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FENDER TELECASTER BIBLE

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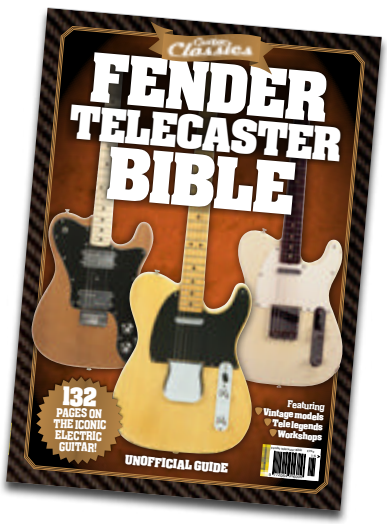
Welcome

This latest special edition in the Guitar & Bass Classics series goes all the way back to the beginning, focusing on the Telecaster – the first solidbody electric guitar offered by Fender. We're not knocking Stratocasters in any way at all, but the Telecaster is the true daddy, and this issue overfloweth with reasons why its impact and charms are worthy of celebration. Inside this issue you'll learn about the Fender Telecaster's fascinating history (which includes pre-Telecasters, such as the Esquire and Broadcaster), as many old and current models as we could fit in, as well as workshop articles on how Telecasters function – including how to make them better. We've also got some classic interviews and features on musicians, such as Danny Gatton and Roy Buchanan, who have used the Fender Telecaster to brighten up all our lives. As always, we hope this appeals to fans of guitars, and music generally, as well as Fender Telecaster devotees. If you fancy some more guitar-driven fun after you've read this, feel free to check out www.guitar-bass.net – as well as Guitar & Bass Magazine itself. For now, it's time to leave you be to get on with sampling what you've paid for. Enjoy...



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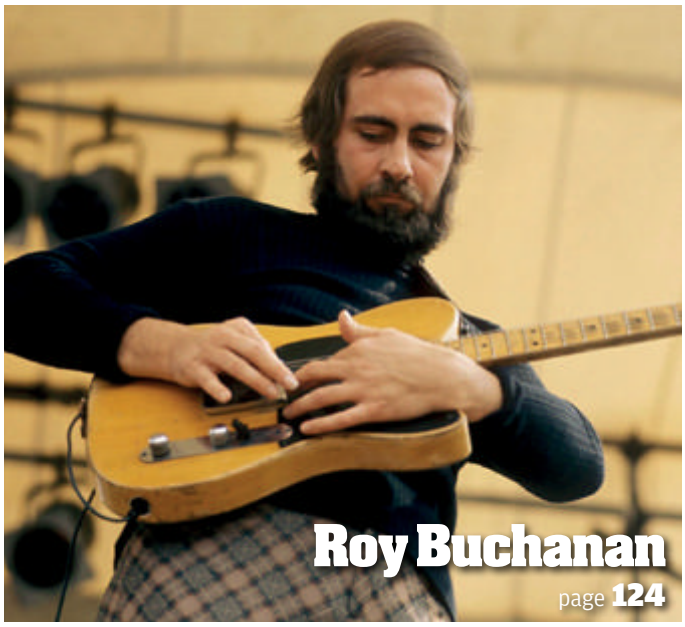

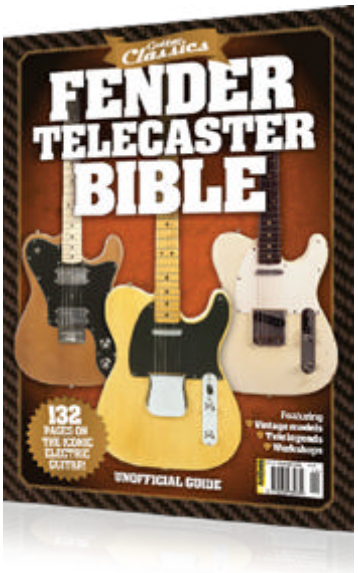

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FENDER
FENDER

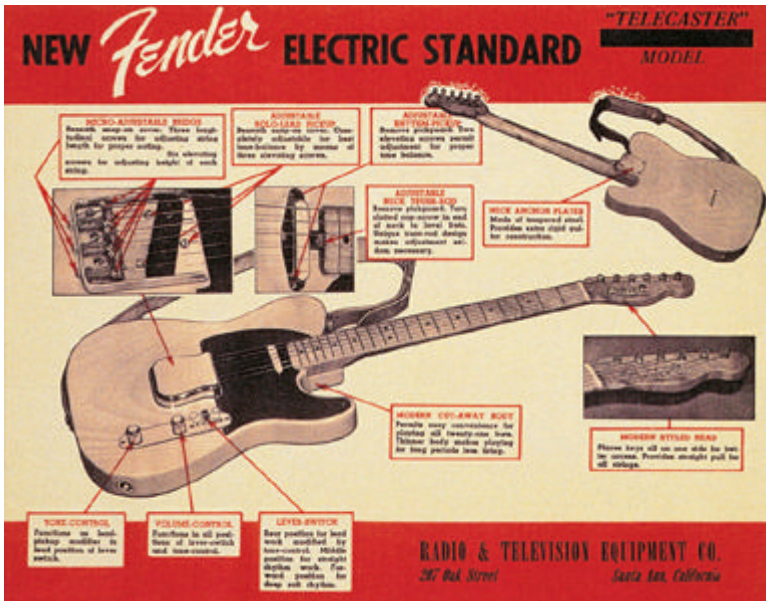
Tele VISION

It was the twang that started it all. **Tony Bacon** unravels the tale of Leo's first-born, the Fender Telecaster – the first commercially marketed solidbody electric Spanish guitar

We're hovering above Manteca, California, early in 1951, just a few miles inland from San Francisco. Suddenly we zoom in on Dale Hyatt, a man out and about with some samples of a new guitar made by Fender Electric Instruments, the small operation he works for down in Los Angeles.

Selling their new-fangled instrument is not, Hyatt is discovering, a particularly easy job. However, his brother, who lives in the same area, has tipped him off about the dozens of country musicians playing in bars and clubs around town, because it is country players who so far have shown most interest in the new Fender electric guitar – the one with the weird solid plank for a body. 'It was like going back to Oklahoma,' Hyatt recalls of Manteca in 1951. 'They had these nightclubs going and guys playing honky-tonk and country-western. I'd taken five guitars with me – these were Nocasters, just the Fender name on 'em.

'I got a guy playing one, he quite liked it, and all of a sudden it just quit, didn't know what was wrong with it. It was embarrassing. So I went out to the truck, got another one. It lasted about 30 minutes and it quit. Then they started saying: 'There he goes again, ladies and gentlemen – wonder how many he's got?' Anyway, the third one kept on going and worked for the rest of the evening.' ↔



Hyatt had stumbled on a weakness of the new Fender's pickup shielding in the most public way imaginable. This was the cost of trying to sell what were still in effect pre-production versions, or working prototypes. 'But anyhow, that was the start of it,' Hyatt laughs. 'That gentleman came down to my brother's house the next day and brought his son's electric train set, which he wanted to trade for one of the Nocasters.

'Another of the first ones sold of what we now know as the Telecaster – it might have been the second or third I sold, I'm not sure – was to a gentleman in Long Beach. He was one of the very first to buy Leo Fender's solidbody guitar, and I know for a fact that he played that thing for years and years.'

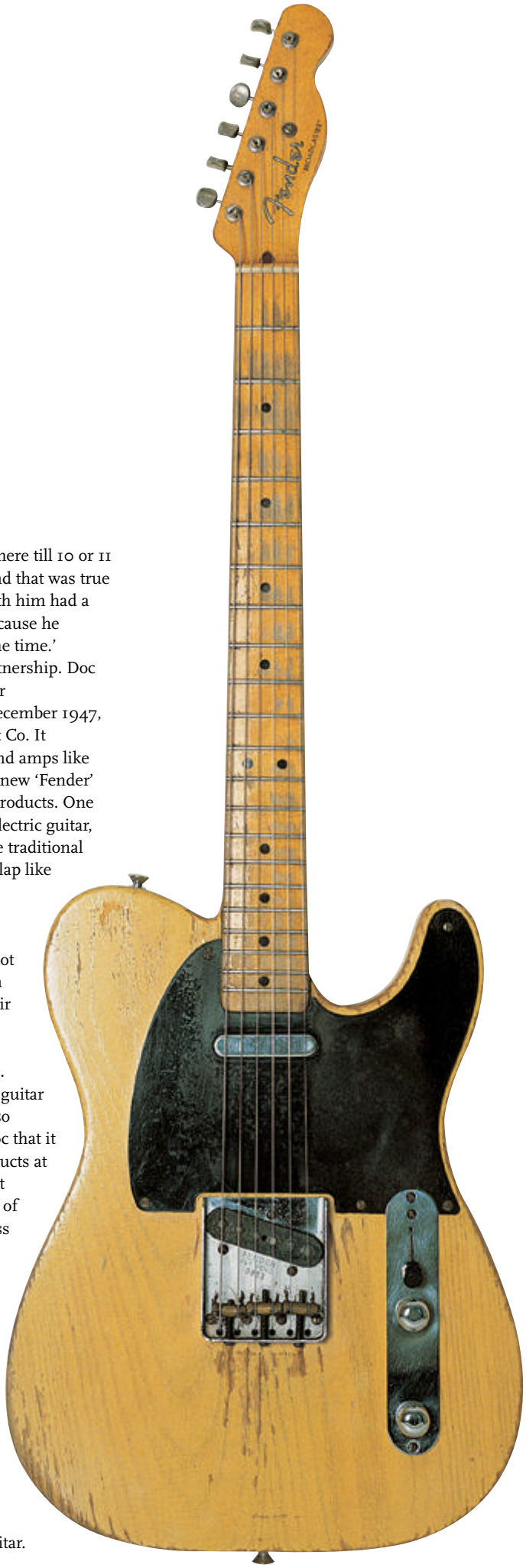
Leo's first manufacturing company had been K&F, with musician Doc Kauffman. They started making electric lap steel guitars and little amps soon after the end of the war in 1945... but the workaholic Leo drove Doc crazy. 'Doc liked to spend time with his family,' remembers Karl Olmsted, who made specialist tools for Leo from the earliest days.

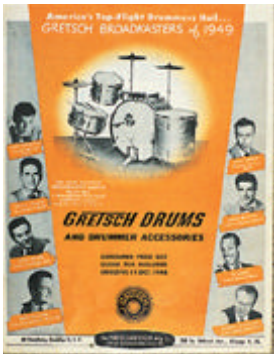
'Doc didn't like staying down there till 10 or 11 at night, seven days a week. And that was true of Leo: anyone who worked with him had a hard time not overworking, because he expected you to be on call all the time.'

That was the end of that partnership. Doc moved on. K&F became Fender Manufacturing and then, in December 1947, the Fender Electric Instrument Co. It continued to make lap steels and amps like the K&Fs, but now they bore a new 'Fender' logo. Leo also developed new products. One idea was for a new 'standard' electric guitar, played against the body like the traditional instrument rather than on the lap like his existing guitars. Leo had converted a few acoustics to electric for customers, but wanted to go further. He was not alone in this, of course, though electric guitars were still in their infancy and not yet totally understood or appreciated by makers – or, indeed, by players.

What he wanted most was a guitar that was easy to make. He'd also realised since working with Doc that it was important to aim any products at working musicians. This might seem obvious enough, but one of the reasons for Fender's success over the coming years was a no-nonsense attitude to relatively simple, unadorned guitars that served a practical purpose: they did exactly what the player wanted as soon as they were plugged into an amp.

Work began in summer 1949 on the instrument soon to be known as the Telecaster, effectively the world's first commercially marketed solidbody electric guitar.

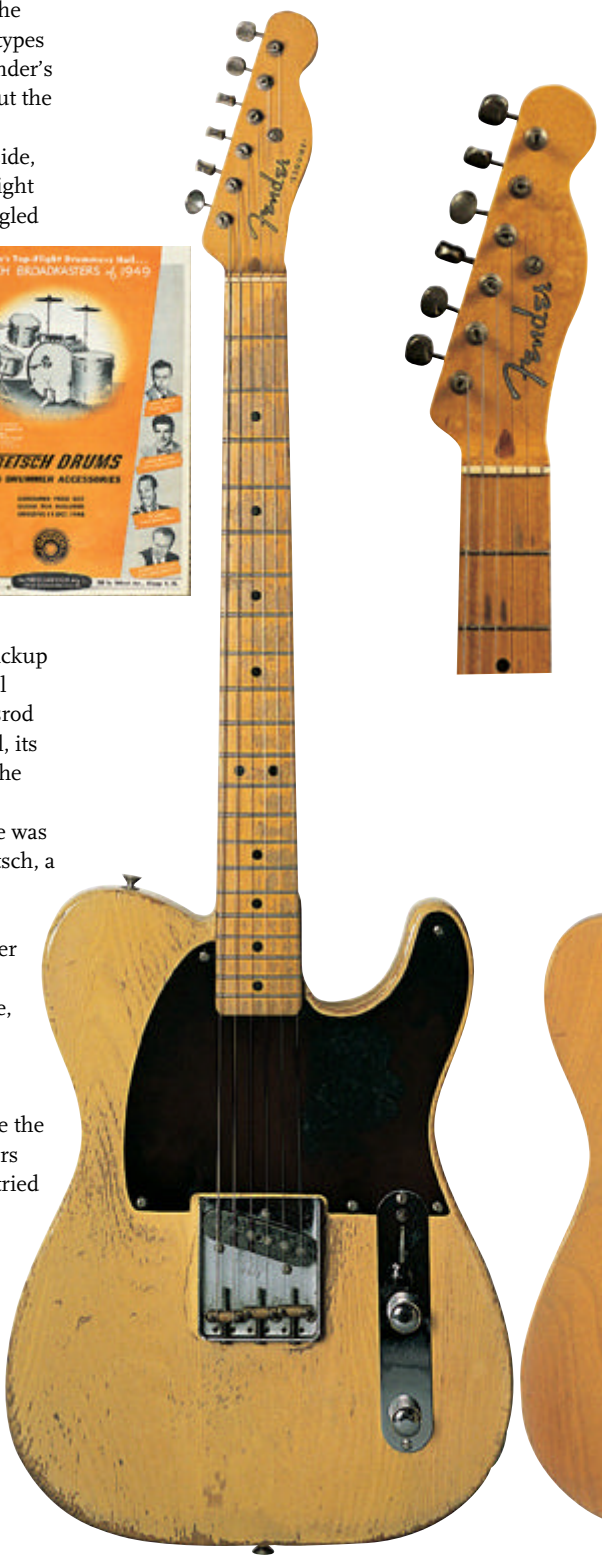


It first went into production in 1950 as the Esquire and then the Broadcaster. Prototypes borrowed their peghead design from Fender's lap steels, with three tuners each side, but the production version had a smart new headstock with all six tuners along one side, allowing strings to meet tuners in a straight line and getting rid of the traditional 'angled back' headstock.

At the factory – by 1950 a modest new building on Pomona Avenue in Fullerton alongside the company's two small original steel buildings – work proceeded on the new instrument. A very few pre-production one-pickup Esquire models without trussrods were made in April 1950, with another tiny production run of two-pickup Esquires two months later. General production of the better-known single-pickup Esquire with trussrod did not begin until January 1951. In November 1950, a trussrod had been added to the two-pickup model, its name was changed to Broadcaster, and the retail price was fixed at $169.95.

However, use of the Broadcaster name was shortlived, halted in early 1951 after Gretsch, a large New York-based instrument manufacturer, pointed out that they already used the model name Broadkaster on drums. Fender complied with Gretsch's request to stop using the name, and at first simply used up their Fender Broadcaster decals on the guitar's headstock by cutting off the Broadcaster part, leaving the Fender logo. These were the no-name guitars, known among collectors today as Nocasters, that Dale Hyatt had tried to sell in Manteca.

The new name for the Fender solidbody electric was Telecaster, coined by Don Randall (who subsequently came up with almost all of the well-known Fender model names, with the exception of the Precision Bass, which was Leo's idea). The name certainly seemed appropriate, fresh from the new age of television and telecasts, and the price was set at $189.50 – about £70 at the time, or in today's money around £925.

It had been an uphill struggle even to get this far, and quite often the business had been close to collapsing under a pile of unpaid bills and what these days would more politely be called cashflow problems. Leo's long-suffering wife, Esther, must have had nerves of steel. Fortunately, she also had a regular pay cheque from her job at the local phone company, and on more than one occasion its arrival pulled the Fender company back from the brink. However, Leo Fender was tough and absolutely determined to succeed.



The Fender solidbody guitar with its basic, single-cutaway solid slab of ash for a body and separate screwed-on maple neck was geared to mass-production. It fulfilled Leo's aim to have a guitar that was easy to build. No fancy and time-consuming carving or complex construction techniques to master: this was simplicity in a guitar. It had a slanted pickup mounted into a steel bridgeplate carrying three adjustable saddles, and the body was finished in a yellow colour known as blonde (though a few early samples were black). ↦

George Fullerton was another of the people who worked with Leo at Pomona Avenue and he has a colourful way of describing the practical bent of the new Fender solidbody. 'Think of a movie cowboy... Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, the big silver screen,' he says, 'and here they are in their fancy hats and shirts and boots and shiny gold-plated guns. But did you ever see a real, working cowboy? He's dirty and got rough boots on and heavy leather on his pants.

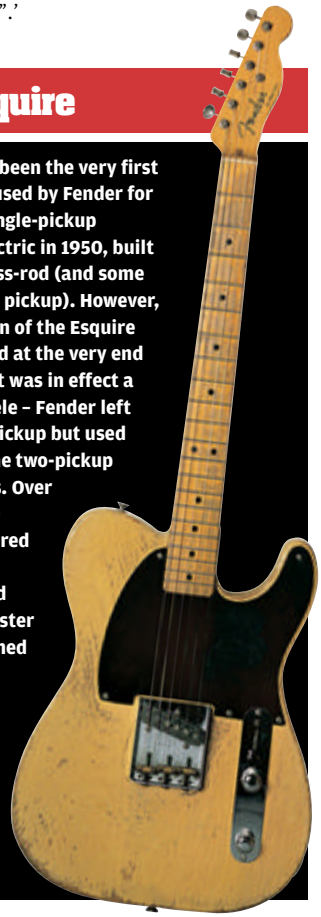
'So we kind of looked at the guitar players as being working cowboys. If you're gonna go out on stage and it's a personal appearance and you're a top-notch entertainer, well, you might want a flashy guitar and flashy clothing. But you're not a working musician, and that's not your dress code.

'See, this Telecaster was so popular – still is right today – and it's part of the dress code of the musician. Take that out of their hands and put something else there and you're taking off part of their dress, part of their appearance. It's like taking Roy Rogers and not putting the hat on him. Or putting a cap on him,' laughs Fullerton. 'And all these things happened for reasons, not just "Oh, I believe I'll do this or do that".'

Headstock Decals

The headstock logo is, like the guitar, clean and simple: Fender Telecaster. Just like that, in two lines. From the start the Fender logo is the 'spaghetti' type: so-called because of the visual impression of the thin, flowing script rather than the diet in early 1950s California. Around 1966 along came the chunkier, modern 'transition' Fender logo. The lettering itself was gold with black edges at first, but a year or so later this had shifted to black with gold edges – the 'CBS logo' – and the word 'Telecaster' became larger.

The Esquire



'Esquire' had been the very first model name used by Fender for its original single-pickup solidbody electric in 1950, built without a truss-rod (and some with a second pickup). However, the production of the Esquire proper started at the very end of 1950, and it was in effect a one-pickup Tele – Fender left off the neck pickup but used the exact same two-pickup routed bodies. Over the years, the Esquire mirrored most of the changes noted for the Telecaster – but was binned as a US-made model in 1969. For purists, it's still a model with unique appeal.

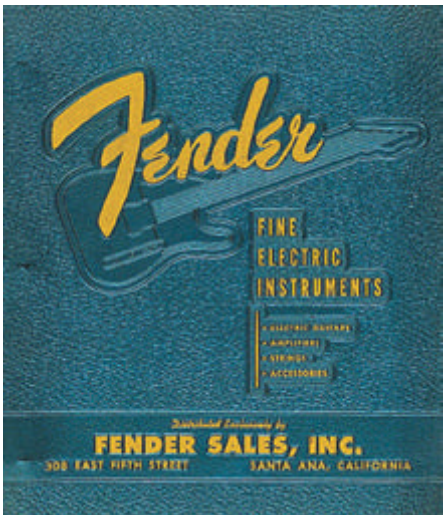
Leo was certainly single-minded. He would have been happy continuing to beaver away in his workshop, drawing pickup designs or fiddling with new machinery. The fewer people who got in the way of his inventing, the better. Leo was – according to Leo – the only one able to get such things done.

Forrest White, who would arrive a few years later as a much-needed production manager, remembered: 'Leo might come in one morning and buddy, he had something in his mind that he wanted to try. The place is burning down? Let it burn down. He wanted to do what he was on. And he wasn't one to give compliments. You could tell Leo something, you'd give him an idea – you could tell he'd be thinking, he'd be looking straight at you and thinking. Wouldn't say a thing, wouldn't agree that you'd even told him anything. Then, later on, your idea would show up on something.'

Not only did Leo have good ideas, he also happened to have people around him who made it possible for the ideas to work out, and, crucially, who ensured that his creations reached a wider audience. Don Randall headed up the Fender sales operation. He'd begun his association with Leo in the 1940s by selling K&F products through Radio-Tel, based in nearby Santa Ana. Radio-Tel, owned by Francis Hall who would go on to acquire Rickenbacker, became the exclusive distributor for K&F in 1946, and continued the deal when K&F morphed into Fender shortly afterward. By 1953 the Fender Sales company would grow out of Radio-Tel, with Leo, Don and two other partners.

Fender and Randall were two highly motivated men with very different ways of working. You may well have seen the same kind of thing in a band set-up, so you can probably guess how things developed. 'Leo sometimes was very resistant to change. You had to prove everything to him,' says Dale Hyatt. 'Nothing wrong with that, you just had to do it. Randall of course was much the same way, he was rather stubborn in his realm of thinking also. It's been said that they fought like cats and dogs, but I don't believe that's true at all. They couldn't fight – because they just didn't talk to each other, period,' Hyatt says. 'But I think one was as good as the other – and they were good for each other. I don't say that Leo Fender was the greatest thing that ever happened to Don Randall or vice versa. No, I genuinely think they were the greatest thing that happened to each other.'

Randall wanted a good product at a competitive price that would rock the market, and he often had to shake things up at the factory to get results. Leo, meanwhile, would be changing a particular wiring set-up for the seventh time. He was constantly trying to perfect this guitar or that amp. 'Leo was a strange man, in a way,' recalls Randall. 'He



had a fetish for machinery. Nothing was done economically, necessarily. If you could do it on a big machine, let's buy the big machine and use it, when you might have been able to buy the part that the machine made a great deal cheaper from a supplier.'

Karl Olmsted helped Leo come up with many of the mass-produced stamped metal parts. 'Leo would say that he'd like a certain part, and we'd take it back to our shop,' says Olmsted. 'Then I'd say "Leo, we'd have to hand-make every one, there's no way you can mass-produce it – it's going to be slow and expensive". He'd say, "Well, what can you come up with that's cheap and that'll make me happy?" Almost every job was that way.'

This made for an interesting collection of machines and tools at the Pomona Street buildings, where the new solidbody guitar came off the Fender production lines during 1950 and 1951. Forrest White remembered that the manufacturing process for electric guitars was simple and effective at Fender. 'We bought our lumber in long lengths, 18-20 feet, ash or alder, whatever we were making – we'd make the Telecasters out of ash because of their almost transparent blonde finish. You'd cut the wood and glue it together so you'd have a block of wood that was the size of a guitar body.

'Then we had what we called router plates made out of 1/4" steel in the shape of the body. You'd attach one to the bottom with a couple of screws, and you could drill on that side, where the neck plate and everything went. On the other side went the plate where the pickups and everything ran. You always had a minimum of two plates, or sometimes three, depending on how sophisticated the instrument was – some might have more cut-outs and so on. You'd screw them on, trace around them, bandsaw the body roughly to shape, then you'd take off the excess on the router and it would go for sanding.

