 'suspended bracing system' (or 'SBS'). While the instrument's back has a trio

of fairly standard scalloped wooden braces, there is almost no further bracing on the top – just a very slim X brace and cross braces at the top and bottom of the soundboard.

The mahogany neck is dovetail jointed to the body and has a meaty, rounded C profile that should feel comfortable to all but the most daintily digitated picker. The Solitaire's rosewood fretboard has 20 medium frets with the guitar's cutaway allowing very easy access to all of them, at least by acoustic guitar standards. The frets themselves are very well finished, while excellent intonation and a sensible action mean that this feels like a real player's instrument right from the start.

The Solitaire's headstock features a set of high-g geared tuners (an 18:1 ratio as opposed to the usual 14:1). These feel solid and of good quality and do their job very well indeed. In keeping with the guitar's unusual design, the headstock shape is individual without being too outlandish. It features black binding, abalone purfling and a mahogany veneer. Everything, including the neck, is finished in a gloss lacquer and, all in all, this feels like a very well-made instrument showing excellent attention to detail. ➔



**BARS AND BRACES**

A CLOSER LOOK AT BOULDER CREEK'S SUSPENDED BRACING SYSTEM

■ Take a look at this picture and you'll see how different the bracing on the Solitaire's top is to that of a regular X-braced acoustic.

Boulder Creek's SBS design does away with the multiple wooden braces that strengthen the top of an X-braced guitar, managing with a single slim 'X' (of about a quarter of the normal mass) to guard against the top cracking. The design derives its strength from a pair of aluminium rods that run the length of the body. These are attached to the top at either end and at the all-important area under the bridge, but otherwise they are not in contact with the soundboard, remaining suspended a centimetre or so underneath. This, coupled with the lack of a front soundhole, is intended to achieve the perennial aim of maximising the amount of vibration from the guitar's top while having a structure that is strong enough to withstand the tension of the strings. Fringe benefits are said to include greater resistance to changes in humidity, less propensity to feed back and a novel look that will certainly get you noticed on stage.

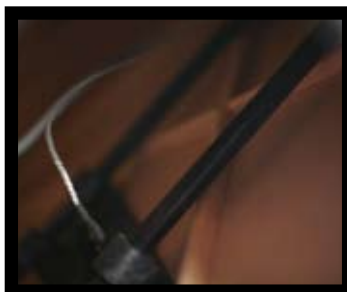


If you like the idea of the suspended bracing system but hanker after a more conservative-looking instrument, Boulder Creek's 'Stage & Studio' series should fit the bill. These guitars feature a standard soundhole design but still get the bracing that features on the Solitaire.

However, designer Mike Shellhammer points out that about 85 percent of Boulder Creek guitars sold are Solitaires, so guitarists may be a little less conservative than most manufacturers seem to assume. 12-string, classical and acoustic bass models are also in the pipeline and should be available early next year, all featuring the SBS design.



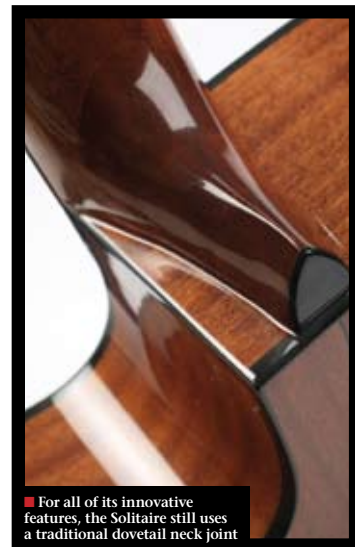
■ The side-mounted soundhole allows for an uninterrupted solid top



battery warning LED.

Unlike some systems, the tuner works whether or not the guitar is plugged in, which is a definite plus point, and the tuner's chromatic nature means that alternate tunings are a doddle. Looking at the bottom of the guitar we see the 9V battery compartment and connections for both quarter-inch jack and balanced XLR leads. This means that, while sending a low-noise output from the XLR socket to the PA system, you could also connect the jack to an on-stage amplifier for monitoring.

