



WOLFRAM
MARTIN SIMPSON
& MICHAEL MESSER
SIGNATURE SLIDES

Two space age signature slides come under the critical gaze of David Mead

Wolfram is rapidly becoming known as the Rolls Royce of slides and yet they come from fairly humble beginnings. The whole project began when David Browne wanted to make himself a high quality slide for his own use. He made one and, when he found himself backstage at a Martin Simpson gig, he showed it to Martin – who wouldn't give it back! At that point, David realised that he had stumbled across something quite formidable in the slide market...

CONSTRUCTION

I'm no scientist, but I can outline for you the sort of research, attention to detail and sheer craft that goes into the making of these slides. To begin with they're made from tungsten carbide which is extremely hard, but it's brittle and so to combat this it's usually alloyed with another metal, commonly cobalt. The problem is that cobalt reacts with acid, including sweat, and this causes discolouration and the risk of eventual pitting and scoring. So Wolfram use nickel, giving the same grade of tungsten carbide that you would find in a shiny new wedding ring or even the saltwater valves in a nuclear power station.

The process begins with powder pressed at very high pressure into a mould which

turns it into the same sort of consistency as gummy chalk. Then it undergoes some basic shaping which has to be incredibly accurate because the next step is for the powder to be heated to a very high temperature – the melting point of this metal is 2,870 degrees Centigrade – during which shrinkage of up to 45% takes place. This creates a basic slide blank ready for final shaping and polishing. Tungsten carbide is such a tough material that the only thing you can use to cut it is a diamond lathe, which is exactly what is used to give the slide its final shape, to within a tolerance of five hundredths of a millimetre. Then it is polished by hand, both inside and out, using successive grades of diamond paste. As you can imagine, this process is far more involved than the chromed steel slides available – but let's look more closely at both of the Wolfram signature models.

MARTIN SIMPSON MODEL

Now, I'll admit straight away that I'm not a seasoned slide player – unlike the two players whose signature slides I have in front of me. I can fumble my way through, though. However, I decided that the best people to ask about these Wolframs were the players themselves and so before reporting my own findings, I'll hand you over to

Martin Simpson. I started our conversation by asking what he's been using for a slide in the past.

'Since I lived in the States, and even before, I've had a series of custom made slides, stainless steel being one of the commonest materials that I've used. I have a friend, Dougal Campbell who had a couple of slides made of stainless steel in the 1980s and they're heavy, beautifully constructed and very good. A friend of mine in North Carolina made some slides and eventually we got to something that we thought was pretty optimal – again, stainless steel – and I showed that to another friend of mine from California, John Lynch, who said that stainless steel is good, but the surface gets worn. He said if you were to coat it with titanium nitride it would protect it. So we made these signature slides which we referred to as 'unobtainium' and I used those for years. John saw one of them after about five years and said, "Oh dear, the plating has worn a bit..." and that it wasn't good enough. He, being the engineer that he is, went away and came back with a tungsten carbide slide, which I thought was phenomenal and I used it for a couple of years. Then David Browne saw that and said, "You know, I have an idea..." and approached a company in England whose ability to produce the best

MARTIN SIMPSON
TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION
Manufacturer: Wolfram
Material: Hand-polished tungsten carbide
Price: £250
Weight: 192g
Length: 64mm

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: Incredibly pure tone and comfortable fit
Cons: The weight – and the price will deter all but serious slide players
Overall: Not just a new take on an old theme but a complete reinvention of the humble bottleneck slide!

ACOUSTIC RATING

| | |
|------------------------|-------|
| Build Quality | ★★★★★ |
| Sound Quality | ★★★★★ |
| Value for Money | ★★★★★ |

5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless.
4 Stars: Excellent, hard to beat.
3 Stars: Good, covers all bases well.
2 or 1 Stars: Below average, poor.

CONTACT DETAILS

Wolfram Slides
www.wolframslides.com

surface on tungsten carbide just shocks me.'

I remarked that it looks like a slide that has been designed by NASA...