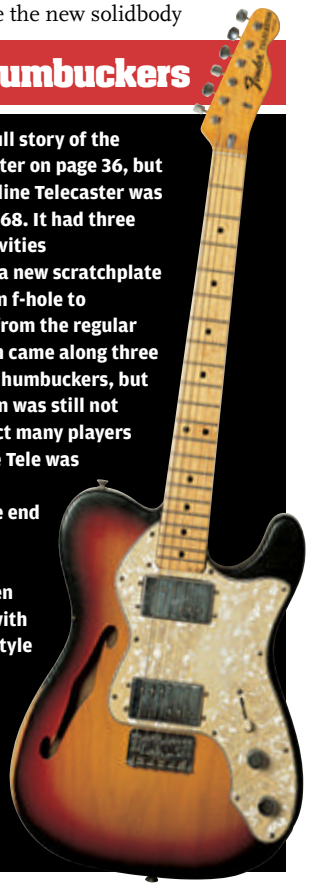
'Then the necks. For ovalling you had a couple of holders swinging back and forth, then there was a mandrel with holes cut out for the frets. Leo designed most of the tooling himself. It was very simple, but it was a case of having to walk before you ran. We didn't have any computerised routers where they can cut out half-a-dozen necks at a time. It was one at a time, everything was simple. Crude, really, but it got the job done.'

There were more crude machines throughout the three buildings on Pomona Avenue. Some were for winding pickups – Heath Robinson affairs with wheels and pulleys – while another area housed a few ad hoc finish-spray booths alongside a wall of racks for drying sprayed bodies. There were punch presses for making metal parts.

Then there were some benches for final assembly. One worker would screw on pickguards with the integral pickups and fit the bridges and tuners, while another took over and soldered the electronics. Finally, new Telecasters would be strung up and tested through a handy amp lifted from the line.

By this time there were around 35 people employed at the factory, but Leo was almost always inside and would often burn the midnight lamp. In 1953, he spent days on end in his back-room workshop. It was time for him and his trusted colleagues to dream up a new solidbody guitar, the sleek beast that became the Stratocaster. Meanwhile, the Telecaster was already proving itself a useful tool for players as diverse as Jimmy Bryant and BB King. Soon it would no longer be a matter of Fender trying to sell the guitars, but of making enough to meet the ever-growing demand. With rock'n'roll around the corner, Fender's place in music history was but a few short years away.

Air and Humbuckers



You'll find the full story of the Thinline Telecaster on page 36, but briefly, the Thinline Telecaster was introduced in 1968. It had three hollowed-out cavities in the body and a new scratchplate and single, token f-hole to differentiate it from the regular model. A version came along three years later with humbuckers, but this modification was still not enough to attract many players and the Thinline Tele was gone from the catalogue by the end of the 1970s. A slightly later humbucker-laden Tele (this time with a Stratocaster-style headstock) was the solidbody Telecaster Deluxe model, which was introduced in 1973.

Changing Times

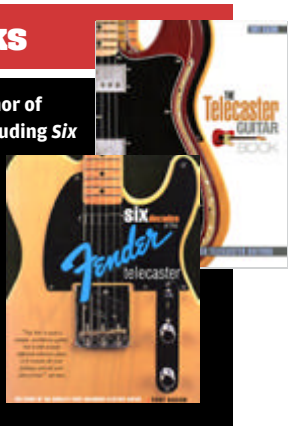
The Telecaster name was on headstocks by April 1951 and the blonde-finish model would be the target of a few changes in the rest of the decade. During 1952, the screws securing the neck/body joint and the five holding down the pickguard were changed from flat-head to cross-head (Phillips) types.

The black pickguard was changed to white in 1954, while the following year saw a slew of small adjustments as the Tele gained staggered polepieces on the bridge pickup, a different shape of selector switch, a serial number stamped on the neck-plate rather than on the bridge-plate and a less yellow-ish blonde. Custom colour finishes other than blonde, including sunburst, began to appear officially around this time, though the Tele was never as popular in colours as other Fender models. The bound sunburst Custom Telecaster appeared in 1959.

Threaded steel bridge-saddles replaced the brass originals in '58, while strings were anchored at the bridgeplate instead of passing through the body from 1958 to 1960. Then in 1959 three screws were added to the pickguard and the fretted maple neck became a maple neck topped with a slab rosewood fingerboard, changed in mid-'62 to a rosewood veneer.

Fender Books

Tony Bacon is the author of many guitar titles including *Six Decades Of The Fender Telecaster*, *50 Years Of Fender*, *The Telecaster Guitar Book* and *The Fender Book*. Published by Backbeat, they are available in all good book and music shops.



FENDER
60th Anniversary Telecaster

Fender celebrated the Telecaster's Big Sixty with the addition of an 'anniversary' neckplate, not just throughout 2011 but also for several months on each side. **Richard Purvis** checked out the birthday boy

Deceptive chaps, Telecasters. They may look like electrified planks, and in the wrong hands they can sound even worse, but no product survives for 60 years unless it's got something a bit special going on. In fact there are those of us for whom, no matter how many guitars might drift in and out of our possession down the years, life without at least one Tele is unthinkable. This isn't just down to its historical status as the first mass-produced solidbody guitar; it's more that that. As the template for almost everything that's come since, the Tele has shaped the sound of popular music to such an extent that it's basically, in guitar terms, the voice of God. No little heritage for an anniversary special to live up to.

The Telecaster was first produced in 1950, but the name didn't arrive until early the following year so this is the 60th anniversary of a christening rather than a birth. Either way, the iconic shape looks as perfect as ever. Might someone at Fender be having a little bit of a visual joke with that nitrocellulose finish, though? It's a lighter shade than most blackguards, in a way that calls to mind the locks of a faded beauty who, at 60, isn't quite as blonde as she used to be. Well, maybe... anyway the effect is somewhat milky, and it rather clashes with the maple neck, though not in a way that's going to have people fleeing the room in disgust. This is supposed to be a Thin Skin finish but it looks shinier than that label usually implies, and it reeks like an open pot of lacquer as soon as you open the case.

A commemorative neckplate provides the birthday candle

The tuners are Fender's Deluxe cast/staggered units

The Tele is basically, in guitar terms, the voice of God. No little heritage for an anniversary special to live up to

Beneath the skin is a moderately lightweight three-piece ash body, screwed to a C-shaped all-maple neck (naturally – rosewood didn't appear on Telecasters until 1958). The profile and radius are pretty much middle of the road and the medium jumbo frets are neatly dressed, their gently rolled ends allowing effortless movement up and down the fingerboard. It's as playable as you could ever want a Tele to be. ➔

FACTFILE

60TH ANNIVERSARY TELECASTER

DESCRIPTION **Solidbody electric guitar. Made in USA**
ORIGINAL PRICE **£1,414 including hard case**

BUILD **Ash body, maple neck with Micro-Tilt system, 22-fret maple fingerboard**
ELECTRICS **American Standard pickups, three-way switch, No Load tone control**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Blonde only**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 51.5mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 19.5mm
12th fret 20.5mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 52mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.5mm
12th fret bass 1.5mm
WEIGHT **3.4kg/7.48lbs**

CONTACT **Fender GB&I**
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www.fender.com

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Noiseless pickups with series/parallel switching, a compound radius fretboard and again those Strat-style individual saddles
RRP **£1690**

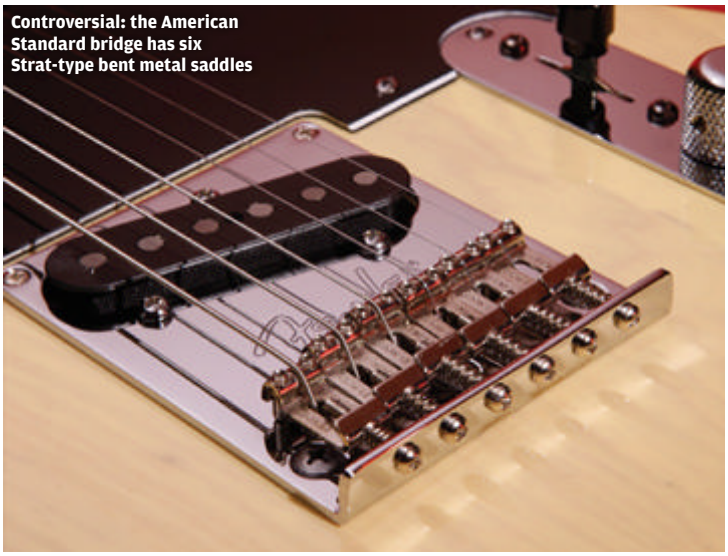
Eternal
Micawber
UK-built pre-aged tribute which really does look 60 years old, with traditional barrel-style bridge saddles and a humbucker in the neck position
RRP **£1500**

ESP
Ron Wood
Rolling Ronnie's signature model is a Japanese-made T-type with an alder body and a neck humbucker for added poke
RRP **£1949**

So far, a thoroughly respectful tribute to Leo Fender's original vision... but the first clear sign that we're not dealing with a correct replica appears on the bridge, which comes with no sides and has individual Strat-style bent steel saddles rather than the brass barrel types that tradition – and, perhaps, the pursuit of vintage twang – would normally demand. Obviously six saddles are better than three when it comes to setting intonation, but there are plenty of compensated barrels available nowadays. Then there's the Micro-Tilt neck adjustment system, which allows for fine-tuning of the body/neck angle using a small Allen key. Fine, but does it not risk compromising tone and sustain by weakening the contact area between the two halves of the guitar? We'll put both of these debateable innovations to the test soon enough.

Finally, a modern execution of an old idea is the No Load tone control with an indent at the top of the pot's travel which bypasses the circuit for a clearer signal path and therefore a touch of extra pep. Fender thought of this in 1950 – it's what the third position on the switch of the one-pickup Esquire is for.

Of course, most of this is already present on various other US-made Telecasters, and Fender has not gone overboard looking for ways to make this limited-edition model stand out. Finish aside, the only thing that marks it out as a distinctly non-standard 2011 Tele is the commemorative neck plate, an unobtrusively classy touch.


Controversial: the American Standard bridge has six Strat-type bent metal saddles

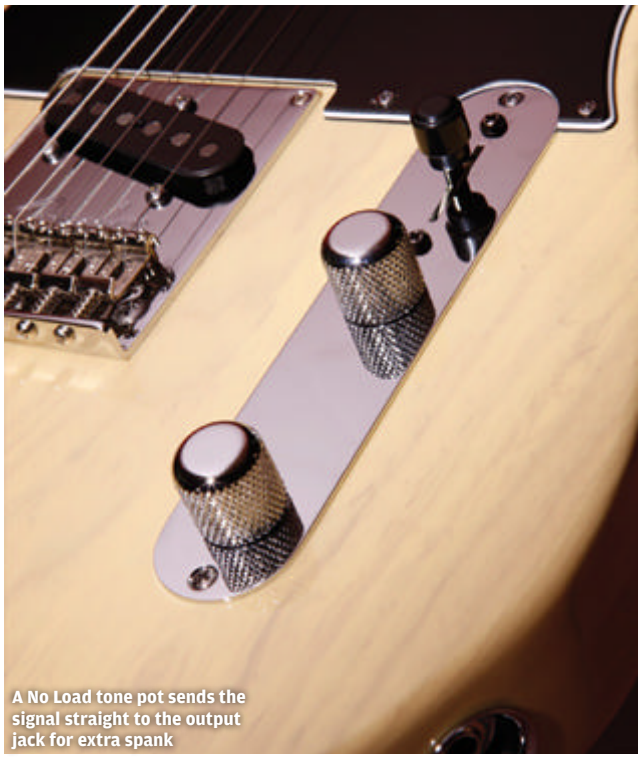
Sounds

Lawks a-lordy, who needs amplifiers? There's not much call for unplugged Telecaster sounds in the average studio, but we can't remember the last time a vibrating lump of timber gave our ears so much pleasure. Strum a simple E chord and this Tele responds with such sweet, smooth resonance that passing motorists will start sobbing over their dashboards without knowing why. All those reservations about the Micro-Tilt thing... forget 'em.

A blackface Fender amp translates this luscious voice into a beautifully warm and pure clean tone with a delicately sparkling top end. It's smooth and soulful through the neck pickup, especially on the wound strings, and even with the tone control backed off close to zero it remains articulate, never succumbing to woolliness. At the other end of the dial, that tone bypass setting offers just a tiny bit of extra top end compared to the point just before it clicks in. It's a nice feature, though a push/pull pot might have been easier to use than that soft little indent.

The middle setting brings an instant hit of classic Tele chime. It's an open and expansive sound with a respectable amount of twang – but in a controlled, hi-fi way. The bridge pickup offers more for country pickers to chew on but there's not a huge deal of upper-mid-range spank coming through. Chords, half-chords and gentle arpeggios are more rewarding than single notes; this is more of a clucker than a snarler. It does crunch up nicely, riffing away effortlessly through a cranked British amp just as you'd expect from any Tele, but it's maybe too polite to convince as a rock hero's primary weapon.

> The neck pickup is smooth and soulful, the middle position chimey and hi-fi, the bridge more of a clucker than a snarler


A No Load tone pot sends the signal straight to the output jack for extra spank

Verdict

Some of us can only afford to own one Telecaster, but you really ought to have a pair: one beauty and one beast. A beastly Tele – hot pickups, brass saddles, fag burns – will growl and bite, excelling at aggressive lead work but sounding a little harsh for the clean stuff; a beauteous Tele will strum and pluck like a dream but may have you reaching for the nearest SG come solo time. Modern US-made Teles often tend to be of the latter kind (at least those with single-coils), and the 60th Anniversary model is no exception. This is not a revolutionary guitar – it's barely any different to the current American Standard model in terms of spec – but as a celebration of the original blonde bombshell's feat of longevity, it's worthy and fitting. Happy birthday, Tele. You really will outlive us all.

FINAL SCORE

FENDER 60TH ANNIVERSARY TELECASTER	
Build Quality	**19**/20
Playability	**19**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**15**/20
Looks	**17**/20
TOTAL	**88%**

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Photo: Robert Knight/Redferns/Getty

Viva Las Vegas

James Burton is one of the great guitar stylists. **Steve Bailey** finds out about his country roots and his session career – and risking the wrath of Elvis

When in 1952 Mr and Mrs Burton splashed out several hundred dollars – a hefty sum – on a shiny new Fender Telecaster for their son, even in their wildest dreams they couldn't possibly have realised where it would lead. The 13 year-old James would pay back his parents' commendable faith and go on to make that very instrument the star of more hit records than perhaps any other guitar in history.

Many will have spotted the quiet man playing the pink paisley Tele on stage with Elvis during his famous Las Vegas '70s residency, but few seem to grasp the huge influence James Burton has wielded over the history of rock'n'roll. Burton was the go-to guitarist for virtually every top Californian record label from the '60s onwards, playing integral licks and riffs on classics by the Beach Boys, the Monkees, the Everly Brothers and many others.

Despite this, James Burton has never had a guitar lesson. Entirely self-taught, he turned pro at the tender age of just 14, encouraged by talent contest victories in his hometown of Shreveport, Louisiana. So impressive were his skills that not only did he play at parties – the usual outlet for underage prodigies at the time – but he was also granted a special permit from the local police station to play the local bars and clubs. The big gig in town was the Louisiana Hayride, broadcast live every Saturday night on KWKH radio. This was the show that launched the careers of big names like Hank Williams, and such was the buzz around Burton that he was asked to join the house band, still only 14.

'It was wonderful,' remembers James. 'It was held at the Municipal Auditorium in Shreveport... there's so much history in that building, it's incredible. I played behind George Jones, Billy Walker and Johnny Horton but I

↦

Gear

Guitars
James Burton Telecaster with three pickups, 1952 Telecaster with red refinish, 1969 Paisley Telecaster

Amps
65 Fender Twin reissue for live and Fender Deluxe for recording

Effects
Boss DD-2 digital delay and Boss chorus

James on stage with Elvis in Las Vegas. Main pic, left: the man with his resprayed '52 Tele

Photo: Steve Morely/Redferns/Getty

1956: Burton (right) becomes a pop star at 16, backing Ricky Nelson along with James Kirkland on double bass

Photo: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

never played it at the same time as Elvis. When Elvis played the Hayride I was always on tour with a country singer called Bob Luman.' Luman, incidentally, named his backing band the Shadows. Hank Marvin was a huge Burton fan... even though he had never seen a picture of his hero with his Telecaster, and thus made the famous mistake of ordering a Strat instead.

James got his first taste of session work at local label RAM Records in 1955, and when frontman Dale Hawkins came to town the pair began playing together and soon cooked up a tune that played its own part in shaping rock'n'roll.

'When I first started playing I wrote a little melody lick which became *Suzy Q*,' explains Burton. 'When I was in a blues band with Dale I wrote the music, and he wrote the lyrics.' The song eventually got to #27 in the US charts and has since been recorded by acts like the Rolling Stones, the Everly Brothers and Creedence Clearwater Revival.

After a year on the Hayride, Burton's distinctive style was fully formed. It took in many influences, including a love of the steel guitar developed from playing with Hayride steel man Sonny Trammell. 'My thing is country music, blues and rhythm and blues all mixed together. I kind of took a little bit of each one and made it one,' muses James. 'I just played a little different – in the sound, and the approach to the chord structures. It was God's given gift, he was my teacher, and I don't know where else I'd have gotten that kind of training. You create an identity, then it's easy to pick out on the records. It's like when you hear Dolly Parton sing – you know who it is.'

Burton's style involves a fingerpick slotted onto his middle finger as well as a normal flatpick. 'In the mid-'50s I developed a little style called chicken-picking – it's just my way of playing. The strings in those days were very stiff and I wanted to bend them, so I experimented with the banjo strings and it worked out perfectly. The banjo strings didn't have the little balls at the end which holds them in place, so I would have to cut the ball off a regular string and attach it to the banjo string to hold the tension.

'I used those banjo strings for the first four strings, and then I used the regular D string in place of an A string and the regular A for the E. The sound was so different... I loved it, man! It became my sound. I guess I was probably one of the first to do that... or maybe the first, I don't know.'

By 1956, Bob Luman – with Burton on guitar – had chalked up a string of hits and was invited to appear in a Hollywood movie. While in California they landed a slot on the NBC television network's *Town Hall Party* show, and things suddenly began to snowball for the 16 year-old Burton. *The Adventures Of Ozzie And Harriet* was an incredibly popular TV show which went on to become the longest-running sitcom in US history (pipped recently by *The Simpsons*).

> ***'My thing is country music, blues and rhythm and blues all mixed together'***

Ozzie and Harriet were a real-life couple – shots of the outside of the house were of the pair's real home – and the show also starred their son, Ricky Nelson. Ricky was a singer, and when he heard Burton play he knew he had to have him in his band. Burton agreed and left Shreveport for Los Angeles, spending two years at the Nelson household. Storylines were specially written to feature Ricky's band, so James was now a TV star and would be the guitar player on all of Ricky's many hits right up until 1966.

Burton was poached by Johnny Cash around 1965. This freed him up to become a top session man and a member of the legendary Wrecking Crew, a group of

virtuoso musicians who played on so many hits, it's almost impossible to count them. 'I was doing five or six sessions a day, seven days a week. It was very busy time,' marvels James. 'Each session was about three hours. Sometimes we'd play all night, and just take a nap if we had time.

'Brian Wilson – he'd want to record all day and all night, so he wouldn't want anybody to leave. We'd work the whole weekend. I did the same thing with the Monkees. We did tons of stuff. I can't remember all of them, but I know I did *I'm A Believer* and *Last Train To Clarksville* – I think me and Gerry McGee played on that.' McGee was famed for his clean guitar tones, and went on to join the Ventures.

The infamous producer Phil Spector of 'Wall Of Sound' fame was one of Burton's frequent employers, but almost every contractor in LA would call upon him for work from television and movie soundtracks to supporting artists like Nat King Cole, Merle Haggard and Buck Owens. Burton particularly enjoyed playing for Glen Campbell and Merle Haggard, as he got to showcase his love of the dobro.

'I think with the dobro as a slide instrument you can do a lot more with it than just bluegrass or folk music,' he points out. 'I've used it on a lot of pop records, I've used it on Nancy Sinatra records... all kinds of things.

'I usually use either an open G or an A tuning, though if I'm doing a lot of blues stuff I'll go to a D tuning or an E. I like the A tuning because it's a little higher-pitched and a little brighter-sounding and it gets more bite out of the instrument.'

For dobro James sticks with his fingerpick and flatpick but utilises a contoured Stevens slide with his left hand. 'It has a cut-out, so you can lay your finger right in the top of it,' he explains. 'A lot of steel guitar players use a round bar, but the Stevens is a lot easier to manoeuvre.

'I did some slide stuff on the Everly Brothers records, there's some with John Denver, and I used it on Glen Campbell's first album *Big Bluegrass Special*. The thing about being a session man is you don't know until you get there whether you'll be playing acoustic, dobro, slide or banjo – even mandolin.'

When it comes to electric, however, James always liked to stick with his number one favourite guitar. 'All you need is one guitar. I always used my '52 Telecaster unless a producer specifically requested a certain instrument.'

Burton even played his '52 for the first couple of gigs with Elvis in 1969. After declining the King's invitation to play on the *'68 Comeback Special* – he was busy playing with Frank Sinatra at the time – James was offered the chance to put together the band for Presley's Vegas residency. This time he was pleased to oblige, and stayed with the show until Elvis's death in 1977. 'We were a powerhouse on stage,' he says. 'Elvis loved it. That was his thing.'

James was given a brand new and very distinctive Telecaster for the Las Vegas shows, and despite a few initial misgivings it has become his trademark. 'A good friend of mine, Chuck Widener, who was Vice President at Fender at that time, called me and said "James, I've got a guitar here with your name on it."' Mysteriously, Widener wouldn't send the guitar – he insisted that Burton come and collect it. 'I walked in and the case was in the corner of the office, so I opened it up. I said "Oh no, no, no, that's not for me, man... way too flashy!"

'You create an identity. It's like Dolly Parton's singing - you know who it is'

James was nervous that Elvis might think he trying to upstage him with such a outrageous guitar, but was persuaded after a slap-up lunch to take it back to Vegas and give it a try. 'I finally talked myself into playing it. We did the first show and Elvis didn't say anything, but between shows this Memphis Mafia guy called Red West came down and said Elvis wanted to see me. I thought "Oh no, here we go..."

'I went to the dressing room and Elvis said "I notice you're playing a different guitar tonight," and I told him I had been a little nervous about bringing it out, with it being a bit flashy. He said "Oh, no, it looks great, it sounds great. Play it. I love it!" So that was a big relief.'

James turned 75 in August 2014, and it's now 45 years since he joined up with Elvis for that legendary run in Vegas. There have been many memorable stints with the likes of Emmylou Harris, John

The Fender James Burton Standard is a copy of his '52 Tele

Burton (left) was a veteran by the time of this session date alongside Glen Campbell circa 1968

Photo: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty

Listen up

JAMES BURTON & RALPH MOONEY
Corn Pickin' & Slick Slidin'
(1969)
Of course you can hear Burton's incredible playing on many thousands of records but this was the first under his own name, alongside pedal steel whizz Ralph Mooney

JAMES BURTON
The Guitar Sound Of...
(1971)
This project was all thanks to Elvis, who had session time booked but didn't show. The producer suggested James play some instrumentals, and this fine record was the result – though Burton always felt it was a bit rushed

BRAD PAISLEY
Play
(2008)
James is still a busy session man to this day. Burton fan Paisley invited him to play on a track called *Cluster Pluck* and the tune won a Grammy for Best Country Instrumental

And another thing...

James was inducted into to the Rock'n'roll Hall Of Fame by 'my buddy Keith Richards' in 2001

The Fender James Burton Signature Tele has three pickups, a six-saddle bridge and a five-way selector

Photo: Jesse Grant/Wireimage/Getty

Denver and even Elvis Costello in between, but these days his biggest motivating force is the James Burton Foundation. It's all about raising money to put guitars in the hands of young kids, and so far around 4500 instruments have been distributed to schools and hospitals. Since 2005 Burton has been hosting the James Burton Guitar Festival to bring in funds for the project, and the venue is the very same place where he began his career, as just a kid himself – the Shreveport Municipal Auditorium.

In 2009 an attempt was made to break the world record for the most people playing the same song on the guitar simultaneously on the guitar. The songs of choice were *Hound Dog* and *That's Alright Mama* to mark four decades since Elvis's Vegas comeback; sadly they fell a little short on numbers, but a great time was had by all as the likes of Albert Lee, Al Di Meola and Kenny Wayne Shepherd rocked the hall to its foundations. With another job well done you might think James would take it easy for while, but that session man work ethic still runs deep. He played on tracks for Jerry Lee Lewis alongside Eric Clapton and Merle Haggard, recorded on a Brad Paisley album, and went on the road with Elvis – The Concert, a strange but rather wonderful live show that reunited the Vegas band behind a state-of-the-art video projection of Presley culled from his best filmed performances.

