

# COMINS

## GCS-16-2

By Joe Gore



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I confess I've never played one of the high-end archtops crafted by Philadelphia luthier Bill Comins. But they're highly regarded and drop-dead beautiful. They're also drop-dead expensive, as you'd expect for fine hand-carved archtops. Base models start at \$10,000, with custom-spec instruments selling for 20 grand or more.

Comins recently followed the lead of several other ultra-premium luthiers in launching a line of relatively affordable instruments assembled on a South Korean production line. His first venture was the GCS-1, a \$1,699 semi-acoustic. This GCS-16 is his second model for the line. We reviewed the \$2,399 double-humbucker version, the GCS-16-2. (The single-pickup GCS-16-1 lists for \$2,199.) Our review model sports Comins' vintage blonde finish. All GCS models are also available in tangerine burst, violin burst, autumn burst, and black.

### Pretty and Petite

Our review guitar may lack a devastating price, yet it retains the devastating good looks of Comins' upscale instruments. It's svelte, as archtops go, with a 16" lower bout (hence the numeral in the model name) and a modest 2 3/4" body depth. It's a nice blend of archtop orthodoxy and personal design touches, such as the substantial asymmetric headstock that echoes the body contours, and handsome multi-ply binding rings the top, back, neck, and headstock. The cream-colored binding and blonde finish contrast beautifully with the black of the tailpiece, pickguard, Wilkinson tuner buttons, ebony fingerboard, and the reflective headstock finish. This is one classy-looking guitar.

Obviously, there's cost-cutting in relation to Comins' high-end instruments, and not only in the automated construction. The spruce top is

laminated, as are the maple back and sides. (Many high-end and classic archtops, including some from Comins' line, also use laminated tops and sides.) The fretboard decorations are minimal pearlloid dots. The floating bridge's base is wood, but the bridge itself is a generic Tune-o-matic unit. And while the attractive pickguard and tailpiece have the look of carved ebony, they're actually molded plastic.

There's no shame in Richlite pickguards—many of the world's most desirable guitars have them. But because we expect parts that look like these to be carved from wood, I felt a flash of downscale disappointment the first time I touched the tailpiece. It was solely an emotional response, and your reactions may differ.

### Top-End Tones

Richlite and laminate notwithstanding, this guitar sounds expensive. The custom-wound Kent Armstrong humbuckers are simultaneously warm and articulate. There's much airy treble openness, even when dialing in mellow, dark neck tones. Note fundamentals are stout and stable. Fine sustain and punchy attack lend mass and power to single-note solos. Meanwhile, excellent string-to-string separation brings clarity to chord-melody playing and contrapuntal voicings. Whether you're soloing or comping, the guitar's natural compression lends a suave, polished character. It's no struggle to maintain balance from string to string and from register to register.

At all settings, tones are complex and detailed. My ears simply got sucked in. The GCS-16-2 nails the sound and attitude of a fine traditional-jazz guitar, or at least it would if I were a fine traditional-jazz player. I recorded the demo clips using the factory roundwound strings, but premium flatwounds would nudge the guitar even closer toward a midcentury archtop aesthetic.

### Primed to Play

With its smallest proportions, the guitar's body cradles comfortably under your forearm. Novice archtop players accustomed to electric-solidbody dimensions are likely to feel more at home here than they would on models with larger bouts.

According to the manufacturer, all GCS guitars make a stopover at Comins' Philadelphia workshop for fret-dressing and setup before they reach consumers. It certainly feels like it: The GCS-16-2 arrived perfectly intonated, with a smooth, buzz-free setup. The 25" fretboard is a comfy compromise between Fender and Gibson proportion. Same with the 1.7" nut width. The neck's medium C-shape would satisfy Goldilocks. The frets feel fab. They're just substantial enough to let you dig into notes without impeding motion—you can shred yourself silly here, if that's your thing. My only wish: rounder fret ends, especially on the treble side. Your desires may differ.

### The Verdict

Comins' GCS-16-2 is gorgeous to look at and a pleasure to play. Its vintage-style jazz tones are deep and detailed. In fact, it's so adept at old-school jazz sounds that I seldom used the bridge pickup, despite its excellent sound. (I'd probably opt for the \$2,199 single-pickup version, myself.) There are two ways of looking at the price tag: At \$2,399, the GCS-16-2 is by far the most expensive Korean-made production guitar I've encountered. But for those of us who can't afford a fine hand-carved archtop (that is, nearly everybody), the GCS-16-2 provides an impressively comparable experience at a fraction of the cost. This guitar has been sitting around my house all week, and it's beguiled me. I couldn't seem to walk past it without pausing to play. The GCS-16-2 is an inspiring instrument that made me want to focus and play my best. 🎸



## RATINGS

Tones	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Build/Design	★★★★★
Value	★★★★☆

**PROS** Great looks. Superb playability. Fine traditional jazz tones.

**CONS** Very expensive for a factory-made Korean guitar.

**\$2,399 street**  
[cominsguitars.com](http://cominsguitars.com)