'I actually reel whenever I get mine out because the quality of workmanship is bonkers! It's utterly flawless



MICHAEL MESSER

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

Manufacturer: Wolfram
Material: Hand-polished tungsten carbide
Price: £250
Weight: 75g
Length: 62mm

ACOUSTIC TEST RESULTS

Pros: A conventional slide with space age capabilities

Cons: Once again, the price will put a lot of people off

Overall: A lighter, but nevertheless robust slide that oozes fine tone and amazing durability

ACOUSTIC RATING

Build Quality ★★★★★
Sound Quality ★★★★★
Value for Money ★★★★★

5 Stars: Superb, almost faultless.
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and utterly peerless in terms of quality. There is nothing remotely as good on the market. The thing about these slides is that they are utterly silent and so what you're hearing is the string with no negative friction noise and they just generate a massive amount of sound because they're so heavy and so beautifully made. People say, "Oh my god, 250 quid for a slide?" But you know what? If you don't drop it from a great height on a very hard surface or lose it somehow, you will never ever damage this thing. It's completely and utterly hard and resilient.'

IN USE

Martin Simpson's slide is indeed very heavy, weighing in at around 190g. It's also been specially shaped so that the inside tapers, meaning that it's a thinner bore at the tip. This fits on the finger nicely and actually feels very comfortable, once you get

used to the weight. I put it to Martin that he uses his slide on a regular PRS acoustic without a raised action and there's commonly a capo at the second fret, making the action quite low.

'Well I have a .015 gauge top string and that makes a big difference. Whereas lot of people play slide in open D major and so you lower your second string down from B to A and your top string is at D, I tend to play in C and G tunings and so my second string, which is .017 gauge, is tuned up to C and my top string is at D and so there's a lot of tension there. So it allows me to play with a low action, or a moderately low action.'

On my own guitar, I could hear immediately what Martin means when he says that there's virtually no surface noise. There isn't. Many people associate the sound of slide guitar with the sound of metal on metal grinding underneath the note, but here all you get is an incredibly pure tone. I compared the Wolfram with one of my own slides - a brass one that cost me around £20 - and the difference was nothing short of amazing. The overall lack of friction means that you simply glide across the strings...

MICHAEL MESSER MODEL

Michael's slide is more like the conventional notion of what a bottleneck should look like: a shiny metal tube. I spoke to him about what he wanted from his signature model.

'I was playing at the Riverside Studios and David Browne was at the gig. Afterwards he showed me

Martin Simpson's slide and I instantly realised its potential but I was aware that what Martin had created was a very specific type of slide for a certain type of playing. The tone you can get out of it is unbelievable! The lack of surface noise is extraordinary and the level of finish and perfection is incredible.'

'Without wanting to sound critical of Martin's slide, it is very heavy. A lot of slide players out there wouldn't be able to use that and so what I wanted to achieve was to take the idea and not reinvent the wheel. So basically where I'm coming from is that for around 100 years people have been putting a piece of metal tubing on their fingers - could be a piece of gas pipe or water pipe or whatever - and they've used that for a slide. What I wanted to do was to take the idea and make the very best one it was possible to get. So basically what you've got is a piece of tube. It's not redesigning the idea of a slide, it is literally a metal tube to play slide guitar with. And it's the best damn slide I've ever come across!'

Michael's slide is, indeed, a lot lighter than Martin's... 'There is a tone coming off that material that is different from steel, brass, copper or German silver - the other materials that people make metal slides

from. This is different; it's very, very pure. There's no drag whatsoever; when you slide up a string, it's almost like you've oiled the string and I've never used any slide like that before. My name wouldn't have gone on it if I didn't think it was incredible. With my reputation as it is, I'd be putting myself up to be shot down if I didn't think it was any good.'

IN USE

As I said, Michael's slide is more conventional in appearance and so it's possible to settle down with much quicker. As before, the tone I was getting from it was pure and untarnished by any undue background metallic rattle. Even fairly wild vibrato doesn't detract from the purity of the timbre - and the weight to thickness ratio is nigh on perfect.

CONCLUSION

OK, I'm not going to ignore the elephant in the room: yes, these slides are expensive. But when you consider the amount of work that has gone into the production of each - and remember that much of that process is done by hand - you have to compare it to any other bespoke item. We all know that it's possible to spend £500 on a flight case, not to mention several thousand on a specially commissioned acoustic guitar, so, placed within that context, £250 doesn't sound too much to pay for the amount of quality on offer here.

David Mead