> *'In sessions you don't know if you'll be playing acoustic, dobro, slide or banjo'*

With 60 years as a guitar pro under his belt, James Burton can still adapt to any musical situation, in the studio or on the stage. Just hand him his faithful Telecaster, and watch him go.

Photo Credit: Warren Orchard

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ELX-382-ADV-EN-JUN14

FENDER

Muddy Waters Telecaster

In the year 2001, having taunted us with a Custom Shop version, Fender reeled us in with a more affordable candy apple red Tele inspired by the Chicago blues legend. Review by **Marcus Leadley**

Back in February 2000 Fender released 100 custom shop Telecasters modelled on Muddy Waters' original '60s instrument. Calipers were taken to the original (now in the Rock'n'Roll Hall Of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio) and every dent in this historic instrument was reproduced, complete with relicing. Well, here's a Mexican-built production model based on the same specs but without all the dings and scratches.

The first impression of the Muddy Waters is of a very clean, well-built guitar. Mexican build standards have improved over the years and the sensible move here is to use American-made hardware and pickups. Sure, this has pushed the price up a little, but it's likely to be money well spent.

The Muddy's a pretty heavy Tele, though not quite the near-Les Paul deadweight of some '70s examples. The heft hints at a recent cut of ash, but certainly not swamp ash or a vintage-style alder. This could be a very bright sounding guitar: we'll see. Fender literature suggests that this is a '50s style body, and while the cut matches the decade it probably will be a little bit weighty for some tastes.

A good, thick, well-executed candy apple red metallic and a single-ply white scratchplate complete the body aesthetic: smart and to the point. However, four screws along the guard's top and bottom edges rather than three? Perhaps it's a Muddy thing. And there's no screw on the guard near the treble side of the neck. So that makes nine screws all together, rather than the eight you'd normally find on a '60s Tele. In time, you too will learn to care about details like this.

Artist name is engraved on the neck plate

Straight brass saddles and ashtray bridge

The Mexican Muddy Waters Telecaster is based on the Custom Shop specs but without all the dings and scratches

The original Muddy Waters replica was fitted with Fender factory Custom neck and the spec provided tells us that this current guitar has a '62 custom. Well, it seems a tad wide for that.

The full-width D profile topped with a rosewood fingerboard and medium rather than vintage gauge frets (why this modern touch?) makes for a chunky feel... but not everyone likes a truly skinny neck, and the finishing quality is good enough to make this an appealing player. The action as provided seems a bit high – which may indicate, at least in part, an attempt to acknowledge the instrument's use for slide playing. There's no skunk strip down the back of the neck: authentic. Clay ➔

FACTFILE

FENDER MUDDY WATERS TELECASTER

DESCRIPTION
Mexican built Telecaster inspired by Muddy Waters' original guitar
PRICE **£649**

BUILD **Solid ash body, maple neck with 21-fret rosewood fingerboard. '52 style Tele bridge with three brass saddles and strings through body anchoring, Kluson style vintage tuners**
ELECTRICS **Two vintage US Tele pickups, master tone and volume controls, three way pickup selector**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Candy Apple Red only**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 52.2mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21.2mm
12th fret 23.8mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 54.5mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 1.5mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT **3.64kg/8lb**

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Fender
Graham Coxon Tele
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Fender
Classic Player Baja '60s
Tasty '60s inspired axe with brass saddles like the Muddy Waters, but with S1 switching and a slightly flatter fingerboard
RRP **£874.80**

dot position markers: also authentic, but the orange tint to the lacquer to mimic aging is perhaps less so. The headstock is pretty much standard Tele, with vintage slotted Kluson-style tuners providing a nice touch. There's no mention of the Muddy Waters connection here, but an engraved signature is located on the neck plate.

For pickups we have a pair of Fender US Special Vintage units. The bridge pickup is a modified '62 American Vintage Tele while the neck is a chrome-covered '52 (both use alnico V magnets). The staggered polepiece bridge pickup is, of course, mounted into the bridge plate – a big factor in the Tele sound. Excellent news: the saddles are brass, reputedly the best Tele saddle material of all, with trad through-body string anchoring promising even more solid tone. Another Muddy custom feature is the Fender amp-style knobs used for the tone and master volume controls. On a guitar they seem chunky, but you can certainly read the numbers and they don't look too badly out of place. Electrically the controls are familiar Telecaster supply, complete with three-way selector.

It's practical and well-priced, with a richness and warmth you won't find in the same way elsewhere in the range

Sounds

Starting from clean it's clear that this Tele isn't quite as bright as might be expected – it's a lot mellower than the equivalent new American Series instrument, for example. The bridge pickup tone is forward and cheerful, and the firm action is great for twangs and hammer-ons. The effect is definitely bluesy rather country – which is what's been aimed for. The neck pickup is open and jazzy: a well rounded tone with very broad application. The sound of both pickups together has a broad, tumbling, jangly character – very '60s, so if you fancy edging towards a bit of psychedelia the trip will be worth it.

This guitar loves overdrive. There's always something really tight and accurate about a Tele, so for chord work you really can get in there and bash away without losing sight of the fundamental importance of the note. You can also add a swathe of distortion and effects before the instrument's character begins to drop away, too. The Muddy Tele is far more than just a blues tool, so there's no need to feel stuck in a niche if you decide that this is for you.

Still, as a blues rocker the Muddy's certainly a fine performer. The action is a good compromise for slide – though you'd certainly lower it a little if you're not into bottleneck. Open tuning to both G and D provides a platform for all manner of classic fingerpicked tunes, and plectrum lead style cuts through really nicely.

Overall, the Muddy Waters Tele seems to work best with amp overdrive pushing the performance rather than relying on pedals to drive the sound. However, moving away from classic amps to a more modern setup doesn't prove too much of a disappointment. This guitar seems quite capable of getting the best out of a mid- or even budget-priced rig. The clear top end helps, and the mid frequency response and tight string feel make for a good basic sound in most applications.

It's a little weighty, but the Muddy Tele is an artful blend of '50s, '60s and modern

Verdict

While the Muddy Waters Telecaster isn't a radical addition to the Fender catalogue of Tele options it's well worth considering if you're in the market for one of these practical, well-priced tools. There's a richness and warmth here that you won't find in quite the same way elsewhere in the range. As always the sheer playability and fun value of this basic instrument reminds us of the enduring nature of Fender's early creation. Yes, this is a good electric blues guitar but any Tele style action will sound fine, and there's lots of scope. The Muddy Water's branding is very subtle, too, so it's not as if you're going to look back in a couple of years and feel you bought into some hype. This is a worthy addition to a long and well-loved line.

FINAL SCORE

FENDER MUDDY WATERS TELECASTER	
Build Quality	**17**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**16**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Vibe	**18**/20
TOTAL	**85%**

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Far more than just a twang monster, a good Fender Telecaster can turn its tonal splendour to almost any style of music. **Dave Hunter** tests seven secondhand plank-bodied belters...

UNSUNG VINTAGE Telecasters

The Telecaster is a much loved yet strangely misunderstood guitar. It was designed for country pickers, and most players still think of it as a bright, snappy, twangy, trebly guitar. It can be exactly that – but this reputation mostly stems from thin-sounding '70s examples, ill-considered reissues (before they started getting it right again), and mediocre copies.

It surprises us that the Tele didn't become the rocker's Fender of choice even more than the Strat, for non-trem players at least. From the 1950s into the early '60s, it was a fat, gutsy, gritty, raw performer – in the bridge position, at least – and able to drive an old valve amp into distortion more easily than any Strat of its day. Just look at the specs: through-body stringing over brass (later steel) bridge saddles for bite, resonance and sustain; a fatter, hotter lead pickup than the Strat would be given four years later, with that all-important frequency-lifting brass plate stuck to the bottom.

The bridge pickup specs are revealing. The Broadcaster was born with a unit with 9200 turns of wire and a DC resistance of 7500 Ohms on average (decreasing to about 6400 in the '60s), while the Strat arrived with pickups of about 8000 turns dropping to 7600 turns, and a resistance of 6000 Ohms dropping to only 5700 or so. That's quite a gap. Really, Teles rule... good ones, at least.

Also, the Tele escaped many of the ravages of CBS – for a time. It kept its lithe headstock shape for the duration (excepting the Deluxe Tele of the '70s), while the Strat went fat in late '65. Also, it retained the 'spaghetti' logo, the most visible pre-CBS mark, until early 1966 – a year and a half after the Strat received the transition logo, and a full year after CBS's acquisition of Fender. 'Standard' Teles also escaped the Tilt neck/bullet headstock debacle.

One duff detail of the original, though, was its oddball pickup selection wiring. Rather than neck/both/bridge, it had 1) the neck pickup with preset 'bassy' sound (nearly useless), 2) neck alone with no tone control, 3) neck and bridge together but with neck blended in with the 'blend' control. In other words, no tone control. In 1953 this was altered to give 2) a neck alone with tone control, and 3) bridge alone with tone control, but the bassy sound (think 'woofy') remained – and it stayed there until until 1967.

1976 Standard Sunburst

Ah, the 1970s: bad clothes, bad hair, bad Fenders (apologies to the kids who are wearing the first two again, but no apologies to the CBS company, who built the latter). In so many little – and a few large – ways, the Fullerton folks just 'went wrong' for the whole decade. Yet it must be said that the better examples of these guitars now have a vibe and an energy that still gives them that vintage feel when played side-by-side with new instruments, and they have a look distinctly of an era. In short, they have eventually become part of music history, and some of them are even pretty playable.

This 1976 Telecaster is of the 'standard' variety (though the word wasn't in Fender catalogues yet), and it's by and large a Tele as Leo intended it. One example of how Fender had lost their way: despite having a rosewood fingerboard, the neck still has a 'skunk stripe' on the back where the trussrod was installed (after '69, 'standardisation' was biased toward maple neck production, with truss-rod installation from the back), and the tell-tale brown teardrop behind the nut encroaches upon the end of the fingerboard. Bizarre, but true.

This guitar is mostly original, although the string trees (two by this time) are missing, the bridge pickup has been changed for a later Fender unit, and an unspecified replacement lurks in the neck position. It's a heavy old wedge, but it's quite playable when you get into the groove, and it sounds good, too – not as overly spiky and bright as many '70s models can tend to be in the bridge position.

VALUE £1700

PROS'N'CONS

Pros:
It's a good-playing and sounding USA Tele of 27 years' vintage, in good condition with a very tidy sunburst finish. Plenty of classic twang, jangle and chicken-pickin' committed on much the same guitar, 'classic' or not

Cons:
Heavy, finished in polyester, and tainted by much CBS meddling with the godlike Tele template

Thanks to:
Charlie Chandler Guitar Experience, www.guitarexperience.co.uk

1973 Standard Blonde

To some people two and a half grand will sound like a heck of a lot of money for a '70s Tele, but examples from early in the decade are generally much more desirable than slightly later models since they feel that much closer to the form. This really is the archetypal Telecaster of its day: blonde finish, maple neck, and built to be played.

This one's a medium-heavy weight, but not a lead brick like many of its brethren. Also, its neck is a luscious, cosy, rounded 'C' with pleasingly rounded shoulders rather than the near-formless baseball bat of some later '70s models. If the shape is to your taste, it's one you can play all day.

Example number two of how Fender lost their way in the '70s: look closely at the shape of the bass-side upper bout on this guitar compared to the '67 or Custom Shop models. Yes, Fender literally forgot how to carve a Telecaster body. When CBS bought new numerically-controlled routers in the early '70s to replace the old pin routers, the large bits and improper programming meant they were incapable of carving the deep downward curve of this bout where it meets the neck. Consequently, the bout's curve is flatter, less comely, and joins the neck at the 16th fret rather than the 17th, lacking the earlier models' 'notch' in the neck pocket. They didn't get it right again until 1981. Just another small reason so many people were hugely impressed with the Japanese copies that followed in the early 1980s, like Tokais and the 'JV' series Fenders and Squiers... at least they usually got the shape right.

VALUE £2500

PROS'N'CONS

Pros:
A good Tele with a rather thick and very '70s blonde finish (and who needs any other colour, frankly). A comfy, welcoming player that sounds very good

Cons:
All the '70s CBS drawbacks, really: heavy, wrong body shape, weaker pickups

Thanks to:
Vintage & Rare Guitars

1978 Telecaster Custom

With so many stadium rockers going Les Paul crazy in the early '70s, Fender decided to fight back. The revamped, humbucker-equipped Thinline of 1971, the Telecaster Custom of '72 and the Telecaster Deluxe of early '73 were their weaponry (see *Tele Imposters* at the end of this article for more details). These were a far cry from Gibson's Les Paul or even SG, of course, and a long way from traditional Teles too, so they largely fell between the cracks both in terms of design and sales. They can be powerful instruments when applied to the right style of music, though – and this is a tidy later example.

The Tele Custom retains the traditional single coil bridge pickup (this one's spanky, clacky and a little over-bright, like so many from the '70s), and much of the original bridge design, so it's at least half a true Telecaster. It was given the new, fully intonatable six-saddle bridge, however, so purists will no doubt sniff and turn away. Switch to the humbucker and it's fat and smooth, but with plenty of bite. It's a versatile pairing that can take you from spanky Nashville licks to juicy blues solos at the flick of the toggle switch.

The white pearloid scratchplate here is a later addition but it looks rather good, and luckily the owner has had the foresight to pop the original three-ply black plate back in the case. Like each of our previous contestants this is a heavy old slab of ash, and it sports that rather indifferent, heavy-shouldered 'D' neck profile – with the infamous Tilt neck and 'bullet' truss rod to boot.

VALUE £1900

PROS'N'CONS

Pros:
This one will do some rockin' for you, and comes with a versatile pickup combination. Totally funky retro look

Cons:
Some would say this guitar is the worst of both worlds: far from a Les Paul and a long way from a traditional Tele, too... and it's yet another back-breaker

Thanks to:
Charlie Chandler Guitar Experience, www.guitarexperience.co.uk

2000 Custom Shop '51 Nocaster

By a fluke of copyright, the most classic and perhaps most desirable Tele is, technically speaking, not a Tele at all. It's that nameless beast we call the 'Nocaster' – a nickname for Teles made during the time in 1951 that Fender was forced to remove the 'Broadcaster' name from the headstock to avoid legal wrangles with Gretsch over their copyrighted 'Broadkaster' drum kits (now Fender has a good deal of control over Gretsch, so ha ha.) Until the 'Telecaster' brainstorm hit someone at Fender later that year, the model remained nameless.

Despite the enigmatic headstock, this 15-year old 'NOS' version of the Custom Shop 'Time Capsule' series '51 Nocaster is everything that many players could ever want in a Telecaster, and carries all the archetypal early Broadcaster/ Telecaster features: brass saddles, a powerful flat-pole lead pickup, a black pickguard, a butterscotch-blonde nitrocellulose finish over swamp ash body, fat maple neck... the lot.

While this is a great guitar and it would certainly be many players' dream Tele, it's also not for the faint-hearted, or for pickers more familiar with latter-day variations. When we say this guitar's neck is fat, we mean it's a real club – but with a more hand-friendly profile than many indifferent '70s club necks. It's carved out of a single piece of gorgeous maple with three-dimensional birdseye figuring, too. Also, this one carries the original-spec wiring as detailed in the introduction. For many players this means one useless sound, and another that's less than ideal... but you can change that.

VALUE £1700

PROS'N'CONS

Pros:
The Telecaster as Leo Fender originally intended it, and a great example of work from the ever-impressive Fender Custom Shop

Cons:
Rather too primitive for some tastes: not everyone will be able to get their hands round this clubby neck, and the vintage-spec wiring yields some odd tonal selections

Thanks to:
Charlie Chandler Guitar Experience, www.guitarexperience.co.uk

1978 Custom Prototype

Exactly that: this seems to be an apparently one-off prototype for a version of the Custom Tele that never reached full production... and it's in impressive, 100 per cent original condition. The Custom Telecaster and Esquire – meaning white-bound sunburst body and three-ply pickguard, rather than the humbuckered Telecaster Custom of the '70s (note name order) – have been with us since 1959. This one is extra special, however, because it carries triple edge binding on front and back rather than the single white plastic ply usually used, more like a Les Paul, a very unusual bound maple neck, and brass hardware from the factory. No, that's not some strange '70s aftermarket bridge you're looking at; Fender made it that way, complete with fat, individually adjustable brass barrel saddles. Fender has reintroduced an 'ashtray cover' shaped bridgeplate on some Custom Shop models.

Even from the photo you can appreciate the extra care taken with the rich, three-tone sunburst finish over the highly figured three-piece ash body, as compared to the '76 Tele above. All in all, it's a stunner, and a rare and collectable piece despite its late-CBS origins. Of course it's another deadweight Tele, but you could get used to it. The bridge pickup is a typical bright, slicing '70s affair, but its harshness is rounded off somewhat by the big brass saddles. In the neck position it's warmer, more refined, and more restrained. This neck has a better feel in the hand than many contemporary examples; it's a good player, and a great blues Tele.

VALUE £3850

PROS'N'CONS

Pros:
A rare prototype for which an otherwise flagging Fender really pushed the boat out, custom-dress-wise. Not a bad player, either

Cons:
Combination of high rarity, hence big price, but a so-so '70s overall spec means it's for the collectors, really. Weight is again an issue; the lead pickup leans toward thin-bright territory, and not everyone can live with this much brass... factory installed or otherwise

Thanks to:
New Kings Road Vintage Guitar Emporium
www.newkingsroad guitars.co.uk

2001 Custom Shop Custom Telecaster

This is a more standard early-'60s dress Custom Telecaster than the brass-swathed oddball above, but it carries the full top-of-the-line efforts of the Custom Shop (are we sick of the word 'custom' yet?). The metallic blue finish appears to be a contemporary and true 'custom color' colour – brighter and a little smokier than Lake Placid blue and maybe actually a blue ice metallic, though original guitars of that colour have almost always faded or greened-off over the years, so comparisons are tricky. Never mind: it's lovely.

We could be wrong, but this doesn't appear to be a piece from the Time Capsule range, but rather a Custom Shop order done in a classic style, and possibly a limited-run or even a one-off guitar. Either way, it's beautiful work. The details: grooved steel saddles (circa 1954-58 and post '68), white-bound alder body, flat-topped knobs, three-ply white plastic pickguard, no-line Kluson repro tuners, a slab rosewood fingerboard on a heavily birdseyed maple neck, and a spaghetti logo.

It's a gem plugged in, too. The bridge pickup is instantly more vintage-voiced than any of the '70s Teles sampled here – cutting and gnarly with plenty of bite and twang – while the neck pickup is characteristically warmer and rounder, but still fairly bright. The neck finish and the overall set-up are close to immaculate, and the guitar plays like a dream. On evidence of this example alone, there's a good reason so many players are still ordering CS instruments, despite all the boutique builders out there.

VALUE £2000

PROS'N'CONS

Pros:
A very well-made take on a classic, blending contemporary craftsmanship with vintage design ethos. Plays and sounds great

Cons:
That's a fair amount of wedge for a simple, non-vintage electric guitar...

Thanks to:
New Kings Road Vintage Guitar Emporium
www.newkingsroad guitars.co.uk

1967 Vintage 'Refin'

Finally, here's a dip into what might be called 'affordable vintage' waters: an otherwise all-there 1967 Telecaster professionally refinished in Lake Placid blue and gently 'relic'ed'. The change of paint knocks a lot of cash off the price, but other than that – as far as we can tell – it's entirely original, aside from a misplaced switch tip. Must be around here somewhere...

Three grand plus for a CBS Fender? We're afraid that's the going rate even for refinished late-'60s Teles these days, and it's not hard to spend even more than that, but this is a sweet example of the breed. Also, the Telecaster of this year is a more 'pre-CBS' CBS Fender, if you will, as discussed in the intro. I've seen good-condition refinished rosewood fingerboard pre-CBS Teles from the early '60s sell at this price or only little more, but to be fair, this guitar is probably equal to any of them and superior to many, despite being two years past that hallowed cut-off date.

The neck has a rich, deep-brown rosewood veneer fingerboard and a nice, chunky feel in the hand – more a 'D' with some shoulder to it than the flat 'C' of the early '60s. It has pearl dots rather than clay ones, of course, and it carries 'F'-branded tuners rather than the earlier Klusons. This guitar is very light – I mean featherweight light – and a real pleasure to hoist after so many of the hernia cases in this round-up. The lead pickup is spranky, gritty and sweet, the neck pickup is round and flutey, and together they're funky and open sounding. This is one lovely Telecaster... fat black logo or not.

VALUE £3500

PROS'N'CONS

Pros:
A sweet, light vintage Tele with tons of vibe and great tone in all positions. Fantastic playing neck

Cons:
Refins are always a little heartbreaking (even very good ones like this), and at this price many buyers would think hard about spending double the money for an all-original or even a pre-CBS example

Thanks to:
Charlie Chandler Guitar Experience, www.guitarexperience.co.uk

Tele IMPOSTERS

When is a Telecaster not a Telecaster? When it has humbucking pickups, many would argue, or when it lacks the tone-essential through-body stringing, the semi-suspended bridgeplate, and three-piece saddles. But that's not to say that an 'alternative' design Telecaster can't be a great guitar in its own right – and if you need just a little more beef, you might try one of these.

Fender's familiar humbucker is distinctive for its 'screw' polepieces offset in rows of three at the treble and bass sides. It was designed by former Gibson engineer Seth Lover – the very same man who designed the most famous humbucker of all time: Gibson's 'PAF' unit of the late '50s (he also drew up the P90-like 'Alnico' single coil pickup). Fender's humbucker sounds fat and fairly hot, but it exhibits more high frequency content than most Gibson units. From the early '70s the pickup appeared on three variations of the Telecaster: one on a Custom (near right), two on a Deluxe (far right), and two on a Thinline II, the next generation of the routed f-hole guitar (not shown). Once fairly unfashionable, these guitars have turned the desirability corner.

www.laney.co.uk
From The Black Country, United Kingdom

TOOLBOX

- Screwdrivers
- Soldering iron
- Drill, various sized bits, homemade drill guide
- Step cutter
- Sandpaper
- Matchsticks, glue, masking tape, Stanley blade

Contacts

Mansons (bridge)
www.mansons.co.uk
Allparts (guard, switch, ferrules)
www.allparts.uk.com

Squier Tele Upgrades

Lyndon Jones has a nice Squier partscaster for stage use, but it could do with one or two little tweaks to make it perfect. **Huw Price** takes on the project and shows us how it's done

This month we're detailing some practical upgrades for a gigging guitar. This 'bitsa' was assembled from various Squier parts. The body is fairly lightweight and the slim neck has a maple fingerboard, diecast tuners and medium jumbo frets. It sounds pretty lively unplugged, and the stock pickups are decent enough. So what's the problem?

Owner Lyndon Williams gigs this guitar regularly and really enjoys the feel and looks, but he finds the tone too thin and underpowered for the classic rock repertoire of his band, Highway Jones. So he requested through-body stringing to aim for more sustain, a beefier bridge pickup, and finally a pearl pickguard to perk up the looks.

Lyndon likes the Seymour Duncan JB Jr SJBJ-1 humbucker on his backup Stratocaster and he wanted something similar for his main squeeze. The closest Tele equivalent we could find in the Seymour Duncan catalogue was the Little '59, so after checking out some online demos we decided to fit one. Lyndon also asked for a coil tap so he'd have the option to switch to single coil tones whenever he needed to.

1 SOURCING THE PARTS

For this project we decided wherever possible to go for secondhand parts to keep the costs down. Lyndon's main priority was replacing the stock top-loader bridge with one that allowed for through-body stringing. In an ideal world we might have gone for a traditional Tele bridge with compensated brass saddles; these are easy to source, but there's a complicating factor: Lyndon has a preference for modern, open-sided Tele bridges. Some specialist guitar hardware manufacturers do supply open-sided bridges with three brass saddles, but they tend to be fairly expensive.

We decided to compromise and found an unused Squier bridge with through-body holes at Manson Guitar Shop in Exeter (www.mansons.co.uk). We hoped it would be a suitable replacement – and it also had the extra screw holes at the front of the bridgeplate, just like the one we were replacing. Research had also indicated that while Little '59 pickups are too large for Mexican Tele bridges, they will fit into Squier bridges without much difficulty.

After trying the push/push switch on one of our guitars, Lyndon decided he'd prefer one to a push/pull. If you like to make quick changes while you're playing, push/push switches are ideal because you only need to tap the top of the control knob, and you're far less likely to drop your plectrum. We bought this item, along with the three-ply pearl pickguard and string ferrules, from Allparts UK (www.allparts.uk.com).