The only criticism we have of an otherwise very well organised system is that the main wire from the control panel to the jack is long enough to allow it to vibrate occasionally against the back of the guitar while playing. This may be a quirk with this particular example – perhaps the wire has come loose from a clip inside the guitar – but it's worth looking out for when you audition one.



■ For all of its innovative features, the Solitaire still uses a traditional dovetail neck joint

**"THIS IS A POLISHED SOUND WITH SPARKLY HIGHS AND DEFINED MIDS"**

**ELECTRONICS**

An undersaddle piezo transducer is, of course, the standard solution to 'electrifying' an acoustic, but the Solitaire's proprietary AB4-T system has a couple of design features that give it a real advantage over many others. A small control panel nestles in the side of the guitar with a quartet of centre-notched sliders that allow adjustment to bass, middle, treble and brilliance and a mini-knob taking care of master volume. There's a phase invert button (useful for dealing with feedback) and a button to switch on the built-in tuner, which has a single-character note display and flat/tuned/sharp indicator LEDs. There's also a helpful low



**SOUNDS**

From the first strum, the Solitaire sounds immediately striking. It's bold and bright with a chiming top end that puts it firmly in the same 'modern' camp as the likes of Taylor and Takamine. The Solitaire is a very dynamic instrument and it's unusual design does seem to be adding something extra to the upper frequencies and to the guitar's sustain, which is very impressive. The open low strings have a compelling, bell-like quality, while harmonics leap out

**DETAILS**

INNOVATIVE DESIGN  
FEATURES AND  
UNUSUAL LOOKS



■ The headstock features a set of 18:1-ratio tuners and a smart mahogany veneer



■ The rosewood pinned bridge accommodates a compensated synthetic saddle



■ The soundhole points towards the player earning the guitar its 'Solitaire' moniker



**GBVERDICT**

**BOULDER CREEK SOLITAIRE ECR3-N**

**GOLD STARS**

- ★ Bright sound with excellent sustain
- ★ Well-specified electronics
- ★ Innovative suspended bracing system really works

**BLACK MARKS**

- Radical appearance won't have universal appeal

**IDEAL FOR...**

Forward-thinking gigging guitarists looking of a bold, lively sound

**GBRATING**



and ring on for a long time.

However, due to the side-mounted soundhole, the sound is quite different from the player's perspective than from that of the audience in front. From the playing position, the sound is both lively and resonant, but without such a strident low end as you would expect from a 'normal' dreadnought. This is a polished and well-balanced sound, with plenty of sparkly highs and defined mids, but one that doesn't have the out-and-out volume and low-end projection of some front-soundhole acoustics.

So what of the sound out front? Most of the low end comes out of the soundhole on

the side – put your ear directly in front of the strings and cover up the hole, and the bass and low mid-range disappear. In a normal playing environment, however, the separate sounds from the soundhole and the top of the guitar blend together, though their different points of origin may be what help give this guitar its articulate, spacious sound.

Plugged in, the preamp sound is good, with little of the 'quack' inherent in many piezo systems. Again, the sound leans towards crisp and bright rather than warm and mellow but the four-band EQ allows for plenty of adjustment here. We found the Solitaire to be just as susceptible to feedback as a regular solid-topped electro-acoustic, so the phase invert function is handy to have on call.



**GBCONCLUSION**

**BRACED FOR SUCCESS**

■ The Solitaire's unique design provides an effective alternative to the norm, with the SBS bracing lending it a lively, polished tone with excellent sustain.

The guitar's looks may put some people off – the soundboard 'Solitaire' logo won't appeal to fans of understated, traditional cosmetics – but its build quality, playability have definite appeal for all. The Solitaire has a bright, modern sound that, again, may not appeal to those seeking a mellow, traditional tone. But this crisp, shiny sound has its own merits and the player-friendly electronics make it a viable prospect for any gigging guitarist – these instruments are already being used by some top-flight players in the US. No doubt they all own traditional acoustic guitars as well, but the Solitaire provides an alternative that has its own definite strengths. **GB**