

# SIXX APPEAL

*Epiphone Blackbird Nikki Sixx Thunderbird bass*

BY ED FRIEDLAND

**N**IKKI SIXX HAS LONG BEEN the solid anchor for the frenzied pop-metal juggernaut that is Mötley Crüe, and penned many of their biggest hits like “Girls, Girls, Girls,” “Dr. Feelgood” and “Kickstart My Heart.” Initially inspired by the Who’s John Entwistle, Sixx began his long love affair with the fabled Gibson Thunderbird bass in the Seventies. He favored the bass for its “substantial” feel and a growling tone that a guitar “can just ride on top of.” As with his other basses, Sixx stripped away its volume and tone controls “because I believe that live Rock and Roll is either on or off.”

A few years back, Gibson teamed up with Sixx to create the limited-run signature model Blackbird. More recently, Epiphone released a version of the Nikki Sixx Blackbird, built in China with a few cost-conscious changes to make the bass more affordable. I decided to take a look at the budget model and see how it measures up.

## FEATURES

**THE BLACKBIRD’S BODY** is made of mahogany, a wood prized for its great sustain, warmth and midrange focus. The flat black finish (Epiphone calls it Pitch Black) is also found on the Goth Series Thunderbird IV, but the Blackbird distinguishes itself with Iron Cross inlays in the rosewood fingerboard and a thunderbird-over-cross graphic on the pick guard. A bolt-on maple neck is one departure from classic T-Bird construction that helps keep the cost down (Gibson ’birds are built with either set-neck or neck-through construction). While less expensive to build, the bolt-on neck also gives this ax a punchy attack and a rock-solid feel. The nut is .28 inches narrower than other Epiphone Thunderbird models but the same width as Gibson’s T-Birds. The rounded neck profile feels comfortable, and its satin black finish insures your sweaty paw won’t get stuck.

The Gibson-style three-point bridge is classic and “model appropriate,” though it doesn’t allow for individual string-height adjustments. Two Deep Sixx humbuckers produce the sound, but as this is a Nikki Sixx bass, it has no tone or volume controls; if you want to sculpt the tone, you’ll have to do it from the amp. Likewise, the toggle switch is only a pickup selector in the sense that it turns them on or off. Unfortunately the

switch is positioned dangerously close to where your right hand might fall after an inspired downstroke—which is not the best time to experience the “off” side of rock and roll. Furthermore, the absence of tone controls and a pickup selector rather strictly limits the sounds the bass can produce. That said, you could easily replace the toggle with a three-way switch and wire the pickups for individual or dual use.

A curious and highly touted feature of this minimalist ax is the “Opti-Grab” handle—a small, square, rubber-coated metal hook bolted on the body at an angle just behind the treble side of the bridge. Sixx reports, “All of my basses have to have the Opti-Grab, which is where I keep my finger to move my basses when I’m playing, since the T-Bird is a neck-heavy instrument.” Although it sounds like a good idea, I failed to find a workable playing position while resting any finger on the Opti-Grab. However, if you thread your cable through it, the Opti-Grab will prevent you from pulling out the jack by stepping on your cord.

## PERFORMANCE

**AS SIXX HAS POINTED OUT**, the T-Bird is a neck-heavy instrument, and the Blackbird is no different. My review bass weighed in at a respectable eight and a half pounds, and I found the rear body wing to be a good armrest, allowing me to compensate for the neck-dive.

But people don’t play these basses for the ergonomics, they play them for the classic grinding tone, which the Blackbird delivers. Although the lack of internal circuitry might suggest a full-range, hi-fi tone, in fact the Blackbird has a rather dark character. The high-frequency response is limited, but what does come through is unmistakably T-Bird: midrange growl, heavy attack and big bottom. Testing it through a Genz-Benz GBE1200, I was able to dial in a bright edge, but I kept wishing the Blackbird had claws of its own.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

**THE EPIPHONE BLACKBIRD** is built well and looks cool, but dark-hearted tone-tweakers might prefer Epiphone’s Goth model Thunderbird for its greater tone-sculpting capabilities. ✨

PRO	CON
T-BIRD TONE AT CHICKEN-FEED PRICES	LACK OF TONE OPTIONS, DARK SONIC CHARACTER



**EPIPHONE BLACKBIRD  
NIKKI SIXX  
THUNDERBIRD BASS**

**LIST PRICE:** \$665.00

**MANUFACTURER:**  
The Epiphone Company,  
epiphone.com

**BODY:** Mahogany

**NECK:** Hard rock maple,  
bolt-on, with Iron Cross  
inlays

**FRETS:** 20

**PICKUPS:** Two Deep  
Sixx humbuckers

**NUT:** 1 1/2 inches

**CONTROLS:** On/off  
toggle

**SCALE:** 34 inches



The Blackbird's toggle simply chooses between having the pickups on or off.

Opti-Grab can double as a bass stabilizer and a cord retainer.