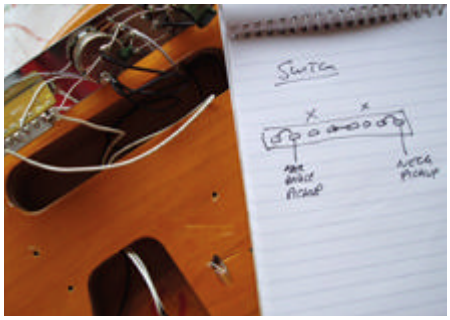
The pickup was the final piece of the jigsaw, and Lyndon located a secondhand example on eBay. Before he bought it we checked that there was plenty of cable length to work with, because some installers cut them quite short.

We found three vital components at Allparts

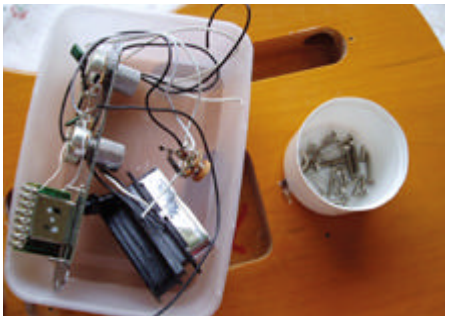
2 STRIP DOWN

The first job was to strip everything down. We removed the strings and separated the neck from the body. The pickguard was taken off then we stripped out all the electrics after making a wiring diagram (see right). Before removing the bridge we used masking tape to mark out the original location, and then we removed the screws and lifted off the bridge.

When you're stripping a guitar it's advisable to keep all the parts well organised. Chinese takeaway cartons are ideal for the hardware, and we placed all the screws, springs and nuts into a smaller receptacle. If you do lose a screw or spring, nine times out of 10 it will be stuck to one of the pickups – so it's a good idea to separate the pickups for storage.

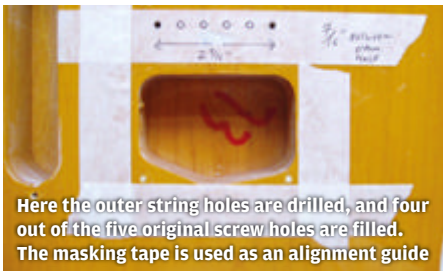


Above: when you strip out the electronics from a guitar, it's advisable to make notes and diagrams before you start. It really helps when you're trying to put things back together



It's surprising just how many little parts are used to put a guitar together. Get organised with one receptacle for the main hardware components and another for all the screws, springs and nuts

3 NEW BRIDGE LOCATION



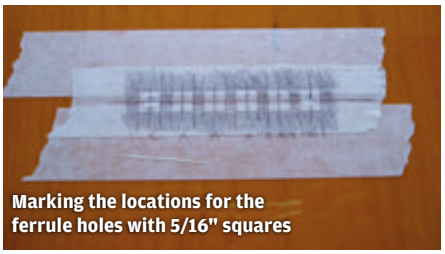
Here the outer string holes are drilled, and four out of the five original screw holes are filled. The masking tape is used as an alignment guide

Fitting a new bridge can bring up all kinds of problems. Inevitably, the screw holes didn't quite line up, and the new bridge was slightly shorter in length. However, we were able to re-use the centre screw hole at the back of our bridge, so that provided a useful location point.

Matchsticks are ideal for plugging screw holes. We simply coated the ends of some matches with Titebond Original wood glue, gently tapped then into the screw holes and left them overnight. The following morning we snapped off the excess and shaved the top smooth with a Stanley knife blade.

A strip of masking tape was placed under the area of the string holes and the new bridge was held in place with that single screw at the back. Since the original screw holes were only a couple of millimetres out, it was easy to align the new bridge by eye and mark the position of the string holes with a fine-tipped pen.

4 FITTING THE STRING FERRULES



Marking the locations for the ferrule holes with 5/16" squares

A 5/16" hole in a piece of 18mm plywood is carefully aligned over the ferrule location to guide the drill bit

The plywood is clamped in position with our drill mounted in a special drill guide that positions the drill dead square

All the ferrule holes ended up in exactly the right places and the fit was so snug we didn't need any glue to hold them in place

This was by far the trickiest part of our project. The difficulty with ferrules is getting them lined up straight with perfectly even spacing between them. You might think that using a quality press drill would be a guarantee of success, but drill bits always have a tendency to wander. Misaligned ferrule holes can be a sure-fire sign of an ill-prepared home build project, but it can happen to the big boys too. Check out some photographs of really early Telecasters... even Fender themselves struggled with it!

Simply drilling through the body from the marks we'd made on the top wasn't an option because the holes on the back would all end up slightly skewed. Instead, we drilled the two outside string holes using a backing board of scrap wood to prevent chip-out when the drill bit cut through the rear of the body.

We used a 3mm drill bit and set the drill to its slowest setting to try to minimise wander. Without having access to a decent drill press, we used a drill guide that we bought from Axminster Tools. The drill clamps into the guide and it is securely held square to any drilling job. We didn't press the drill too hard, and when we flipped the body over it turned out that the distance between the two holes was only slightly narrower than the 2 3/16" we needed.

A strip of masking tape was placed over the holes and a guide line drawn straight along the centre line. The centre point for each ferrule was then marked with 7/16" between each centre point. A 5/16" drill bit was required to make the ferrule holes, so we marked out a 5/16" square around each centre point and shaded the surrounding areas to make the drilling target easy to spot (see picture top left).

Rather than risk using a drill press, we used the drill guide to make a 5/16" hole in a piece of 18mm plywood (second picture, left). This guide hole was very carefully aligned over each square, then clamped in position. A torch was needed to shine into the guide hole and alignment was re-checked after clamping (third picture, left). With the 5/16" drill bit in the drill guide we proceeded to drill each ferrule hole. It wasn't a fast process but we ended up with six perfectly-aligned holes. Take care when removing the masking tape, because a brittle poly finish will flake off quite easily.

The ferrule holes were much wider than the string holes, so that allowed for some margin of error. Using the guide, we drilled the four remaining holes with the drill bit marked for a depth slightly less than the thickness of the body. Each hole came through almost dead centre, and we pushed the ferrules into position. Ferrules with a lip are suitable because any untidiness around the edges of the holes will be concealed.

The finish around the holes did get slightly damaged...

...but the 'lip' around each ferrule hides any little chips in the finish

5 INSTALLING THE PICKUPS

Because the wire for both pickups pass through the bridge pickup rout, the pickups needed to be re-installed before we fitted the bridge. While you're at it, don't forget to re-install the ground wire, and check that you've got electrical continuity before you invest time in putting the strings back on. We screwed the neck pickup in position and the attached the back pickup to the new bridge, then the pickup wires were fed through to the control cavity.

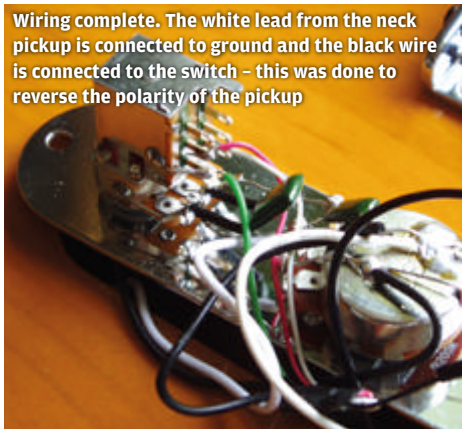
6 FITTING THE BRIDGE

We had left the masking tape on the top of the guitar to indicate the location of the original bridge. The new bridge was fixed on with the centre screw at the back and aligned by eye, using the original screw holes and the masking tape as a visual guide. We drilled pilot holes and installed the four corner screws in their new locations.

Measuring the distance from the back of the original bridge to the take-off point of each saddle allowed us to roughly position the new saddles, and after that it was finally time to re-attach the neck and string her up.

Above: new bridge and pickup installed

7 FITTING THE PUSH/PUSH SWITCH



Wiring complete. The white lead from the neck pickup is connected to ground and the black wire is connected to the switch – this was done to reverse the polarity of the pickup

Seymour Duncan deserve a lot of credit for providing so much technical information on their products. We simply located the pickup on the website, clicked on the link for wiring instructions, and found all the information we needed to hook up a coil-tap switch.

The diameter of the shafts of the original pots turned out to be slightly narrower than the shaft of the push/push switch pot, so we widened the tone control hole with a step cutter and hooked everything up according to the diagram.

As it turned out everything worked first time but the two pickups were out of phase, resulting in a thin and weak tone in the middle position. The answer is just to swap over the black and white wires of the neck pickup. Having done that, we screwed the control plate into position.

8 THE PICKGUARD

Telecaster pickguards usually come with either five ('50s style) or eight ('60s and onwards) screw holes, so make sure you order the correct one for your guitar. Our replacement guard needed a little bit of filing and sanding to get it to fit around the end of the neck, but all of the screws more or less lined up. They were certainly close enough that we didn't need to fill and drill new ones.

9 SETTING UP AND FINAL ADJUSTMENTS

Countless books have been written about setting up guitars, but here's a very rough guide to get you up and running. Generally, we set up guitars with a small amount of neck relief. Tune all the strings to concert pitch, then try holding down the low E string at the first fret with your left hand and hold the same string down with the thumb of your right hand somewhere around the 16th fret. You should see a very small gap between the string and the seventh fret. If there's no gap, the truss rod may need to be turned anticlockwise. If the gap seems excessive, say 2mm or more, then try turning the trussrod clockwise by about a quarter turn until the gap reduces. Set the height of the top E string so you can bend it two or three semitones without string buzz or choke out. Then set the height of the low E string so that it sounds clean and buzz-free when you play it open and doesn't sound hollow or out of tune as you play further up the neck.

Go online and Google radius gauges for guitar – they're easy to find – and then print them off to figure out the radius of the fingerboard on your guitar. This one is 9.5" but vintage-style Fenders tend to have a 7.25" radius. Carefully cut out the radius gauge and use the one that's closest to the radius of your guitar's board to set the height of the B, G, D and A strings. Rest the outside edges of the gauge on the E strings and then raise the height of the other strings until they just touch the edge of the gauge. With the saddle heights set, adjust the intonation for each string and your guitar should play pretty well.

Verdict

The purpose of the project was to turn this Squier Telecaster into a beefier and more powerful rock guitar without compromising its versatility or tonal range. The most significant change came from swapping out the bridge pickup, and we found that the Seymour Duncan Little '59 is a great-sounding unit that delivers a full-bodied rock tone while maintaining a crisp attack and excellent definition.

Most of the hard work went into the conversion to through-body stringing. Although this had a less profound effect than changing the pickup, we did notice a smoother and more full-bodied tone with some extra sustain. The low end also seemed to gain power, so it was really about more body and less twang. Hardcore Telecaster pickers may feel differently, but in the context of Lyndon's guitar this was exactly the result we wanted.

Here's the finished guitar, looking good and sounding good too

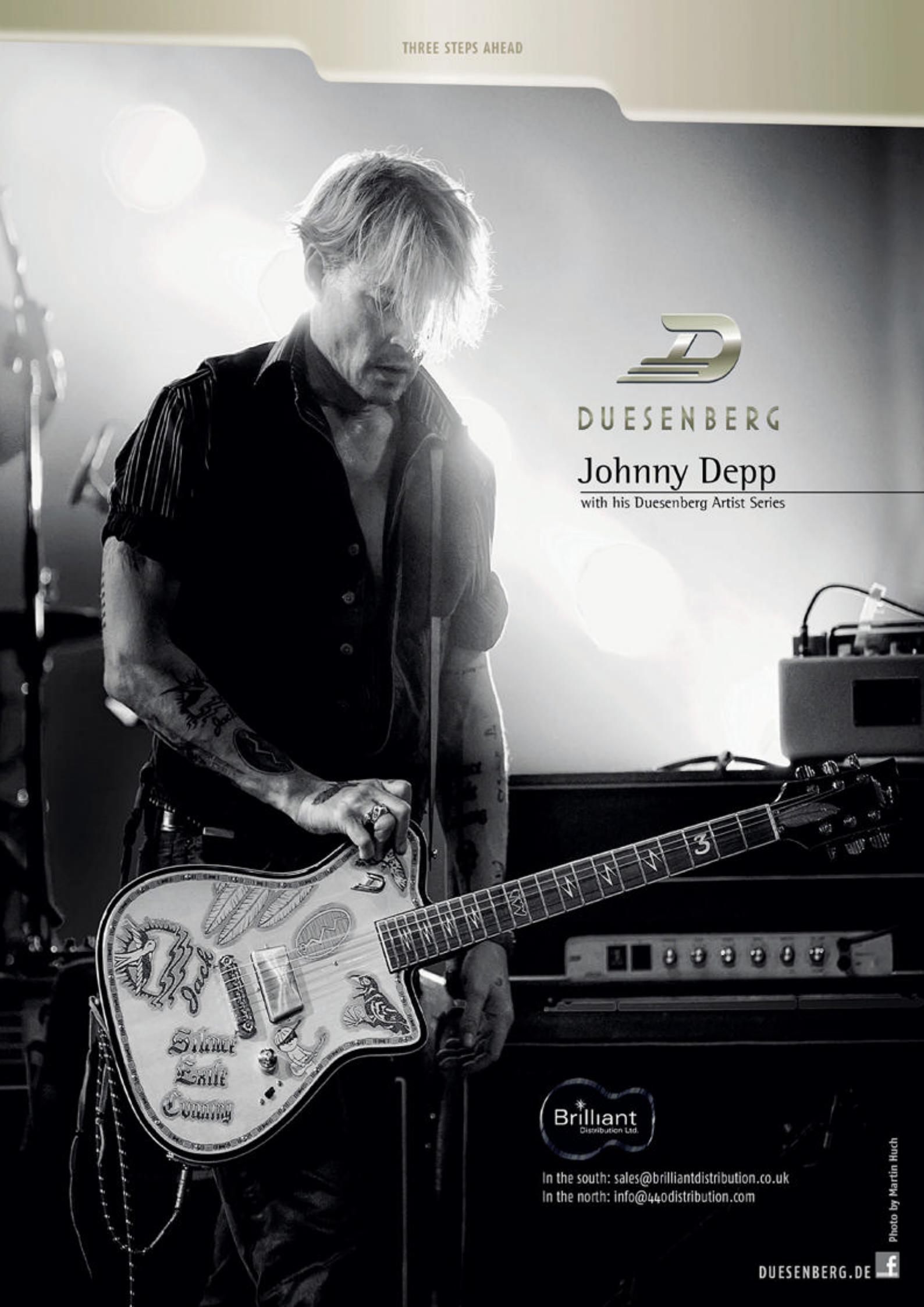

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Photo by Martin Huch
DUESENBERG.DE

THE f FACTOR

Once, Telecaster Thinlines hung forgotten on music store walls. Now they're the darlings of the indie set and roots-rock fans alike. **Rick Batey** traces the story of Fender's lightweight classic

Of all the guitars designed and produced by Fender, the Telecaster Thinline is one of the less likely success stories. Not so long ago the Thinline was seen as a pointless, toneless aberration. We can recall chatting about them to a well-known player of the 1980s, who scratched his chin and said 'Thinlines? Pffff. They aren't really good for anything much. Well,' he added, changing his mind, 'maybe reggae.'

To be fair, many others thought the same. What's more, not long ago you'd be hard-pushed to name many famous guitarists who saw any value in having some oxygen molecules floating around inside Fender's original solidbody electric guitar. True, country crooner Conway Twitty used one. Soul great Curtis Mayfield, normally associated with a black Strat, played a Thinline for a while – he was pictured with one on the sleeve of his *Curtis/Live* album. In the '70s, Danny Kortchmar, guitarist with Carole King, James Taylor and Jackson Browne, was a high-profile fan. Sly Stone can be seen on YouTube wreaking Thinline havoc on a blazing version of *Thank You (Falettinme Be Mice Elf Agin)*. Any more candidates for the Thinline Hall Of Fame? A few – but it's not easy.

The Thinline has a new image: rootsy hipness with alternative credibility

Yet suddenly, it seems, the Thinline has turned itself around. Somehow, it's gained a new and attractive image: rootsy country hipness combined with deep alternative credibility.

Credit, no doubt, must go partly to Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead, who used one as far back as the mid-'90s. Since then, an insanely wide range of players of the independent genre have given a home for this supposed ugly duckling. Heck, even the once-derided double-humbucker version is now almost the default alt.rock guitar of choice: see Coldplay's Jon Buckland, J Spaceman of Spiritualized, Hope Of The States' Ant Theaker, James Dean Bradfield of the Manics, Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth, O.A.R's Richard On, and Scott Johnson of the Gin Blossoms.

It isn't just an alt-rock guitar, either. Thinline bluesers include Jonny Lang, Louisiana's Tab Benoit and the UK's Joanne Shaw Taylor. Then there's jazz iconoclast Bill Frisell, top-selling country star Dierks Bentley, songwriter and one-time Commitment Glen Hansard, ex-Replacements leader Paul Westerberg, Melissa Etheridge, Nick Cave, and Clash man Mick Jones, known to strut a Thinline with Gorillaz... and a fair percentage of current bands playing at any festival this summer that you care to name. ↦

FENDER

'69 Tele Thinline: Andy Hackett, www.angelmusicguitars.com

Save for the scratchplate all this Thinline's hardware is totally stock 1969 Tele

The Mk I Thinline

Launched in late 1968 and priced at $319.50, the MkI carried no special 'Thinline' designation on the headstock. It was offered in natural ash or natural mahogany: the mahogany body is rarer and more desirable today. Equally, it came with a maple or rosewood fingerboard, and though some Thinlines just made it out of the factory before all Fender neck and body finishes changed from nitro to 'thickskin' poly, most are poly, and so the nicer-feeling rosewood necks fetch the bigger money; mahogany/rosewood is also said to be the darkest and sweetest-sounding combination. After about a year, Fender dropped the 'maple cap' fingerboards and returned to the old method with a truss rod inserted from the rear of the neck and a 'skunk stripe' filling the resulting slot.

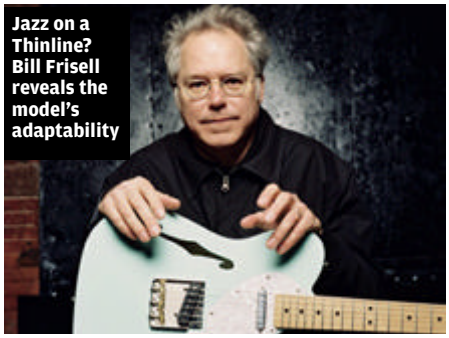
In 1969 Fender added a sunburst option, and custom colours have been seen (we once spotted an all-original lilac Thinline at a vintage show around 1990 for a then-whopping $5000... there were no takers). Alas, the single-coil Thinline lasted only three years.

The Thinline's fortunes have changed. But how did this oddity come to exist in the first place? To find out we must zoom back to a moment in time when the vast CBS conglomerate was wondering just what it could do to squeeze more money out of the company it had bought in 1965.

The German connection

Fender in 1968 was a very different place to the company of 15 or just 10 years earlier, where top brass would get hands-on with the workers. Under CBS, Fender became big business, with the marketing department throwing dozens of ideas at the wall in an effort to increase sales, ordering prototypes, and then deciding whether to take the results to production. By the late '60s, Fender's new 120,000 square foot acoustic plant was home to a number of extra-curricular projects. Here worked pickup genius Seth Lover, while elsewhere lurked electric piano designer Harold Rhodes, long-time Fender man Freddie Tavares, and Gene Fields, who worked on the Mustang, the Musicmaster bass, the Starcaster semi and various ingenious pedal steel projects. But the main guitar designer for Fender in this period was Roger Rossmeisl, head of the brand-new R&D department – and it was Rossmeisl who drew up the Telecaster Thinline.

Rossmeisl was one of the most influential guitar designers in the '50s and '60s, but because he always worked for others and never had a company of his own (the German-built 'Roger' guitars, sometimes attributed to Rossmeisl, were built by his father Wenzel and named after his son), his contribution is all too often overlooked. In 1937, as a 10 year-old, Rossmeisl entered school in



Jazz on a Thinline? Bill Frisell reveals the model's adaptability

Photo: Jimmy Katz

Thinline timeline

Less weight, all the twang

1927 Telecaster Thinline designer Roger Rossmeisl born in Germany

1952 Rossmeisl moves to the US and first spends a year with Gibson

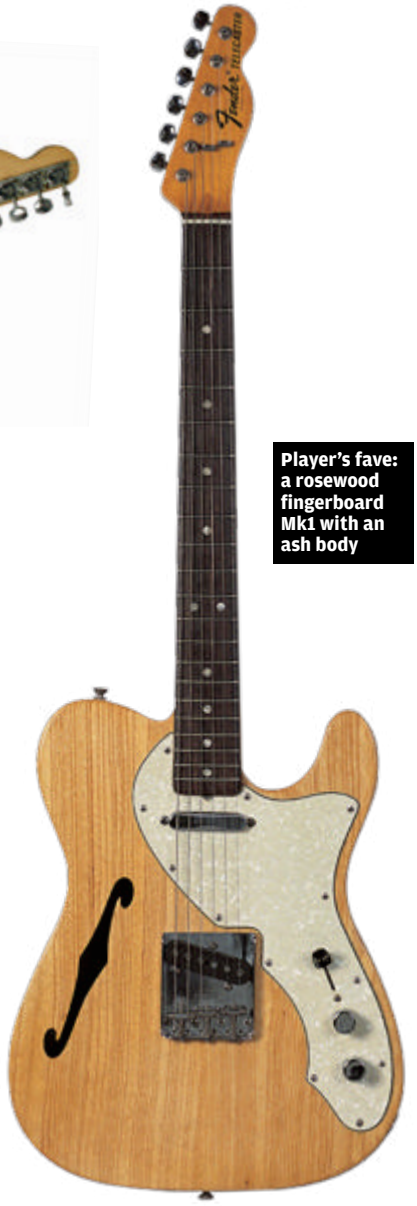
1962 Joins Fender after spending time at Rickenbacker and at Mosrite

1968 Mk1 Thinline introduced with two single coil pickups

1969 Sunburst option is added to natural ash & mahogany

Maple cap fingerboards were dropped in 1969. This one has the walnut skunk stripe at the rear

Early Thinlines were late enough for F-brand squared-button tuners but too early for the bullet truss rods



Player's fave: a rosewood fingerboard Mk1 with an ash body

Mittenwald, Germany's centre of lutherie, and emerged eight years later with the title of Master Guitar Maker. He joined his father in Berlin, making archtop electrics and acoustics, and absorbed a number of Wenzel's innovations, including multi-laminated necks and a body style that incorporated a flat centre with a 'step' around the edge – a feature that later became known as the 'German carve'. Semie Moseley, maker of Mosrite guitars, would adopt the German carve on his own guitars after being shown it by Rossmeisl.

In 1952, the year the Les Paul was introduced, Rossmeisl applied to Gibson's Ted McCarty for a job and received a ticket to the States and an offer of employment. But he didn't fit into the mould and after just a year set off for California, where he found a place with Rickenbacker. Here he was given more freedom, as the company's new owner Francis Hall – a one-time Fender distributor – was intent on setting up a whole new line of guitars in competition with Leo Fender.

In his eight years with Rickenbacker Rossmeisl adapted the Combos to become the 650 and 850, drew up the 450 and 425 models, designed the 4000 bass and was responsible for the semi-hollow Capris and all the acoustics and deep-body archtops. Rickenbacker never challenged Fender in sales terms, but the Rossmeisl legacy would fuel the company's 1960s success.

It was Rossmeisl's acoustic experience that Fender was seeking when they hired his services in 1962. Fender wanted to apply their bolt-on neck technology to the folk guitar market, and Rossmeisl came up trumps with the King, Concert, Classic and Folk models, soon expanded to include the Shenandoah, Malibu, Villager and Newporter.

Phil Kubicki – who passed away in March 2013 – was Rossmeisl's assistant. Recruited by him in 1962, he eventually ended up working directly under him in the newly set-up R&D department. 'Roger was a good guy, and a strong personality,' Kubicki remembered. 'Roger was very smart and very skilled because of his father and family background, but he was a strong person when it came to dealing with the people that would come to him. He was capable of handling his job and giving his opinion.'

