

**BASS DESIRES** *Just for the low end*

# STERLING REPUTATION

**Ernie Ball Music Man HH Sterling 5 five-string bass**

BY ED FRIEDLAND

**O**VER THE PAST FEW YEARS, Music Man has been developing new models and configurations for their bass lineup. The highly anticipated Sterling 5 is the company's latest low-frequency machine, and it's a welcome addition to the family. The Sterling was introduced in 1993 as an alternative to the ever-popular StingRay, and while the visual differences are subtle, the tone and feel are quite different. The five-string version offers the sonic signature of the Sterling with the added benefit of a tight, punchy B string.

## FEATURES

**THE STERLING 5** is available in three pickup configurations: H (humbucker), HS (humbucker/single-coil) and HH (double humbucker). My review instrument was an HH model with a sexy Black Cherry Burst high-gloss polyester finish over an ash body, and a matching headstock. Weighing in at 10.2 pounds, the bass is right at the top end of my personal preference for heft. If it weighed much more, I might not consider using it for a long night's work, but then a strapping young lad might not even notice the load.

Like every Music Man bass, the Sterling 5's construction is top-notch and bombproof. The solid and functional hardware package features a chrome-plated hardened steel bridge with stainless-steel saddles, Schaller BM tuners with tapered posts, a five-bolt neck plate, a wheel-type truss-rod adjuster and oversized strap buttons. The rosewood fingerboard (maple is an option) has 22 wide, high-profile frets (one more than the StingRay), which are well-seated in the fingerboard, and the ends are properly filed for a smooth run up and down the gunstock oil-finished maple neck. The patented compensated nut is 1 3/4 inches wide, which makes for a comfortable spread by the time it widens to the .685-inch (17.5mm) string spacing at the bridge.

The Sterling's forward-leaning tonal signature is due in part to its use of ceramic bar magnets with steel pole pieces (as opposed to the StingRay's alnico pole pieces). The general consensus is that ceramic magnets produce a more forceful tone, while alnico is "sweeter" or more "vintage." Music Man basses have never been tame, but the Sterling certainly has a pronounced midrange bite. Its aggressive behavior is also

partly the result of the pickups being wired in series rather than in parallel as on the StingRay. This gives the pickups a slight volume boost while it brings out the punchy low-mids, making this bass perfect for hard-hitting rock, fusion or any music where you need to be heard.

The three-band active circuit offers timbral flexibility with boost/cut in the bass, mid and treble ranges, and the five-position toggle switch gives you access to the various coil combinations.

## PERFORMANCE

**THAT TOGGLE** is the key to unlocking the Sterling 5's wide range of great tones. It's five positions, combined with the bass's three-band EQ, make it easy to sculpt tones that are suitable to just about any style of music.

Position 1, with the switch all the way toward the bridge, gives you the back humbucker with both coils—the classic Music Man setup. The Sterling's cutting power is in full force with this setting and gives you the toothy tone that put this bass on the map. With the three-band EQ, it's possible to tailor the basic sound for cushiony lows, articulate mids, a sharp edge or a subtle mix of all three. Position 2 accesses the outer two coils (1 and 4), which would seem to compare with a J-Bass, but this setting is much brighter with more mid scoop. Although you can boost the mids with the EQ, it never stops sounding like a Music Man.

With the switch in the middle (position 3), all four coils are activated for a thick, complex tone. With this setting, the Sterling 5 has a deep, almost dub-like bottom end, yet it retains enough mid presence to bring out fingerstyle attack. Slapping with this coil combo is awesome: the highs jump out, the lows support the thump and the mids seem to back off on their own to create the perfect scoop for a glassy, full-range tone.

Position 4 gives you the two inside coils (2 & 3). It's an interesting texture, with lots of midrange focus, and it was a great platform for fuzz bass. Position 5 brings in the front humbucker (coils 3 & 4) with a full and cushy tone. I rolled off the highs for a fat blues sound that would satisfy even a die-hard blues freak.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

**THE STERLING 5** HAS a unique voice, a tightly focused B-string and a sexy vibe. It will certainly thrill the Music Man faithful and potentially attract some new players because of its flexibility and usefulness. 🌟

**MXR M182 EL GRANDE  
BASS FUZZ PEDAL**

**LIST PRICE \$2,550.00**

**MANUFACTURER:**

Ernie Ball/Music Man,  
ernieball.com

**BODY:** Ash

**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on

**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood (maple optional)

**FRETS:** 22, high-profile, wide

**SCALE:** 34 inches

**PICKUPS:** Two ceramic humbuckers (as tested) wired in series; also available in single-humbucker and humbucker/single-coil configurations

**ELECTRONICS:** Three-band EQ, master volume, pan, NUT WIDTH:

1 7/8 inches

**STRING SPACING:**

.685 inches (17.55 mm)



Dual humbuckers offer a wide range of tones.

The compensated nut greatly improves overall intonation.



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