1969 Maple cap neck swapped to one-piece complete with skunk stripe

1971 Launch of MkII Thinline with Wide Range humbuckers

1980 Thinline dropped. The end of CBS's time at Fender draws near

1980s Fender Japan launches the first reissues in '69 and '72 versions

1987 First-ever Fender Custom Shop guitar is a Tele Thinline

1997 Launch of US-built production version: it lasts three years

2010 Affordable Squier Classic Vibe Thinline kept the breed alive with style

The birth of the Thinline

Whose idea was the Telecaster Thinline? Nobody really knows. 'Roger didn't think of it. It came down from above,' said Kubicki. In truth, even Leo had always worked, in design and product terms, under request from Fender's sales department. 'We weren't free to think for ourselves, we weren't hired to think about new models,' he continued. 'The ideas came from the people that sell them. You know, they might say "I want an electric that sells for $125". It wasn't something that I or even Roger generated.'

No doubt, Fender's sales dept was aware of the success of Gibson's thinlines. In 1966, Rossmeisl was charged with generating a competitor and he produced the Coronados, a range that aped the 335 look in six-string, 12-string and bass forms. But there was a simpler way: to convert a Fender solidbody to become a semi-acoustic. Forget the Strat: too many curves and complications. The best candidate was the Tele. Also, it solved a problem. Fender's supply of light ash was dwindling; the blocky Tele was in danger of becoming labelled a heavyweight.

The first known experiment, in 1966, was a crazy one-off – a green dye-injected Wildwood double-bound hollowbody Tele with reverse f-holes, a Jazzmaster neck and a Mustang vibrato. This, it seems, was likely an employee test piece.

In early 1967, Rossmeisl and 'Babe' Simoni from the wood shop made a Tele built like an acoustic with thin sides, a zebrawood back and a spruce top. A stunning guitar... but it wasn't given the green light. Next, they tried hollowing out cavities under the scratchplate on a standard Tele, but this didn't make much difference. Finally Rossmeisl drew on his Rickenbacker experience by hollowing the body from the back.

Kubicki was charged with building the prototype. Interestingly, the first one wasn't ash: 'The first one was mahogany, and as the guitar was mostly a stock item, we had a production body,' he explained. 'I mean, why should I route something out from scratch when I could just get it from the floor?' For some reason, the timber choice stuck, and the Thinline Mk1 would be available with an ash or mahogany body.

No doubt Fender was aware of the success of Gibson's thinlines

The semi-hollow aspect of the Thinline design was pure Rossmeisl. 'The body was carved out in the back on the f-hole side, and then the f-hole was machined in, then a matching back was glued on so it looked like a solidbody,' detailed Kubicki. 'There was a patent on that in Roger's name, although the assignment of the patent was to Fender. I don't know if that's ever surfaced.'

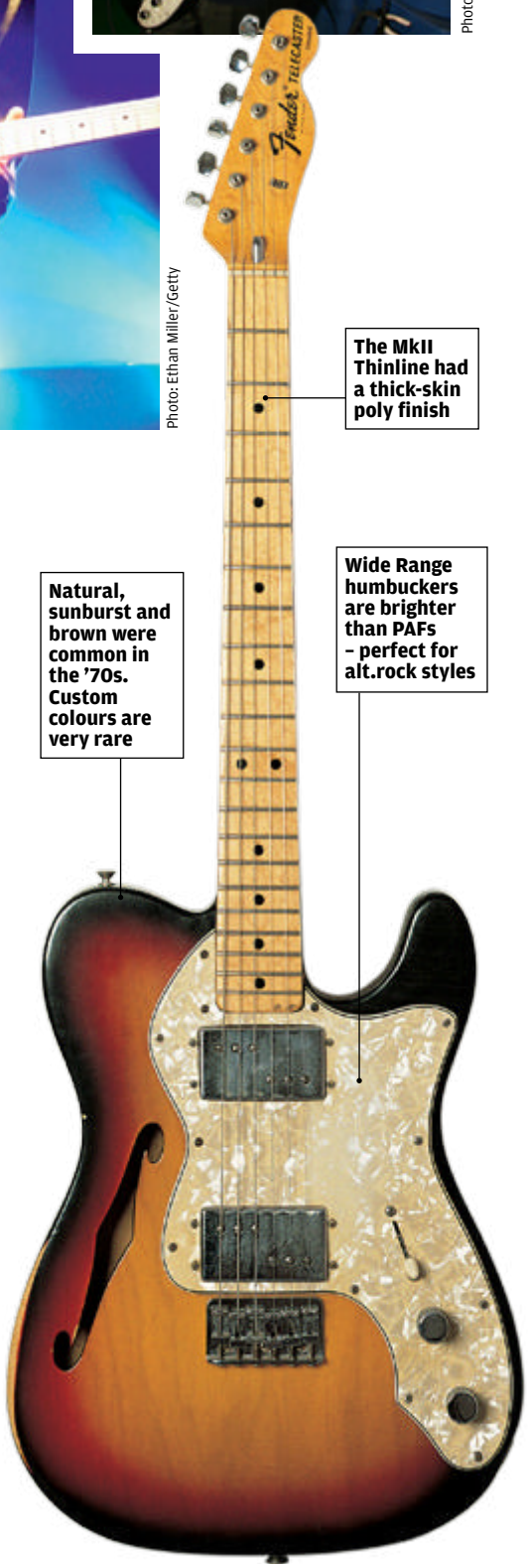
The Thinline received a brand new all-in-one scratchplate and control plate – a

Jonny Buckland of Coldplay is a major exponent of the Seth Lover humbuckers

Photo: Ethan Miller/Getty

Mick Jones, from LP Junior to a Thinline

Photo: Bob Thacker



The Mk II Thinline

With a keen eye on Gibson's appeal, Fender was pushing its Seth Lover-designed 'Wide Range' humbuckers hard in the early '70s, and the Thinline was chosen to receive them. This spelled the end of the ashtray bridge, so much part of the familiar Tele layout: it was replaced by a hardtail Strat bridge. Below the centre-line the scratchplate stayed the same; above, it made two bulgy excursions to bypass the larger pickups. The MkII also inherited the three-bolt neck plate with Micro-Tilt adjustment and the headstock-end 'bullet' trussrod nut. Vintage values for '72-'80 originals are much less than for the MkIs: perhaps collectors think it simply isn't as much a classic Fender as the MkI. Players, though, don't always agree. The Wide Range pickups combine twang with beef in a unique way, and our only regret is that the reissues don't sound the same, since the Japanese and MIM models don't have threaded CuNiFe magnet slugs and give a darker, smoother tone.

Tab Benoit demonstrates great swamp blues chops on a '70s Tele Thinline

Photo: Philip Gould

gorgeous piece of work, as it turned out, executed in multi-layered cream pearloid and sweeping seamlessly from the bass side of the fingerboard in an almost LP Jr-like style, nipping cunningly around the traditional ashtray bridge, encompassing the standard Tele controls with the addition of a eye-catching peak, and finishing short of the full extent of the lower horn, creating a beautiful and totally unified design.

For Kubicki the Thinline project was just another job. 'I was doing stuff like that every day,' he said. 'That's how it happens. Of course, it was pretty cool. I remember Leo Fender walking in with a body and a neck and some parts and asking me to put it together by the next day, and that was the first-ever Micro-Tilt neck system. Y'know, 1968 was a pretty busy time. Something would come in and you'd do it with as much secrecy as necessary and as much speed as possible – and the less cost, the better.'

Indeed, the R&D department was a hotbed of activity. Many projects never even saw production – such as the Zebrawood guitar, a headless bass, and the Songwriter parlour acoustic. Kubicki worked on many of them, and the high point was the Ltd and its regular-production stablemate the Montego. These electric archtops were close to Rossmeisl's heart – perhaps too close. 'Gibson was the biggest competition and the Ltd was built to compete with its jazz guitars,' recalled Kubicki. 'We never made many. They were totally handbuilt. It was a prestige item, the most expensive on the price list. It was proof of the level of skill we could muster, but it may not have been too profitable!'

The end and the beginning

It's unlikely that Rossmeisl had a great deal to do with the MkII Thinline. It appeared in late 1971, the year Rossmeisl left Fender. 'Roger left and I was left hanging there, and then CBS phased out R&D,' recalled Kubicki with sadness. 'R&D was beginning to turn into the early phases of being a Custom Shop, in a way. It didn't feel like the same company. People were being replaced by CBS personnel, and they didn't know who their skilled people were, or value them highly enough. They all left with Leo and George [who formed G&L]. It's amazing to think of what they let go.'

Rossmeisl moved back to Germany, where he maintained a workshop until his death in 1979, aged just 52. Phil Kubicki left Fender soon afterwards, going on to become a highly-regarded custom builder and the designer of the Ex Factor bass. And Fender entered a period of virtual non-design and worsening quality that would end in the company's sale in 1981.

The Thinline has inspired dozens of makers to reimagine the T-style guitar

But it was far from the end for the Thinline. Unexpectedly, a guitar from an era that spawned so many disasters – the Maverick, the Marauder, the Custom, the Swinger/Arrow – rose again. In the mid-'80s the canny revivalists at Fender Japan released Thinlines in single-coil '69 and double-humbucking '72 forms. Fender USA took note. When the Custom Shop was launched in 1987, the first project undertaken by builders Michael Stevens and John Page was a foam green Thinline for Elliot Easton; more would follow, both authentic reissues and relics, and alternatives such as a Thinline in blonde with a black guard like a '52. Fender underlined the guitar's rehabilitation from 1997 to 2000 with the US-built Tele Thinline, and in 1998 launched the Mexican vintage reissues, again in '69 and '72 forms. These are still in production, as is the Classic Player Thinline Deluxe (like a '72 Thinline/Deluxe), the Jim Adkins (twin P90s), the Squier Vintage Modified Thinline (with a 24.75" scale), the Squier Classic Vibe with its light mahogany body, and a limited-edition USA 'thin skin' '68. Along the way the Thinline has also inspired dozens of other makers to lighten and reimagine the T-style guitar, from G&L to Tom Anderson to Suhr to Melancon and Nash and many more besides.

Today, Thinline lovers have never had it so good. The Mk1 versions offer pure Tele twang, but with a touch more air to the note and a lot less shoulder-denting weight; the Mk2's combine compact Fender handling with near-Gibson drive and girth, but with a voice all their own. It's a weird twist of fate that a guitar that Roger Rossmeisl almost certainly considered one of his lesser, and easier, achievements at Fender would outlive most of his others and become his parting gift to the company – and a guitar that fully deserves its reputation as a modern classic.

The F-Hole Mystery

The Thinline's finishing touch was its f-hole – a piece of pure German design transplanted to California. This swept angular f-hole was like a Roger Rossmeisl signature: he used it on the Fender Coronado as well as the Montego and Ltd. Strangely, however, the first place it appears seems to be on Wenzel Rossmeisl-built 'Roger' guitars in the mid-to-late '50s... and by that time, Wenzel's son was long gone to America. Was this classic Fender f-hole drawn up by Wenzel, or by Roger? It's a tiny scrap of guitarcheology which has yet to be solved. 'I don't know the answer,' mused Phil Kubicki. 'I'm sure Roger borrowed a lot from his father... the German carve and so on. Maybe, for ease of design, he used it. On the prototype, though, the shape of the f-hole wasn't important, as it would probably be changed later. It wasn't vital that it was designed to a T.'

Roger Junior, early 1960s

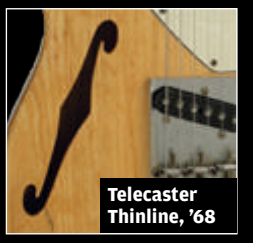
'67 Fender Coronado

Telecaster Thinline, '68

Photo: Tats Ohisa / Jazzgitarren 2010

Time Team

You don't have to even scratch the surface of any of these modern-day guitars to find the clear imprint of Fender's first, and maybe greatest, solidbody electric guitar. Join us as we unearth 11 Fender Telecasters costing from a couple of hundred quid up to a grand and a half. Review by **Huw Price**

It may not have been the first-ever solidbody electric guitar, but the Telecaster was a sensation. Although designed for country and western swing players, the Telecaster has more than held its own in blues, punk, metal, soul and rockabilly. You can play just about anything on a Tele – so no wonder they have never gone out of style.

In its purest form the Tele is a brutally minimalist and functional instrument that owed little to familiar guitar-making tradition. People rightly credit Leo Fender and his team with extraordinary design flair, but the truly revolutionary concept behind the Telecaster was that unskilled labourers should be able to make them on a conventional factory production line.

Over 60 years later this fact still polarises opinions. Some deride the Telecaster as being little more than two bits of wood bolted together, but anybody who has ever built one from scratch will understand how ill-informed that opinion is. The bottom line: we're still playing Telecasters, and our descendents will probably be playing them decades from now. Changes have been made over the years, but Fender's current catalogue includes a Telecaster to suit every taste and budget. So let's take a look at what's out there...

SQUIER
Affinity Series Telecaster

At a glance

RRP **£214.79**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in China. Alder body with bolt-on maple neck, 21 frets, six-saddle bridge, diecast tuners. Two single coil pickups with a three-way switch and volume and tone controls. Finishes: two-colour sunburst, black, metallic blue, metallic red, arctic white, butterscotch blonde. Weight of review model 3.75kg/8.25lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Wiry, bona fide Tele tones for beginners; good playability**

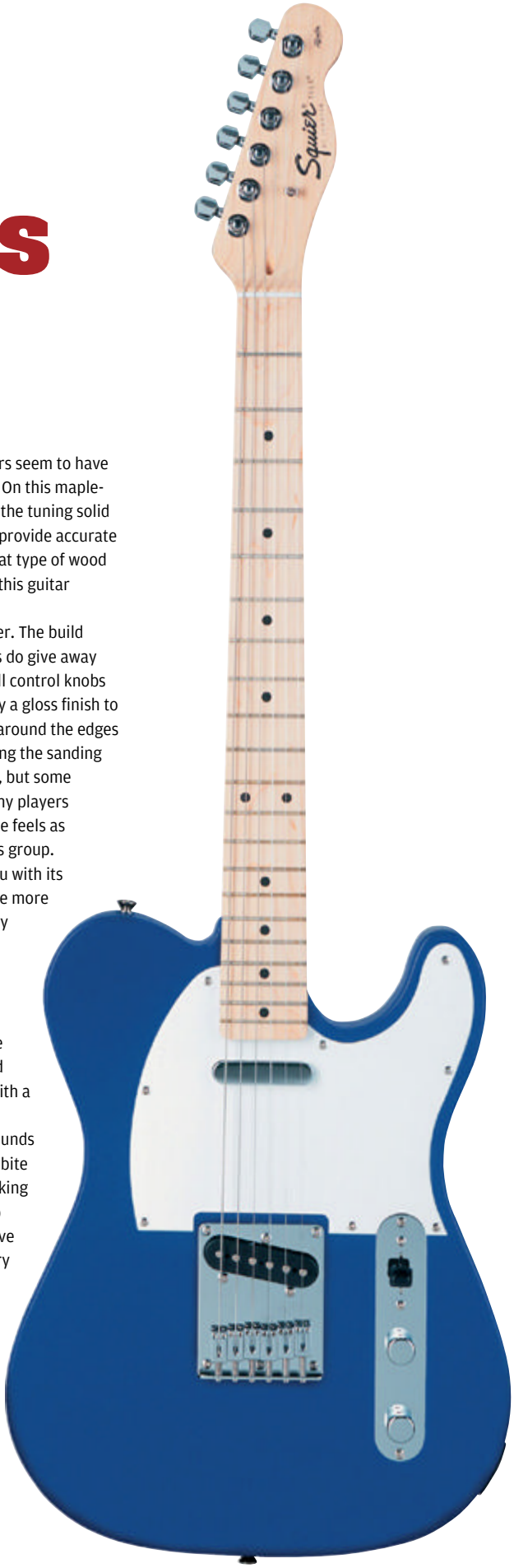
CLOSEST COUSIN **The Squier Standard Tele with wider nut and alnico neck pickup**

Recently, Fender's entry-level Squiers seem to have been punching above their weight. On this maple-board Affinity, diecast tuners keep the tuning solid while six individual bridge saddles provide accurate intonation. Nothing in the specs indicates what type of wood is used for the body, but it hardly matters as this guitar resonates quite willingly.

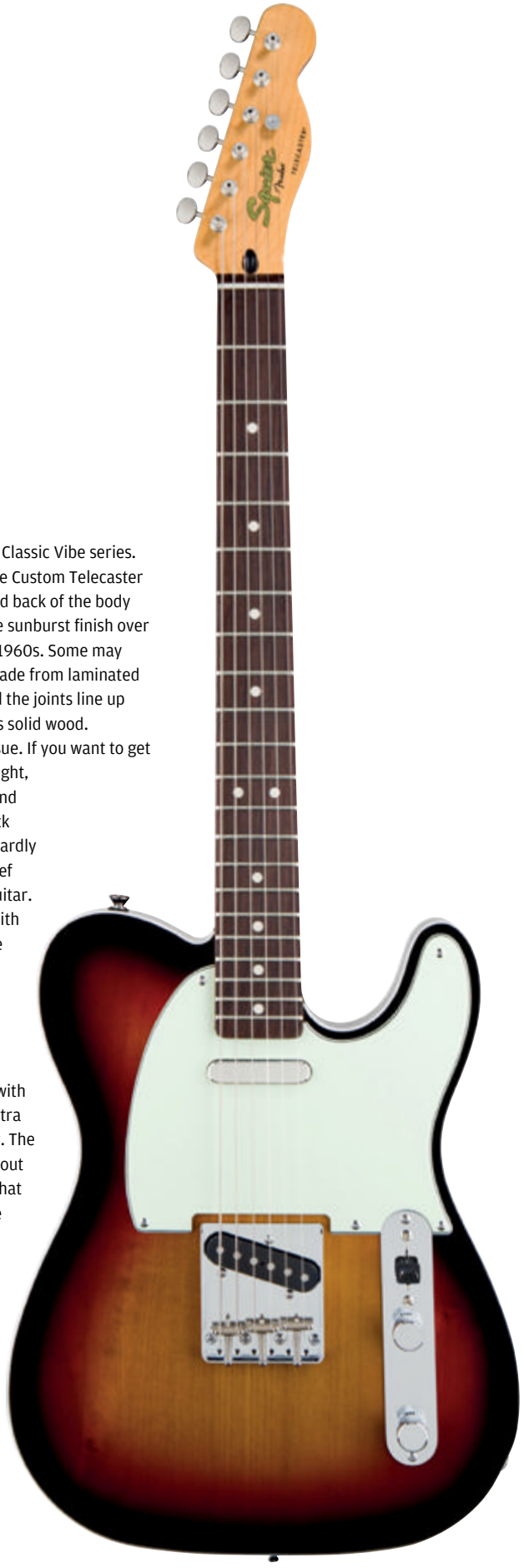
The metallic blue finish is a real eye-catcher. The build quality is impressive, although some features do give away the budget status: for instance the ultra-small control knobs look a little odd, and the factory doesn't apply a gloss finish to the neck. The fingerboard is also a bit rough around the edges due to a slight lack of care and attention during the sanding process... it feels more or less like bare wood, but some kind of sealer has certainly been applied. Many players will like this natural feel, and the slim C profile feels as good as that of most of the other necks in this group.

Unplugged, this guitar's sound engages you with its lively resonance and sustain, and that's all the more impressive when you consider that the factory strings are about as light as they can get. It's understandable, because the Affinity range is primarily aimed towards beginners, and the light strings do make this guitar almost effortless to play. However, in our experience skinny wires rarely do a Tele any favours, and we're confident it would sound even better with a set of .010"s.

The good news is that the bridge pickup sounds fantastic. It's got some real bark, sprang and bite without sounding too trebly; it's a proper rocking Telecaster sound. In contrast the neck pickup displays the muffled quality that seems to have plagued many Tele neck pickups from the very beginning. It's a tad quieter than the bridge pickup too, but it may be possible to improve the clarity and volume balance by raising it closer to the strings.



SQUIER Classic Vibe Telecaster Custom



At a glance

RRP **£406.80**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in China. Three-piece alder body with bolt-on maple neck with 21-fret rosewood fingerboard, three-saddle bridge, vintage-style tuners. Two Alnico V single coils, three-way switch, volume and tone controls. Finishes: three-colour sunburst only. Weight of review model 3.25kg/7.15lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Classic '60s Telecaster sounds... and looks too**

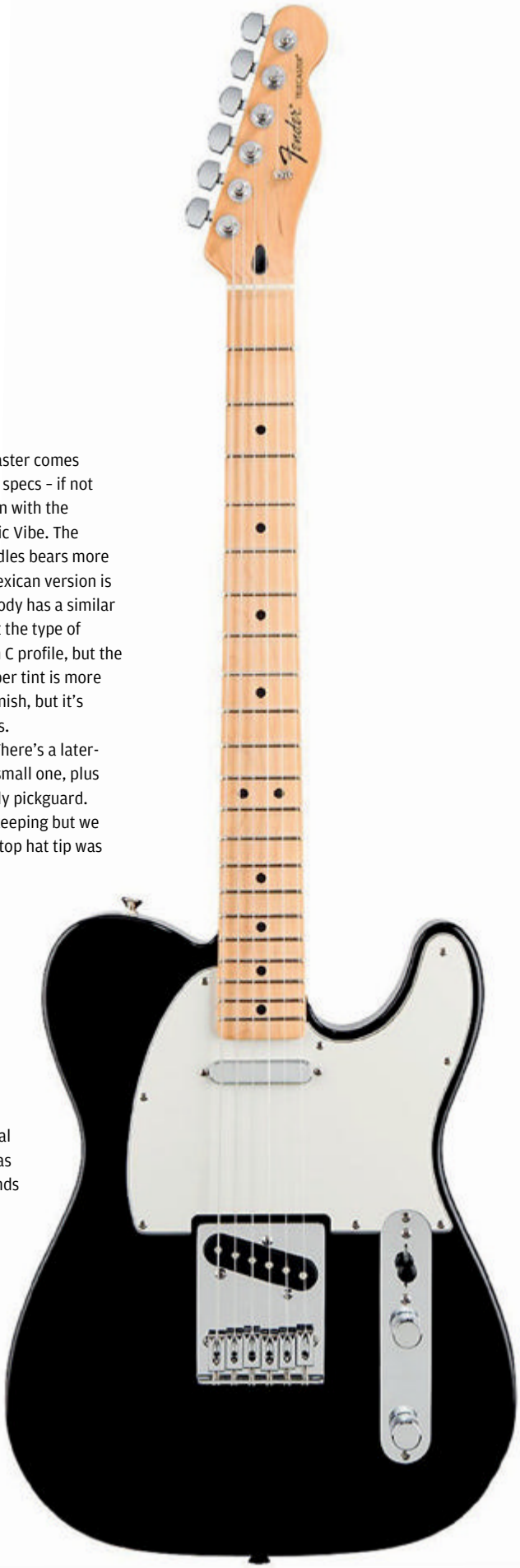
CLOSEST COUSIN **The Squier Classic Vibe 50s Tele with maple board; butterscotch one has Alnico V pickups, vintage blonde has Alnico III**

We're huge fans of the Squier Classic Vibe series. This one – a recreation of the Custom Telecaster with binding on the front and back of the body and a sumptuous three-tone sunburst finish over an alder body – is straight out of the early 1960s. Some may have concerns that the Classic Vibes are made from laminated bodies, but this has a three-piece body and the joints line up front and back, so there's no doubt that it's solid wood.

This is a surprisingly classy vintage reissue. If you want to get picky, maybe the hardware is a bit lightweight, the string tree is a '50s-style round item, and the truss rod adjustment is at the headstock end: though it isn't vintage-correct it can hardly be seen as a disadvantage, as the neck relief can be tweaked without dismantling the guitar. Elsewhere, Squier has got things spot on with a three-saddle bridge, vintage Kluson-style tuners and an amber neck tint... and the rosewood fingerboard even has some attractive figuring with nice tight grain.

Although the Affinity was nice and resonant, this Classic Vibe has far more of that trademark Telecaster twang coupled with a deeper and more full-bodied tone and extra sustain. Plug in, and things get even better. The balance between the two pickups is just about perfect and the neck pickup doesn't have that muffled quality; instead you get all the bite and cut you'd expect from a Telecaster bridge pickup, combined with smooth, round and almost glassy tones from the neck. In clean mode this guitar almost compels you to play country and Steve Cropper-type licks. The middle position encourages fingerstyle playing, and the neck approaches jazziness when you roll off the tone. Kick in some overdrive and this Tele turns into a bona fide blues machine. Sure, it's built to a price... but it's one of the best bang-for-the-buck guitars out there.

FENDER
Standard Telecaster



At a glance

RRP **£514.80**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in Mexico. Alder body with bolt-on maple neck, 21 frets, six-saddle bridge, diecast tuners, chrome plated hardware. Two alnico magnet single coil pickups, three-way switch, volume and tone controls. Finishes: Lake Placid blue, black, candy apple red, wine, white. Weight of review model 3.75kg/8.25lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Hard-hitting sounds from rock to punk**

CLOSEST COUSIN **The Mexican-made Classic Series '50s Telecaster costs a little more but has a more accurate vintage spec**

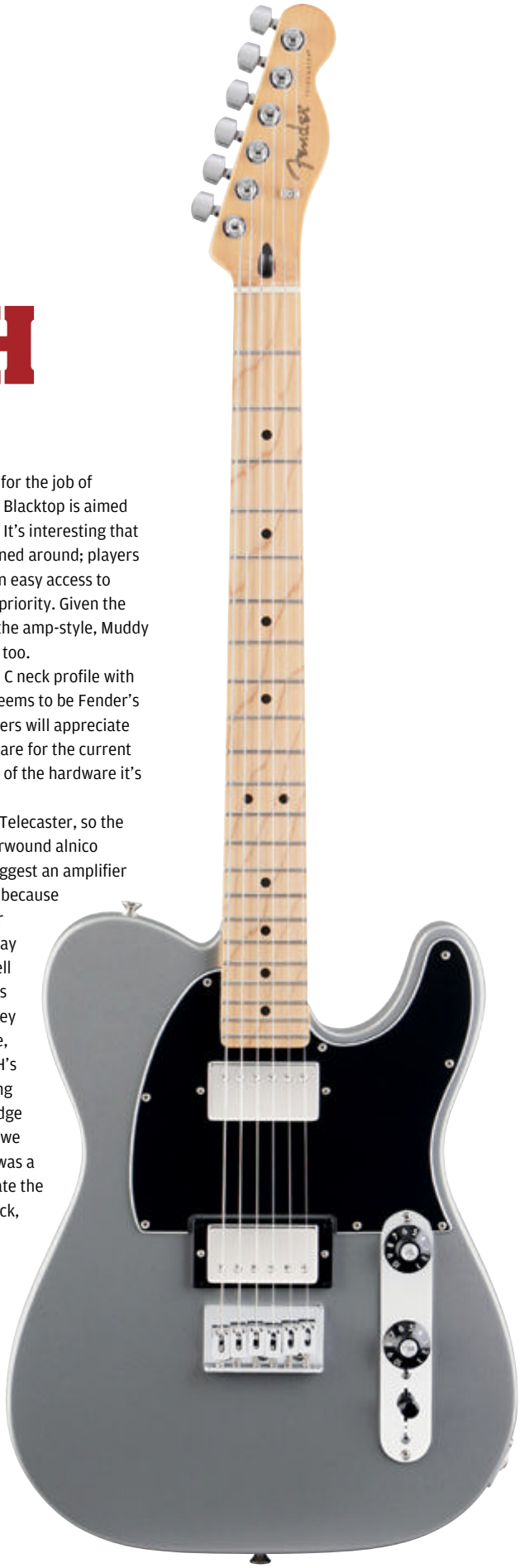
The Mexican-made Standard Telecaster comes from a higher price range, but the specs – if not the quality – have more in common with the Squier Affinity than with the Classic Vibe. The open-sided bridge with its six adjustable saddles bears more than a passing resemblance, although the Mexican version is heavier, with superior chrome plating. The body has a similar weight, though Fender's website is coy about the type of wood they've used. Again the neck has a slim C profile, but the gloss-finished fingerboard with its slight amber tint is more attractive. The back of the neck has a satin finish, but it's much smoother and slicker than the Affinity's.

The style is more late '60s than pre-CBS. There's a later-period logo on the headstock, albeit a fairly small one, plus boxy diecast tuners and an off-white three-ply pickguard. A top hat switch tip may have been more in keeping but we prefer the round '50s one on this guitar (the top hat tip was falling off the Classic Vibe switch, anyway).

Unplugged, the Mexican Standard has a sturdier and more solid tone than either of the Squiers. It doesn't quite match the full frequency spread of the Classic Vibe but this darker, more even response will suit plenty of players. The pickups are described as hot single coils with Alnico magnets, so if you're expecting fatter and rockier Tele tones then you won't be disappointed.

The response is even and slightly compressed, with plenty of body and a natural sustain that works just as well for lead work as rhythm. You won't get the three distinct sounds that you can achieve with some Telecasters, but you'll still hear noticeable variations between the three pickup settings. If you want a reasonably-priced Telecaster to use in a punk band or for grinding out some hard-edged R&B rhythm sounds, this may be the one for you.

FENDER Blacktop Telecaster HH



At a glance

RRP **£634.80**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in Mexico. Alder body with bolt-on maple neck, 22 frets, hardtail bridge, diecast tuners. Two high output alnico humbuckers, three-way switch, volume and tone controls. Finishes: black, candy apple red, silver. Weight of review model 4kg/8.78lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Telecaster-type looks but with much heavier alt.rock sounds**

CLOSEST COUSIN **For extra low-end grind, investigate the Blacktop Baritone Tele**

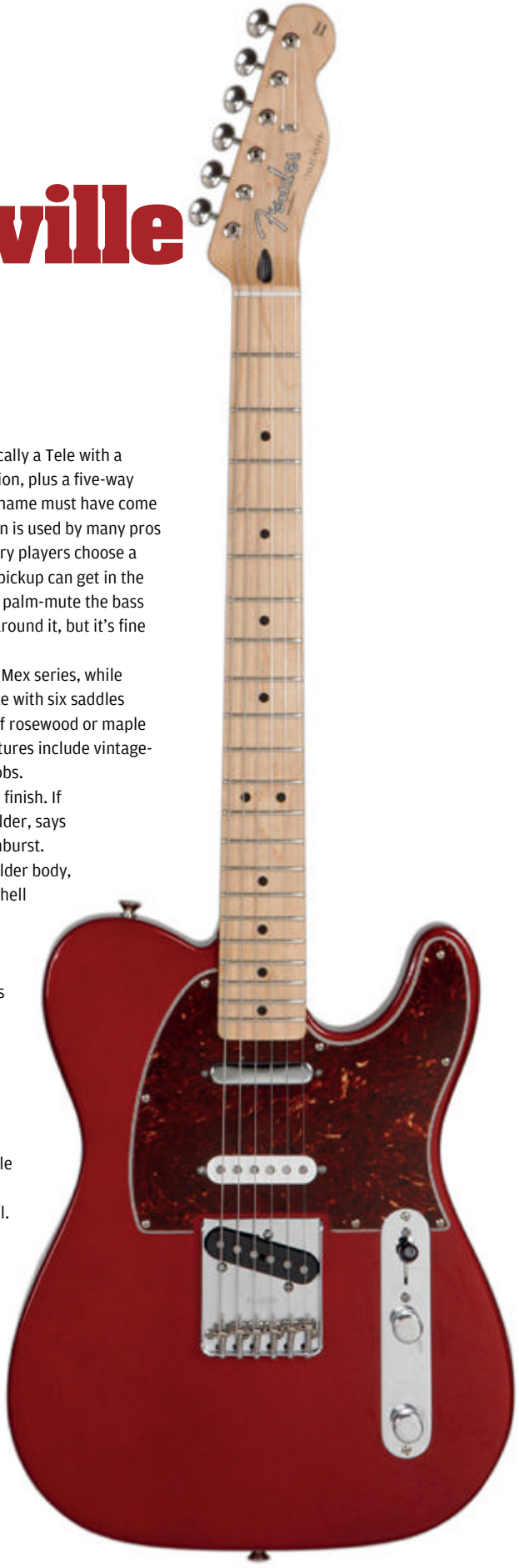
Nicely styled and purpose-built for the job of carrying two humbuckers, the Blacktop is aimed towards modern rock players. It's interesting that the control plate has been turned around; players have been doing this in the decades when easy access to the volume rather than the switch is the priority. Given the silver chrome and black colour scheme, the amp-style, Muddy Waters Tele-type knobs look pretty good too.

The Blacktop HH shares the same slim C neck profile with most of the guitars in this round up – it seems to be Fender's default neck profile at present – but rockers will appreciate the extra 22nd fret. We don't especially care for the current Mexican hardtail bridge, but like the rest of the hardware it's more than fit for the purpose.

Acoustically this sounds exactly like a Telecaster, so the thick, hard, aggressive tone of these overwound alnico pickups may come as a surprise. We'd suggest an amplifier with powerful EQ controls would be best because you'll probably want some influence over the midrange texture. Both pickups display impressive clarity and clean up pretty well from the volume control, but if the amp is set for a lot of high-frequency content they can veer towards harshness; all the same, coil tapping would have expanded the HH's somewhat limited tonal palette. Mounting high-output 'buckers on a traditional bridge plate can lead to microphonic squeal, so we think that mounting them into the body was a wise decision. Many players will appreciate the tummy-tuck body contour around the back, and you can choose between a rosewood and maple fingerboard.

Most country and roots players will be able to tell by looking that this isn't the Tele for them; we wouldn't even suggest it, but it is especially suitable for blues and classic rock. It's not a traditional Telecaster, but the Blacktop HH is a very enjoyable guitar.

FENDER
Deluxe Nashville Telecaster



At a glance

RRP **£766.80**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in Mexico. Ash body with bolt-on maple neck, 21 frets, six-saddle bridge, vintage-style tuners. Two Tex Mex Telecaster pickups & one Tex Mex Strat single coil, five-way switch, volume and tone controls. Finishes: three-colour sunburst, honey blonde, candy apple red. Weight of review model 3.5kg/7.7lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Traditional Telecaster sounds with a dose of Strat thrown in**

CLOSEST COUSIN **The Deluxe Nashville Power Tele has even more adaptability thanks to a blendable Fishman piezo bridge**

The Deluxe Nashville Tele is basically a Tele with a Strat pickup in the middle position, plus a five-way selector switch. The 'Nashville' name must have come about because this configuration is used by many pros in country music's capital city. Many country players choose a Tele rather than a Strat because a middle pickup can get in the way when using a thumbpick; if you like to palm-mute the bass strings near the saddles it's hard to work around it, but it's fine for clawhammer-style.

All three pickups are from Fender's Tex Mex series, while the bridge combines a traditional baseplate with six saddles for intonation accuracy. There's a choice of rosewood or maple fingerboards, both with 21 frets. Other features include vintage-style tuners and barrel-shaped control knobs.

The body wood varies depending on the finish. If you choose honey blonde, you'll get ash; alder, says Fender, goes with candy apple red and sunburst. Although this guitar is supposed have an alder body, the sticker on our review guitar's tortoiseshell scratchplate proclaims that it's ash. To our ears, it sounds like it; it's hugely responsive, clear and snappy with plenty of low-end body. In fact, it was obvious this was a 'live one' as soon as we played it.

The pickups do this guitar justice. The bridge has a grind and midrange body which combines nicely with the Strat pickup's glassiness. The neck pickup is a doozie, with a smooth, clear, slightly jazzy tone that hooks up superbly with the middle pickup. It excels for clean stuff, and all the pickup combinations balance up really well. The Nashville is fundamentally bright but you can always roll back the treble from the guitar or your amp to open up more possibilities. Don't be put off by the name – this guitar delivers in myriad musical styles. It's so responsive that we'd expect blues players to enjoy it every bit as much as country players. Sustain, dynamics and expressiveness are the watchwords; this is an elegant, versatile and practical twist on the Tele theme.

FENDER American Special Telecaster

At a glance

RRP **£886.80**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in the USA. Alder body with bolt-on maple neck, 22 frets, traditional bridge with three brass saddles, diecast tuners. Two Texas Special single coils, three-way switch, volume and tone controls. Finishes: three-colour sunburst, vintage blonde, olympic white. Weight of review model 3.9kg/8.58lbs**

PERFECT FOR **An easy to live with Telecaster with refined tone and dynamics**

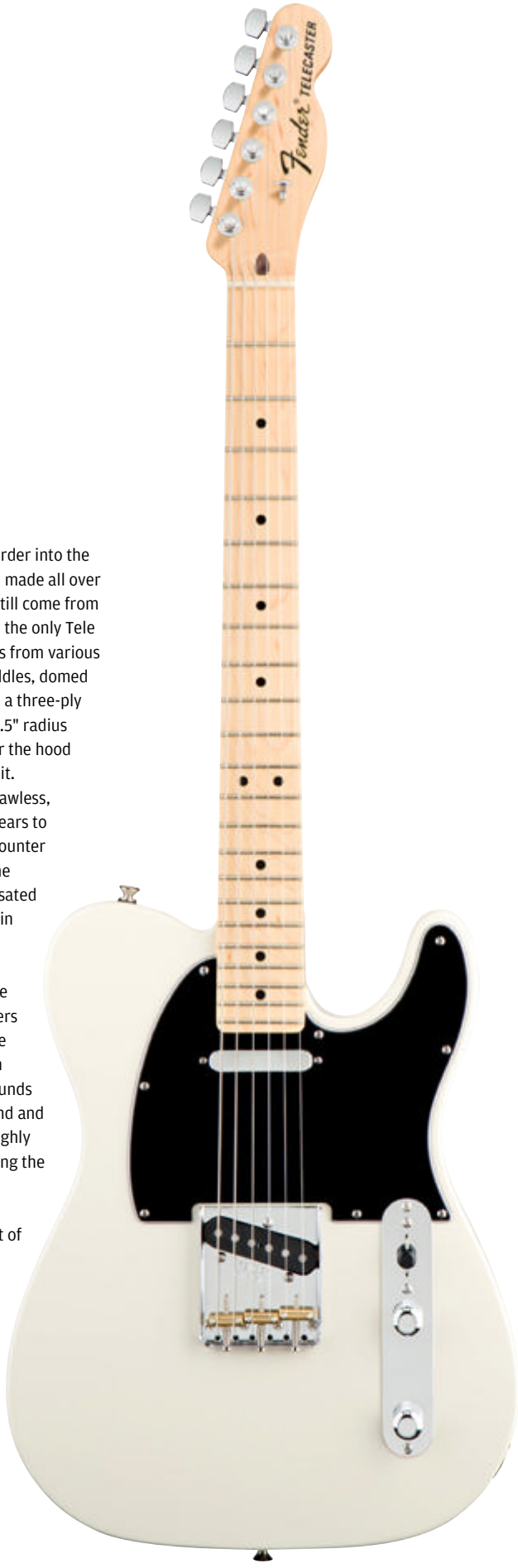
CLOSEST COUSIN **The Classic Series '70s Telecaster Custom with four knobs and a Wide Range at the neck**

Finally, it's time to cross the Mexican border into the United States. Modern Fenders may be made all over the world, but top-of-the-line models still come from California. The American Special Tele – the only Tele in the Special Series – combines vintage features from various eras, and an ashtray bridge with three brass saddles, domed knobs and a round switch tip rub shoulders with a three-ply scratchplate, a '70s logo and diecast tuners. A 9.5" radius board carries 22 medium jumbo frets, and under the hood Fender has installed its Greasebucket tone circuit.

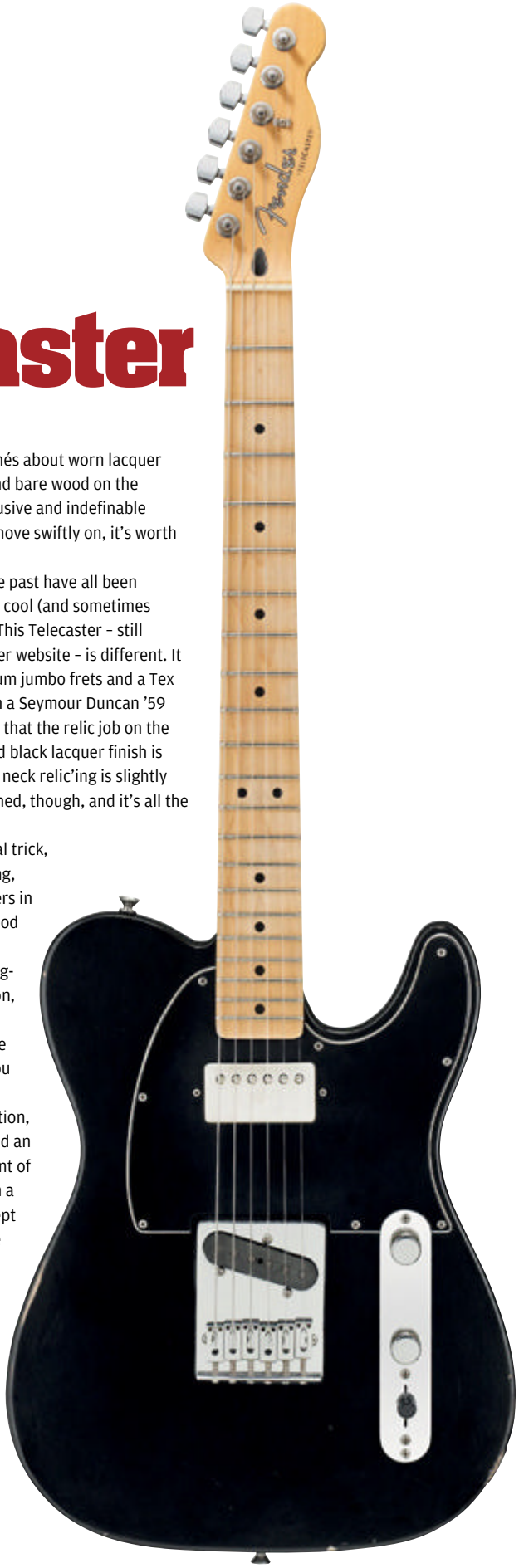
This is a very well made guitar. The finish is flawless, the neck tint is subtle, and the hardware all appears to be top-notch – though we were surprised to encounter grub screws poking out from above the top of the saddles... it's spiky and uncomfortable. Compensated brass saddles are readily available but once again Fender has chosen to install straight saddles, so intonation accuracy may be compromised.

Grub screws aside, the keyword is refined. The urethane finish on the back of the neck, the tuners and even the tone all exemplify smoothness. The American Special is like a classic Telecaster with all the quirks and rough edges taken away. It sounds clear and even, with a solid thump in the bass end and sweet highs. The Grease Bucket tone circuit is highly effective, rolling off unwanted treble while leaving the remaining frequencies unaltered.

So is it worth paying extra for this entry-level US-made Telecaster? You can figure out the cost of hardware upgrades for yourself, but ultimately the sonic virtues of this guitar are a question of taste. Some players will prefer the wilder ride of a vintage-style Tele, while others will find this easy-going incarnation easier to live with.



FENDER
Road Worn Player Telecaster



At a glance

RRP **£1042.80**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in Mexico. Alder body with bolt-on maple neck, 21 frets, six-saddle bridge, diecast tuners. Tex Mex bridge single coil with Seymour Duncan '59 SH1N at the neck, three-way switch, volume and tone controls. Finishes: black, candy apple red. Weight of review model 3.75kg/8.25lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Cranking out those Keef riffs with a load of Keef attitude**

CLOSEST COUSIN **The Vintage Hot Rod 52 Tele with a Seymour Duncan mini-humbucker at the neck**

You've probably heard all the clichés about worn lacquer finishes, vintage-style pickups and bare wood on the back of the neck creating that elusive and indefinable mojo, but before you yawn and move swiftly on, it's worth persevering: this guitar really sings.

The Road Worn models we've tried in the past have all been distressed vintage-spec guitars with all the cool (and sometimes not so cool) features that go along with it. This Telecaster – still available in shops, though not on the Fender website – is different. It has a flatter 9.5" radius fingerboard, medium jumbo frets and a Tex Mex single coil in the bridge combined with a Seymour Duncan '59 SH1N neck humbucker. It's almost a shame that the relic job on the hardware, pickups, three-ply pickguard and black lacquer finish is so convincing, because the standard of the neck relic'ing is slightly shown up. The body ageing is quite restrained, though, and it's all the better for it.

Perhaps it's some insidious psychological trick, but this guitar feels and sounds more willing, freed up and played in then any of the others in this group. You know it's going to sound good before you even plug it in. A Tele bridge pickup with a PAF-style humbucker is a long-established and proven custom combination, and vintage-style PAFs are quite bright-sounding pickups, so getting one to balance with a beefy back pickup isn't as hard as you might expect. This guitar has three distinct sounds – traditional Tele in the bridge position, a warm and fluid bluesiness on the neck and an effective blend of the two with an added hint of midrange phasiness in the middle. It's such a comfortable old shoe of a guitar that we kept reaching in the wrong place for the volume control: it wasn't where our Tele-honed instincts told us it should be. Fortunately there's more than enough excess wire inside the cavity to switch the control plate around if you prefer.

FENDER American Standard Telecaster

At a glance

RRP **£1330.79**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in the USA. Select alder body with bolt-on maple neck, Micro-Tilt system, slab rosewood fingerboard, 22 frets, open-sided brass bridge with individual steel saddles, diecast tuners. Two Custom Shop Twisted Tele single coils with three-way switch, volume and 'Delta' tone controls. Finishes: Bordeaux metallic, ocean metallic blue, mystic blue, sunburst, black, three-tone and two-tone sunburst, natural, jade pearl metallic, crimson red, mystic red. Weight of review model 4kg/8.8lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Extra-clean clarity and high end**

CLOSEST COUSIN
Well... the leftie version

It must be tough having to come up with new twists to keep the American Standard Telecaster current. The latest innovations include a tummy-tuck at the back of the body, a bi-flex truss rod, and a thinner undercoat to promote body resonance. On top of it all, this jade pearl metallic finish looks really gorgeous.

The rosewood-fingerboard neck has a slim modern C profile and 22 very well installed medium jumbo frets. The brass bridge has open sides, and six individual bent steel saddles; it looks a bit odd, as the US Standard string spacing – 52mm instead of the vintage 56mm – means the saddles are bunched up in the middle, with oceans of space either side. Curiously, Fender has been revisiting the Micro-Tilt neck system of the '70s but these days it's combined with a four-screw neckplate. There's an extra hole in the bridge plate for Allen key angle adjustment, but many luthiers prefer to shim the neck instead.

A Custom Shop Twisted Tele neck pickup is combined with a CS Vintage-style bridge pickup and no-load tone control that Fender dub the 'Delta'. You'll notice a detent when the tone control is set fully up that disengages the tone circuit, along with the regular treble bleed of standard guitar circuits. If you have always found Teles a bit treble-shy, this may be the solution you have been looking for.

As expected, this is quite a bright-sounding Tele. In addition to preventing treble roll-off, the Delta Tone removes the resonance peak at the cut-off frequency. You lose a bit of the bark in the upper-midrange, but you gain an extra measure of clarity – a bit like switching to high fidelity mode. This guitar plays evenly, stays in tune, displays fine sustain and overall is best described as a modern, professional-quality take on a classic theme. However, it doesn't particularly ooze character, and not everyone will find it the most inspiring guitar in the range.

FENDER American Deluxe Telecaster

At a glance

RRP **£1558.79**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in the USA. Select alder body with bolt-on maple neck, Micro-Tilt system, slab rosewood fingerboard, 22 frets, open-sided brass bridge with individual steel saddles, diecast tuners. N3 Noiseless single coils with three-way switch, s1 switch, volume and 'Delta' tone controls. Finishes: olympic pearl, three-tone sunburst, aged cherry sunburst, crimson red. Weight of review model 4kg/8.8lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Rock-solid pro-quality Tele with extra tone option**

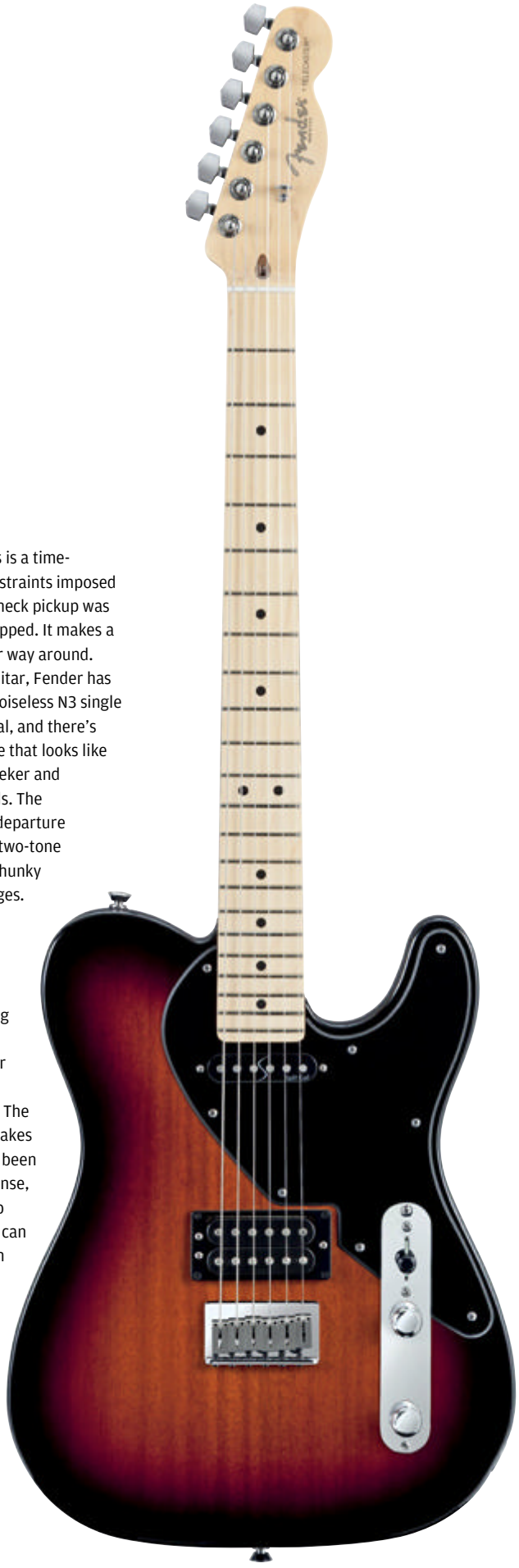
CLOSEST COUSIN **American Deluxe Tele with ash body and maple fingerboard**

Only the Select and American Vintage series separate the American Deluxe models from the rarefied delights of the Custom Shop. Many of the features we observed on the American Standard are present with the Deluxe: Micro-Tilt neck adjustment, a no-load tone control and the open-sided six-saddle bridge, this time with chrome-plated brass saddles. An S-1 switch in the volume control provides one extra option; combining the bridge and neck pickup in series like a humbucker. The pickups are N3 noiseless units.

Extra work has gone into the body, with a belly contour and top edge binding for a 'contemporary Custom' look. The heel block is chamfered to facilitate upper fret access and the slab rosewood fingerboard (maple is an option) is obviously a superior grade of timber. The position dots are pearl and the board itself is treated to a compound radius, graduating from 9.5" to 14" to allow you to achieve a low playing action with no choking-out on string-bending. The headstock sports a chrome logo with a retro-round string tree, and Fender provide staggered locking tuners and a Schaller strap lock system.

The Deluxe neck feels a bit chunkier than most, and we prefer it. Although slightly heavy, this is a comfortable and easy guitar to play. The N3 pickups sound bright and clear, with a discernible hi-fi quality; there's plenty of frequency range and a lively dynamic response. The S-1 switch only functions with the selector in the middle position, but the effect is dramatic – the Deluxe goes from modern Tele to thick, powerful rock tones instantaneously, and once again the no-load tone control allows you to sculpt the sound without making things dull or lifeless. It may be one for the pragmatists rather than the romantics, but this is an undeniably fine and handsome guitar.

FENDER Telebration Mahogany Telecaster



At a glance

RRP **£1810.79**

IMPORTANT SPECS **Made in the USA. Mahogany body with bolt-on maple neck, 22 frets, hardtail bridge with individual saddles, diecast tuners. Enforcer bridge humbucker and N3 noiseless neck pickup, three-way switch, volume and tone controls. Finish: two-colour sunburst. Weight of review model 4kg/8.8lbs**

PERFECT FOR **Modern rock dirt combined with crystal-clean single coil neck pickup tones**

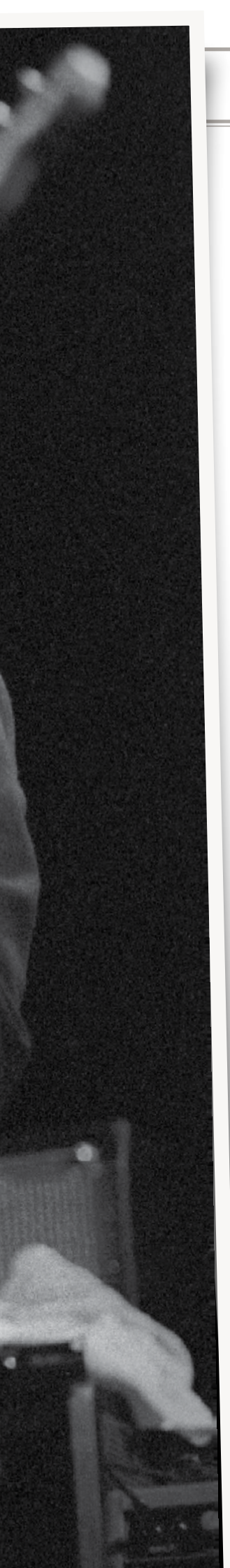
CLOSEST COUSIN **The Fender Select Telecaster HH with chambered body, blackwood top and a pair of Wide Range humbuckers**

Messing around with Tele pickups is a time-honoured tradition, but the constraints imposed by the bridge dictated that the neck pickup was invariably the one that was swapped. It makes a pleasant change to see things done the other way around.

In this discontinued Telebtration series guitar, Fender has combined a high-output humbucker with a noiseless N3 single coil in the neck. The controls are conventional, and there's through-body stringing with a hardtail bridge that looks like the one on the USA La Cabronitas – much sleeker and cooler than the bridge on the Mexican models. The maple neck is a standard slim C, but the big departure is a mahogany body with a tummy tuck. The two-tone sunburst is gorgeous, but it's let down by a chunky black plastic guard with roughly bevelled edges.

Where the humbucker/single coil pickup combination was complementary on the Road Worn Tele, this combination is chosen for contrast. The Enforcer is a rock-voiced humbucker with rolled-off treble and a strong midrange peak, but the stacked single coil combines high output with an unusually clear and bright tone. Split-personality guitars are rarely successful, but we think it works here. The mahogany generates the type of tone that makes a guitar sound overdriven even before it has been plugged in; it's complex and harmonically dense, but also extreme versatile. The bridge pickup pushes a valve amp into distortion, then you can switch to the neck for clean sparkle tone with no loss of volume. Previously we have found the N3 pickup a bit dull on Strats, but for some reason it suits this guitar. The centre setting has a phasey, funky quality. We think that there must be some trick wiring going on because these two pickups shouldn't really combine so well – but the Telebration is one of the most toneful, playable guitars in this group.

Photo: Clayton Call/Redferns/Getty



Telecaster Master

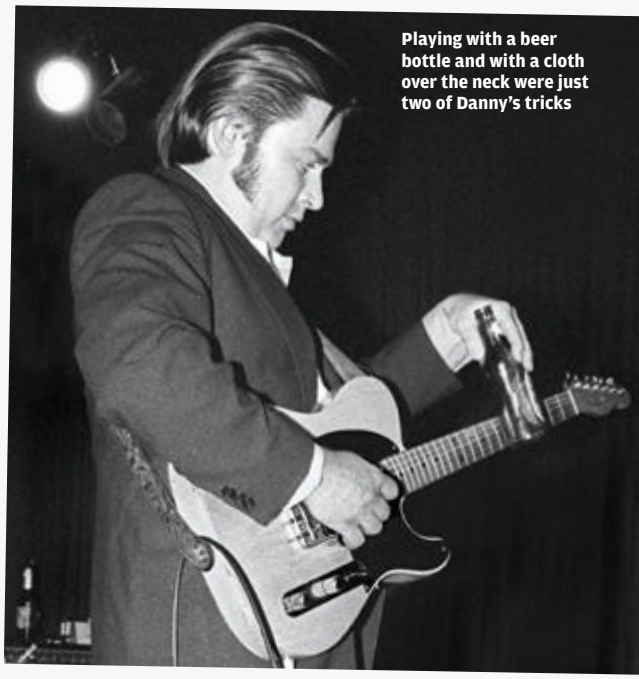
Blues, jazz, country, rockabilly – Danny Gatton mixed all these together, and sometimes in the space of a single bar. **Michael Heatley** tells the story of one of the greatest electric guitarists of all time

When it comes to classic, state-of-the-art Telecaster playing, two artists rise above all others: Roy Buchanan, a country/roots maestro who made his music on a '53 Fender Telecaster, and Danny Gatton. Gatton played the same model guitar from the very same year, and he also crossed paths with Buchanan, some five years his senior and much more experienced, when he hung around Washington DC gigs in the late '60s to pick up tips.

Both men's lack of vocal ability restricted their impact outside musicians' circles, yet meant that the guitar was their one and only musical voice. Both had an ambivalent attitude to fame; both, too, exited this life in tragic fashion. Yet Danny Gatton was his own man – one who pulled together so many different styles of music in his playing that it proved to be his undoing. He once famously said 'I can't stand a whole night of one thing; it drives me crazy. I can't even stand a set of one thing.'

He was dropped by Elektra Records two albums into a seven-disc deal precisely because his inability to limit himself stylistically (biographer Ralph Heibutzki called it 'genre-hopping') made his music tough to market in a category-obsessed business. Yet since his death in 1994 from a self-inflicted gunshot wound at the age of just 49, his reputation has continued to grow.

Gatton, whose love for cars ran parallel to his music, was a tinkerer who was fascinated by how things worked. Just as he'd often be found with his head under a car bonnet, he would hot-rod his guitars, starting with a 1956 Gibson ES-350 purchased for him by his father for $375 (Danny Senior was not amused). He chose the utilitarian Tele as his adult workhorse because it came with no preconceptions. A Les Paul? 'Too many volume knobs, too many tone knobs, too much crap – plus you can't bend the strings behind the nut,' Gatton opined. The Strat? 'No – the middle pickup gets in the way.'



Playing with a beer bottle and with a cloth over the neck were just two of Danny's tricks

Danny Fans

'Mr Gatton deserves his own cult. He plays with remarkable speed and agility'

John Rockwell, New York Times

Born in September 1945 in Washington DC, Gatton came from a musical family: his father had played in a dance band while his mother Norma was a country music fan. A guitar entered his life at the age of nine when the family moved to the suburb of Anacostia. Lessons lasted just six months: once he'd mastered the country ↦

Danny with his modded and pinstriped Tele

standard *Wildwood Flower*, he decided he could figure out anything he wanted to. His first performance was in 1956 at the Cottage City Firehouse in Bladensburg, Maryland. He was all of 11 years old.

The music of Les Paul, to which his uncle introduced him at an early age, was perhaps his greatest influence, as much because of the technological innovations as his music. He slowed down Paul's 45rpm records to 33 to get a better understanding of how the different parts were layered. Gatton even tried to emulate Les Paul by rigging up two tape decks to perform primitive overdubs. 'I would play a track on the left machine,' he said, 'run it into the right one with a Y cord, and play along with it. I created echo by doubling a part and playing a bit behind myself, which is hard to do when you're about 12.'

Later heroes would include country-picking rock'n'rollers Carl Perkins and Scotty Moore, then jazzmen Charlie Christian, Howard Roberts, Wes Montgomery and Lenny Breau. Local hero and fellow Washingtonian Link Wray presented no challenge: 'I'm not trying to brag, but by the time I heard *Rumble* I could play better than that.'

Danny started playing with local group the Thunderbirds, whose Gene Newport he credited for 'teaching me how to play by ear'. He moved on to teen band the Lancers in 1957, playing his Gibson ES-350 and developing some amazing chops. Danny was left-handed yet played guitar right-handed, which may go some way to explaining his amazing speed and dexterity on the fretboard. In 1959, at the age of 14, Danny auditioned for an established and somewhat older band called the Offbeats. His skills overcame any doubts as to his youth, and he got the gig. He made his first recording with them, *Beggarman/Trouble In Mind*, in 1960.

In yet another curious echo of Roy Buchanan, Gatton was unwilling to follow fame by uprooting himself from Washington. The furthest he ventured was when the Offbeats played gigs in New York and other East Coast cities. Keyboardist Dick Heintze, who had been in Roy Buchanan's pre-fame outfit the Snakestretchers, proved something of a musical father figure to the young Danny, but when the band split and Gatton travelled to the country music mecca of Nashville in 1967 with thoughts of making his name as a session musician, he returned, homesick, just six months later.

After a spell mixing sheet-metal work with country gigs as a hired hand with a band called Liz Meyer And Friends, Danny's first solo album, *American Music*, appeared on in 1975. The standout was a version of what would become his theme tune, the jazz standard *Harlem Nocturne* featuring Dick Heintze on Hammond organ. He played live with a band called Danny and the Fat Boys.

At the heart of his music was the fact he'd never been seduced by the all-conquering rock guitar heroes of the '60s. 'I was playing rockabilly with the Fat Boys when everyone else was into Jimi Hendrix,' he'd later explain. 'I guess I'm a rebel at heart.'

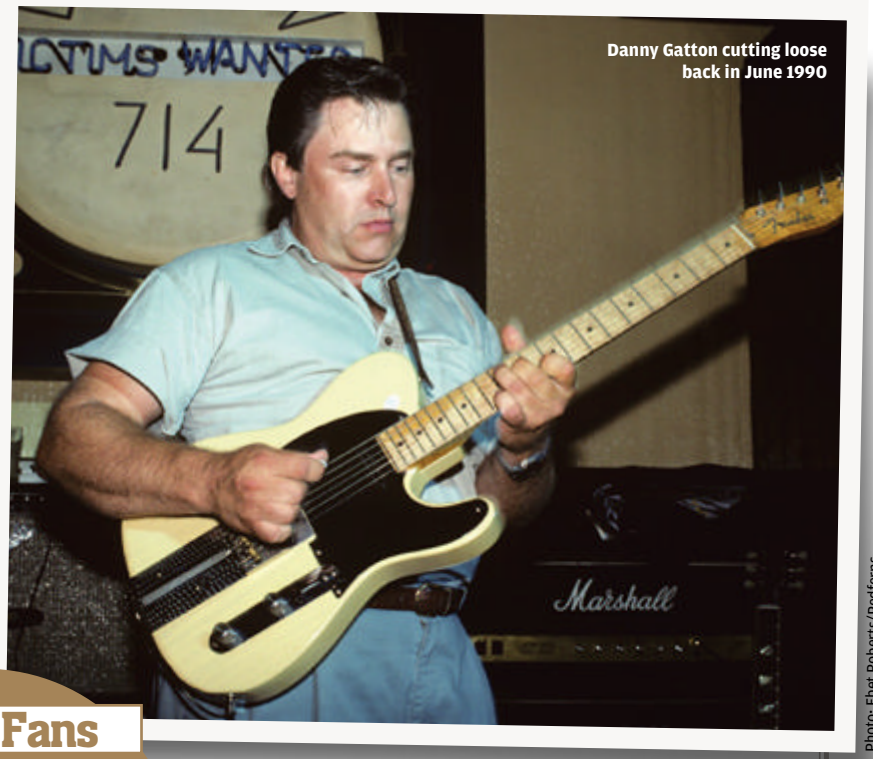
He found work in the late '70s as a sideman with Commander Cody and Roger Miller, seemingly as comfortable with hippie country convert Cody as the *England Swings* veteran. 'I went out and played other people's music and no-one could play mine,' said Gatton – which was as much of a boast as he ever managed to muster. Neither did he care about image. 'Guitar players are supposed to look English and lean and hungry,' he once said. 'I look more like a sheet metal worker.' Which, by day, he was.

One of the contacts Gatton made in Nashville during his short stay was pedal steel guitarist Buddy Emmons, and Danny became part of the Redneck Jazz Explosion, a band of hot musos playing country whose live tapes circulated widely. A studio album *Redneck Jazz* (1976) was followed two years later by the live *Redneck Jazz Explosion*. The trading of licks between steel and guitar was incendiary, with listeners treated to a musical

Danny Fans

'He expresses his music in such broad terms. Usually guitar players settle into one bag... Danny goes in so many different directions'

Steel guitarist Buddy Emmons



Danny Gatton cutting loose back in June 1990

Photo: Ebet Roberts/Redferns

mystery tour. 'One song may start as a bluegrass tune and turn into a bossa nova,' Gatton said.

At this time Danny had temporarily forsaken his Tele for a rare 1961 Gibson Les Paul Custom. He added a bridge plate on which was mounted a switching unit he'd designed with his dad. He used this 'Magic Dingus Box' to control several effects units, including a Leslie speaker cabinet. It was, in retrospect, almost a primitive prototype MIDI multiple effects control, giving him access to a keyboard-type sound at the flick of a switch.

Making a living from music had always been an unattainable dream. 'We like what you do but we don't know how to sell it,' was the record companies' refrain. In 1978, Gatton confided that if he had his time again, he would never play an instrument. 'More often than not, it's been miserable. I mean, I'm 33 and my wife's 36 and... we have nothing. We can't buy a house, because I can't afford it.'

Atlantic Records came sniffing, but Danny did not sign despite the financial rewards on offer. When interviewed by the *Baltimore Sun*, he revealed that he had just bought a small house on an acre of land – big enough for his three vintage cars, two dogs and a pet raccoon – and was about to become a father for the first time. 'That's all I ever wanted,' he told the reporter, 'to have a house, a kid and be normal like anyone else.' Yet there was an undercurrent of sadness beneath this cosy picture. He had lost three influential people in quick succession – his father, Dick Heintze, and Lowell George of Little Feat, who had talked about him joining his solo band – and was not in a state of mind to take the limelight. He even considered quitting music to concentrate on rebuilding cars.

Danny Fans

'He was short and pudgy, and he nursed his beer and cigarette like he was sitting in a bar on the Jersey shoreline after work. But Gatton was one of the great guitarists'

Rockabilly Hall Of Fame

Little Feat's reputation, like Danny's, had been boosted through bootleg live albums. One of these was *The Humbler*, which chronicled a show Danny played with new wave/rockabilly star Robert Gordon. After circulating as a bootleg for 15 years, this was one of several recordings released by Gatton's mother Norma, the guardian of her son's musical legacy. The name, incidentally, refers to his ability to reduce any challenger in a 'cutting contest' to humble contrition.

Danny got back with the Offbeats, now the American Music Company, whose new young singer Billy Windsor he would take with him when Elektra Records signed him in the early '90s. But he seemed content to play and record locally. A young singer called Eva Cassidy came to him for guitar lessons and, recognising her talent, he put her to work contributing vocals to tracks that would appear posthumously as the *Untouchable* album.

In the late '80s Danny Gatton was invited to make some teaching videos – and these, now of course available in DVD format, are invaluable. Danny's first instructional video was *Licks & Tricks For The Telecaster*, on which he used the '53 Tele and a silverface Fender Super Reverb. *Telemaster* was released three years later, while 1994's *Strictly Rhythm Guitar* saw him demonstrating the art of backup with a Gibson J-200 and a black and white pearloid Telecaster. One trick he kept to himself was his habit of using a beer bottle to play slide: 'Heineken for preference, but any brand will do...'

Danny Fans

'The best player in any style that I've heard'

Little Feat's Lowell George

But as much as he seemed intent on avoiding stardom, Gatton's reputation ➔

Cars And Guitars

GUITARS

Gatton's vintage 1953 Telecaster underwent many modifications including a solid steel tailpiece and hot-rodded pickups, both built by Joe Barden, plus a 1 meg tone pot with a .05 capacitor to create wah-wah effects. Fender issued a limited edition Danny Gatton signature model Telecaster to the same specification, but it's now sadly discontinued. Another famous Danny Gatton guitar was the doubleneck Telecaster/six-string bass built in the Fender Custom Shop that was delivered to Danny in early 1994. It owes its fame to appearing on the cover of *In Concert 9/9/94*, recorded less than a month before he died.

A 1954 Gibson ES-295 – like an all-gold ES-175 – that Gatton bought in Memphis was erroneously said to be the guitar Scotty Moore used on Elvis Presley's Sun label recordings. Danny sold the Bigsby-equipped model to put a down-payment on a white 1958 Chevrolet, but eventually bought it back.

AMPS

Danny Gatton's favourite amp was an original tweed Fender Bassman. Quizzed about its lack of effects, he stated simply: 'If I turn it all the way up, it doesn't need reverb!' He also used an early-'60s blackface Fender Vibrolux, which can be seen in action on the *Strictly Rhythm Guitar* video, and owned a pair of late-'50s tweed Fender Twin amps, one of which, serial number 40, was acquired in the mid-'60s. The other, a beaten-up 1956 model, had a pair of 12" SRO speakers.

CARS

Outside of playing, Gatton's passion for hot rods and vintage cars led to the acquisition of a '32 Ford five-window coupe which featured on his *Cruisin' Deuces* album cover. By the time Danny had finished with it, it had a Mercedes flathead engine, Jaguar independent rear suspension and a cross-braced chassis. A 1926 Model T Roadster took six years of work to renovate. He also owned a '37 Chevrolet and a '56 Ford Crown Vic.

Listen up

DANNY GATTON
The Humbler
(1982)
One of the best-known guitar bootlegs of all time, and the one that lit the fuse under a legend

DANNY GATTON
Hot Rod Guitar: The Anthology
(1982)
This 1999 compilation offers not just country cuts but an entire crash course in American music

DANNY GATTON
Unfinished Business
(1982)
***Homage To Charlie Christian* and Santo and Johnny's *Sleepwalk* are two key tracks on this 1987 release**

And another thing...

He played with Jack Casady of Jefferson Airplane in 1962-'63

His album *88 Elmira Street* was named after his birthplace

Danny guested on Chris Isaak's *San Francisco Days* album in 1993

The first guitarist he remembered seeing play live was Roy Clark at age 11

Danny Gatton just months before his death in 1994 with his Fender doubleneck

Photo: Andrew Lepley/Redferns/Getty

Danny Fans

'Danny Gatton was a man who comes closer than anyone else to being the best guitar player to ever live'
Steve Vai

was growing. A 1989 issue of *Guitar Player* called him 'the world's greatest unknown guitarist', and while he was a world away from the top-hatted Slash, axeman du jour, he knew few rivals as a guitarist's guitarist. The all-instrumental *Unfinished Business* (released in '87 on NRG, the label founded by his mother Norma Rae Gatton) made him a hip name to drop in musicians' circles, and was to prove the beginning of Danny's long-awaited commercial breakthrough.

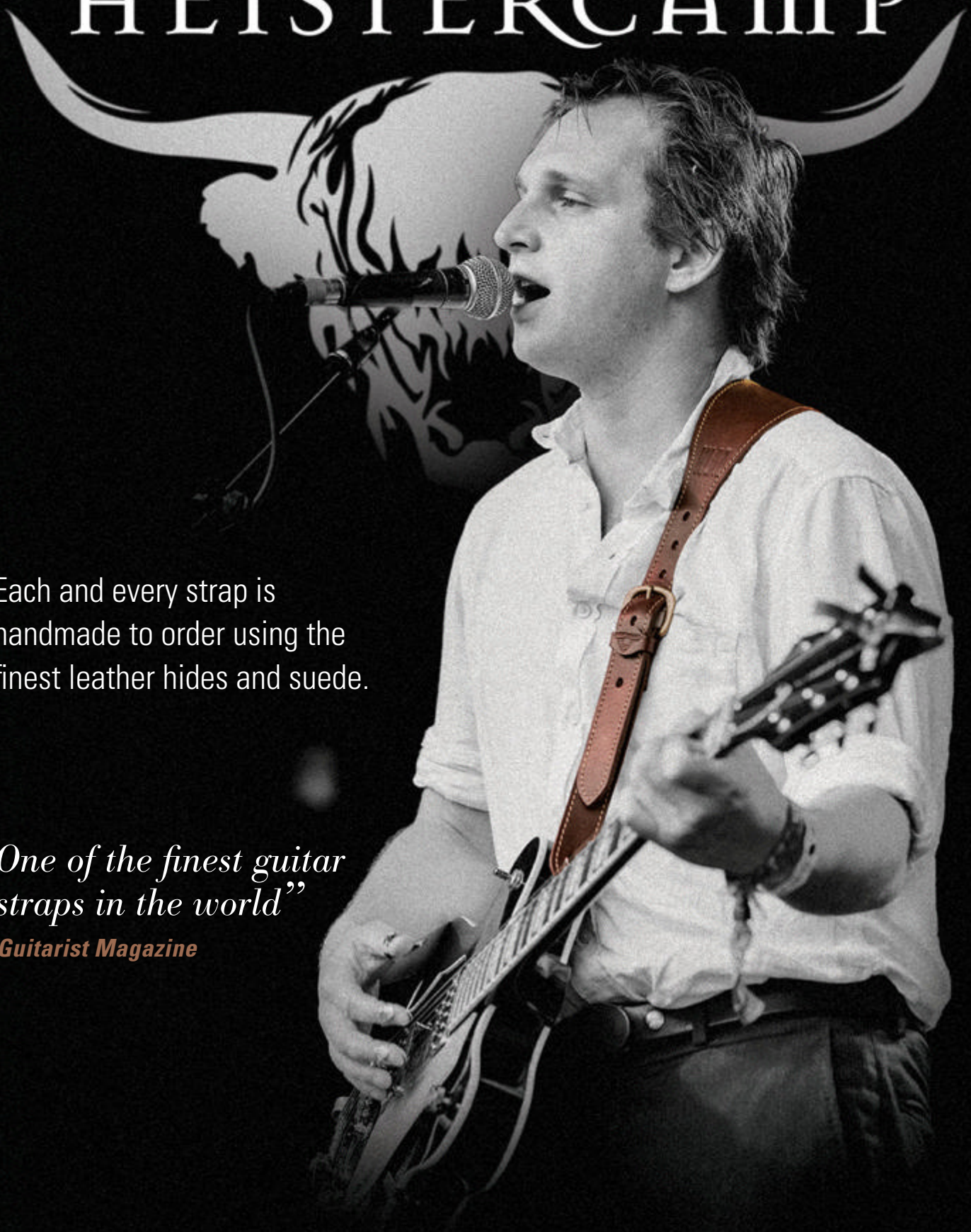
This finally came when the rockabilly-styled *Elmira Street Boogie*, a track from 1991's *88 Elmira Street*, won a Grammy nomination for Best Rock Instrumental. It seemed like the bells on the fruit machine had all lined up at last. But the album sold poorly, and only one more major label release, *Cruisin' Deuces*, emerged in 1993 before a shake-up at Elektra left him out in the cold. He'd brought in guests Rodney Crowell and Delbert McClinton in an effort to appease the music machine and deviate from his instrumental-only policy, but money was the bottom line, and his albums just didn't sell enough. Diversity did not add up to dollars.

Danny Gatton's technique and musicianship were always going to appeal to fellow players, but it never got further than that. Even ringing endorsements like *Entertainment Weekly*'s 'Danny Gatton lets his stunning electric-guitar chops loose on a barroom collection of R&B, rockabilly and blues...' didn't shift sufficient units.

Even now, 20 years after his death, there is no shortage of legends ready to champion the late, great Gatton. Indeed, in 1998, just four years after his passing, a bevy of country/roots guitarists turned out in a two-day festival to honour his life. They included Albert Lee, Rodney Crowell, Steve Earle, John Jorgenson, Jerry Douglas, Vince Gill, Radney Foster, and Amos Garrett.

Many albums are available, thanks to the diligence of Norma Gatton, but perhaps the first step (after consulting www.dannygatton.com) is to scour YouTube, where the sheer effortlessness of Danny's style comes across better than on record. One excerpt from a 1989 gig shows him handing his Tele to a 12 year-old Joe Bonamassa. The youthful Bonamassa makes the most of an early turn in the spotlight. Yet as one of several hundred posters responding to the clip remarks, this was one teacher who would not be humbled by his pupil – or, indeed, anyone.

HEISTERCAMP



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Johnny Kidd and the Pirates; Mick Green, with Les Paul Junior, is on the right

PLAY LIKE

Mick Green

One of Britain's first great guitar blasters, the late Mick Green was a cool rhythm/solo player with a fabulous sound. **Douglas Noble** tips his hat to a man who really rocked

Mick Green's biting, slashing sound – often created on a Telecaster – may not seem too revolutionary by today's standards, but in Britain in the early '60s this assertive, trebly guitar attack came as little short of a revelation. Mick Green's distinctive solos formed a vital part of the appeal of Johnny Kidd and the Pirates; true, guitar solos in songs were few and far between around this time, but Mick Green also had genuine, unmistakable flair.

Green's sound and the way he structured his solos made him a major influence on many British guitarists such as Ritchie Blackmore, Mark Knopfler, George Harrison and Eric Clapton. The Who – once a support act to Johnny Kidd and the Pirates – partly based their sound on the Pirates' approach, and Green's then-amazing technique of combining rhythm guitar and lead guitar was later a major influence on Dr Feelgood's demented Tele shredder, Wilko Johnson.

Green's playing with Johnny Kidd and the Pirates can be heard on *25 Greatest Hits* (1998), although it's important to remember that he did not play on all the songs. Particularly, he's often associated with Kidd's classic *Shakin' All Over*, but that was not Mick Green; it was session guitarist Joe Moretti, standing in for Alan Caddy.

Johnny Kidd was instrumental in shaping Mick Green's technique. 'Kidd was a very visual artist, and he said that it looked better to have the singer in the centre and a guitarist either side,' said Green in *Guitar & Bass* Issue 3 No 7. 'So you had to do the rhythm part and then you had to do a lead, and sometimes they'd spill into one. Anyway, you've got to make as much racket as you can when there's only three of you.'

Green's reputation grew quicker than that of Johnny Kidd and the Pirates, and in 1964 he left to join the Dakotas, at the time enjoying high chart placings and working as the backing band for Billy J Kramer. Green can be heard on the Dakotas' hit *Trains And Boats And Planes*.

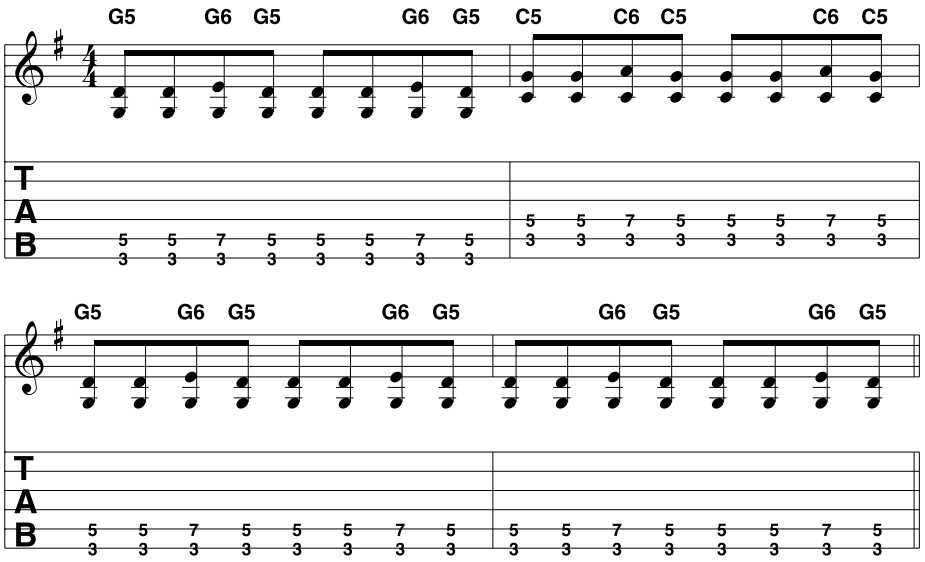
After working with Kramer and the Dakotas, Green joined the Cliff Bennett Band. By now a talented and versatile sideman, he jumped ship again and played with Engelbert Humperdinck for six years. Although it was a well-paid gig, Humperdinck had little real need for Green's raw, trademark sound. 'I left Engelbert because I was losing touch with reality,' he bemoaned. 'Life was becoming too easy for my own good!'

Although Johnny Kidd died in a car crash in 1966, the Pirates reformed in 1976. The band's blend of rock'n'roll, blues and rockabilly lent them an affinity with the punk scene, and the reformed rockers soon built up a cult following. They toured widely, releasing the appallingly-titled *Don't Munchen It – Live In Europe 1978* (currently not available), before their final gig in Camden in 1983. Green also recorded a solo album *Painkiller* (not available either) and toured with his own band, featuring his son Lloyd on bass.

Mick Green's fans were delighted when the man emerged from obscurity to play with Paul McCartney on the ex-Beatle's 'return to rock'n'roll' albums: *Choba B CCCP* (1988), translating as *Back In The USSR*; *Run Devil Run* (1999), and the companion DVD *Live At The Cavern Club* (2000). Green's occasional stints with McCartney gave him wider exposure than at any time in his career.

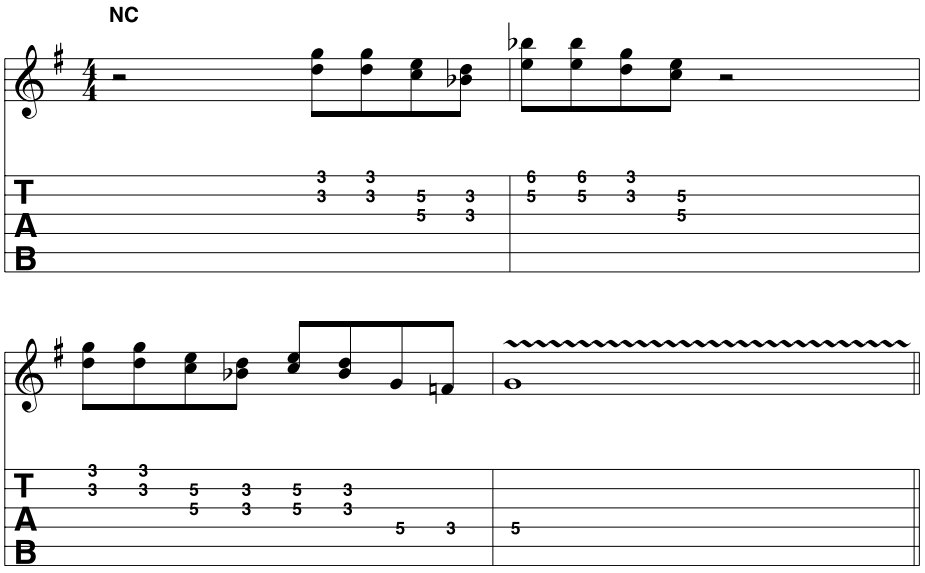
1 5 AND 6 CHORD RHYTHM GUITAR

This exercise shows a typical rock'n'roll rhythm guitar part using 5 and 6 chords on the lower strings. The voicing of the 5 chord here consists of the root and fifth degree of the scale; the voicing of the 6 chord consists of the root and the sixth. Instead of hitting each chord twice, try playing the 6 chord only once, then returning to the 5 chord; this will give the rhythm guitar part greater forward momentum. Different feels can be given to this part by using different pick directions: try playing with all downstrokes, then with alternate pick directions. Other moods can be created by playing with a triplet feel, or in a shuffle rhythm.



2 DOUBLE STOP LEADS

Lead parts can be given a fuller sound by playing double stops – two notes played simultaneously on adjacent strings, often at the same fret. Chuck Berry pioneered this style of playing in rock'n'roll – have a listen to the intro of the classic *Johnny B Goode*. When the two-note double stops (or diads, the correct technical name) are played at the same fret on adjacent strings, they can be fingered by lying the fretting hand finger flat across the strings. Try playing with all downstrokes to give the notes a consistent tone.



The following pages look at three different methods Mick Green employed to combine rhythm and lead to such great effect. Exercise 1 shows a stock rock'n'roll rhythm guitar part; Exercise 2 shows another stock rock'n'roll lead part but using double stops, then Exercise 3 combines the two. Exercise 4 shows a lead part based on partial chords, and Exercise 5 shows a lead part plucked with the fingers and thumb, enabling a lead part to be played with bass notes.

Mick Green was a uniquely remarkable and effective player, but he was not particularly fond of self-analysis. 'I've never taken much notice of what's written about me,' he once said. 'At the end of the day, all you're doing is just playing...'

'CASTER SUGAR

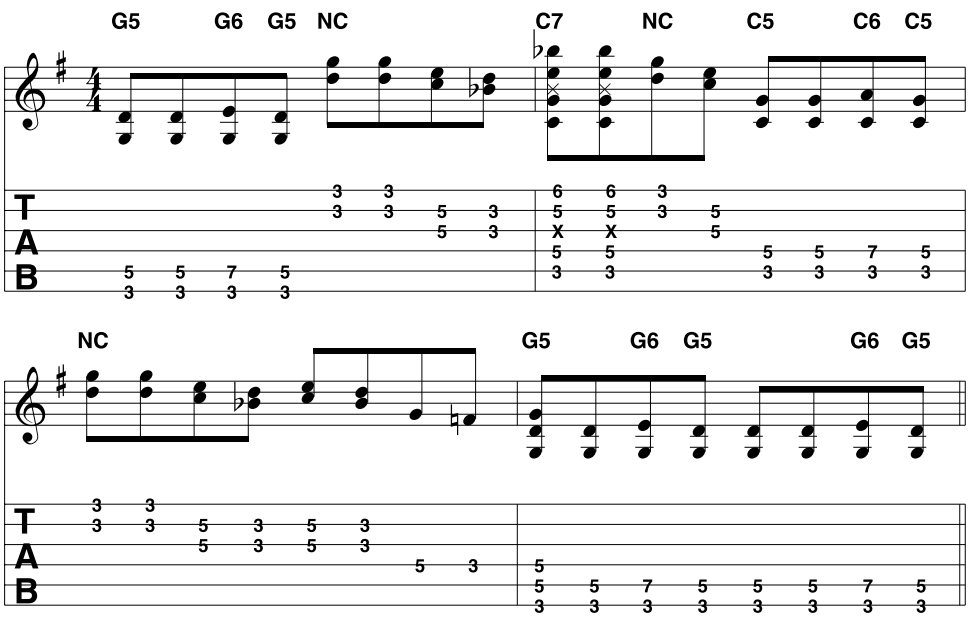
Mick Green's interest in the guitar was sparked at the age of 13. Stuck in Putney Hospital waiting to have his tonsils removed, he encountered a real, live teddy boy for the first time. 'He had a pointed hairdo that could cut through fog, and he kept talking about Gene Vincent and Lonnie Donegan. When I got home, I bought myself a £5 Spanish guitar.'

Later on Green moved on to a Hofner, then an Antoria, which was swiftly followed by a double-cutaway Les Paul Junior (the Junior is pictured in his hands on the opposite page). Finally, he settled on a Telecaster, never having been much taken by the Strat: 'I always thought the Strat was a bit poncified. The Telecaster was a working instrument, a man's guitar!'

Nevertheless, on Paul McCartney's *Run Devil Run* Green is credited with playing a black maple-neck Fender Strat, perhaps chosen in order to offer greater tonal contrast with the sound of fellow guitarist David Gilmour, who played his battered '55 sunburst bound-edge Custom Esquire with the extra neck pickup personally added by Seymour Duncan. On McCartney's *Live At The Cavern* DVD, Mick Green played a Telecaster and a red Strat.

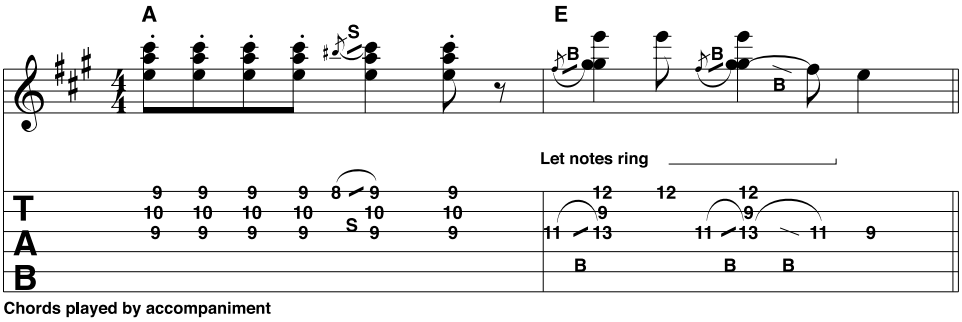
3 COMBINING LEAD AND RHYTHM

Mick Green is known above all for his ability to combine rhythm and lead, and this exercise combines the rhythm guitar part in Exercise 1 and the lead part in Exercise 2. To spell it out, the first bar consists of the first two beats of the rhythm guitar part from the first exercise, followed by the start of the lead phrase from the second. Bar two starts with a four-note voicing of C7 that combines the lead part in bar two of Exercise 2 with the first two C5 chords in the second bar of Exercise 1. This bar then carries on with the lead part from Exercise 2 plus the rhythm guitar part on beats three and four, and bar three consists entirely of the lead part from Exercise 2. Note how the chord in bar four on the first quaver adds the last note of the lead phrase to the top of the chord.



4 CHORDAL LEAD PLAYING

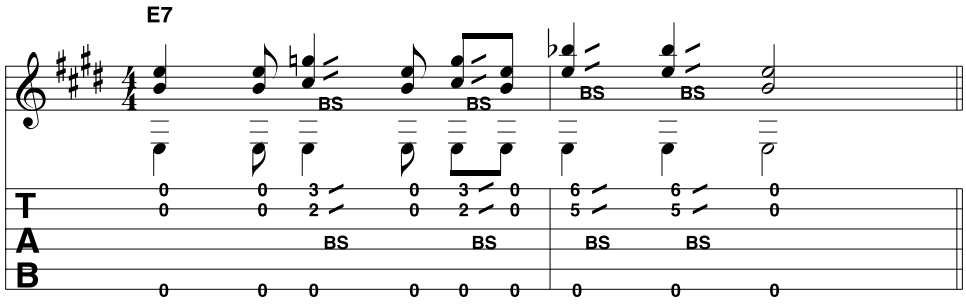
Green started his solo in Johnny Kidd and The Pirates' *I'll Never Get Over You* with partial chords similar to these. When the solo kicks off, you can hear the rhythm part drop out as Mick switches to lead, the solo supported only by drums and bass. He plays the first eight bars of this 10-bar solo using partial chords, with single-note phrases in the last two bars only.



This exercise starts with the top three notes of the basic open D chord played high up the fretboard, making an A chord. Note the staccato on the triad in the first bar, shown by the dot above the notes in the notation; this gives the opening of the solo a little more character. The slide on the top string on the third beat involves fingering the note with the first finger; do this from the beginning of the bar or just when required. For a nice full sound, be sure to follow the 'let notes ring' sign in the second bar; try using the fourth finger to hold down E on the top string, 12th fret.

5 FINGERPICKING

In his first solo in *Honey Hush* on Paul McCartney's *Live At The Cavern Club* DVD, Green created a bigger sound by playing double stops on the upper strings while also hitting a bottom E at the same time. He plucked the bottom string with the thumb and sounded the top two strings by brushing them with the middle finger; this 'brushing' motion perhaps does not guarantee plucking the top two strings as equally in volume as plucking the strings with index and middle fingers (index to pluck the second string, middle to pluck the top string), but it's the feel that's important, not exact technical precision. 'BS' means 'bend sharp', so bend the notes sharp by about a quarter tone for a great bluesy effect.



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Photos: Mike Prior

Magic Johnson

The music world celebrated when British R&B hero and ferocious guitarist Wilko Johnson came back from the brink with a new lease of life. **Rik Flynn** hears about his musical roots and that signature black and red Telecaster

Aside from a smattering of sportsmen and a pioneer of deep sea fishing, Canvey Island is pretty much known for two things; its skyline-consuming petrochemical plants and Wilko Johnson's band of underground heroes, Dr Feelgood, four unkempt rebels who came out of the ether with an unfashionable melee of old-school Brit R&B, blues and fiery rock'n'roll. Perhaps hailing from a seven-miles-squared piece of land just off the south coast of Essex has its advantages.

'It's an odd place,' chuckles Johnson. 'People wouldn't dare to go over to Canvey Island. They thought it was a swamp with some shacks on it... which is basically what it was, come to think about it! It was like being an outsider – and musically, that's where we were. We did what we wanted to do, we weren't thinking in terms of anything else. Coming from Canvey Island made you feel like you had something to prove.'

'Coming from Canvey Island made you feel like you had something to prove'

Wilko Johnson and Dr Feelgood, then, were the living embodiment of the 'local' band, literally detached from the mainland. It's a metaphor that mirrors their position in the musical spectrum of the time. The vision was theirs... but just as important was their uncontainable attitude and onstage swagger.

In the past few years, of course, Wilko has zoomed from underground rhythm and blues cult guitar hero to attain the status of a national treasure. Hospitalised in 2012, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer; given less than a year to live, he embarked upon a farewell tour with a gleeful, positive attitude that won universal acclaim, and recorded an album with Roger Daltrey, *Going Back Home*, that would, he assumed, be the last thing he ever did. Then, in early 2014, he received an astonishing reprieve; his condition was found to be operable. Today, to the music world's unalloyed joy, Wilko is looking at the possibility of many years of sonic mayhem ahead.

The profile of Wilko and Dr Feelgood was hugely boosted in 2009 with the appearance of a remarkable documentary, *Oil City Confidential*, directed by filmmaker Julian Temple (*Sex Pistols No. 1, The Great Rock And Roll Swindle*). Wilko threw himself into the task of recalling Canvey Island's music scene with typical enthusiasm.

'When Dr Feelgood's manager told me Julian wanted to make a film, my first reaction was surprise... I mean, how are you gonna do it!?' Wilko laughs. 'He said the first thing he wanted to do was go over to the oil depot on Canvey Island at night and project films of Dr Feelgood onto the side of these big tanks and interview us in front of them. I thought "F***ing hell! This sounds great!"

Despite a lifetime with the omnipresent shadow of the oil works blocking the light from his bedroom window, it was a first for Wilko. 'It was such an experience,' he recalls. 'When you go up on Canvey Island you're always aware of the oil works, but no

What? A Strat? Wilko's had this '62 since Dr Feelgood's first record deal. 'A classic design. You can't touch it'

The latest Joseph Kay replica (above) and the original (below)

Photos: Mike Prior

Wilko's famous black and red Telecaster, with Bo Diddley's signature (above left)

one ever goes there. I'd never been there in my life, so going in the night time was weirder still. Standing there with these great big pictures – me and Lee Brilleaux 30 years ago... silent, of course. It was so weird, I wanted to stand there all night!'

Ever the humble man, Wilko struggled to watch it on the big screen. 'I didn't see the film until they first showed it at the National Film Theatre,' he goes on. 'I don't like looking at films with myself in them. I was sitting next to my son and kind of looking through my fingers. For one thing, it was the first time I'd ever really seen live clips of Dr Feelgood... but then it was like, "Bloody hell, we were pretty good!"'

Let it bleed WILKO'S FINGERS

Perhaps one of the things that separated Johnson from his guitar hero Mick Green was the fact that he never uses a plectrum. 'I tell people that's why I have the red scratchplate!' laughs Wilko. 'So the men can't see the blood! I've got used to it. It don't happen so much anymore! The style I'm actually playing really is a plectrum technique and Mick Green certainly used one. My excuse is that actually I'm left-handed and I started off playing that way round and I was rubbish, so I decided to learn the other way round, but I couldn't hang onto the plectrums! It's saved me a fortune over the years!' By blending his own style with Mick Green's and after a few pints of the old claret lost, Wilko forged the sound that captured the moment.

The 'greatest local band in the world' didn't take long to hit the national stage. 'We just wanted to play that kind of thing 'cos it's what we liked,' says Wilko. 'Then we started playing gigs in London and suddenly everyone was interested. Then we realised we were in contention – we weren't just a local band anymore. There was a strong feeling about what we were doing. We were going against the way things were. When it started getting really popular it didn't really surprise me... I thought "People like this music! You can really tap your foot to it."'

The Feelgoods' debut, *Down By The Jetty* – released in unfashionable mono – kicked things off. The second, *Malpractice*, took them in to the Top 20 and the third, the live *Stupidity* (a warts'n'all recording with Johnson insisting on no overdubs) hit No 1 in the UK. However, despite writing all the tunes, Johnson's tenure with the band would prove to be cut short, as tensions began to simmer with Lee Brilleaux after the release of *Sneakin' Suspicion*, the follow-up to *Stupidity*. 'With the live show there were two frontmen, if you like. People used to wonder if this led to anything going wrong,' says Wilko. 'I think not... I was always taking my cue from Lee. As far as I was concerned he was like the leader. Anything I would do would be reacting to him – I wasn't trying to upstage him or anything. I was acting with him.'

So how did it all unravel? 'Towards the end Lee and I really couldn't stand each other! I don't know why – this kind of animosity had grown up. In 1976 we were touring in America quite a bit and all sorts of things started to worry to me 'cos I was the one that wrote the songs. It's great, writing, but once you've done your first album it becomes a bit of a headache and I think that that was maybe something the others didn't understand. I would try and get them to write stuff, but they didn't. When things started to get a little strained personally, I'm proud to say that – except for one spectacular exception – we never took it onstage. We weren't bad-vibing each other on stage. You can start shouting later on. We'd go on there and do the thing.

'That's the way things ended up. They ended up badly, but I never wanted that to obscure my feelings about that band. I mean, they chucked me out, let's get that straight... and it was very hurtful for me. After it happened I thought, I didn't wanna come away with a load of bitterness. Perhaps it was the best thing that

ever happened to me. I don't know. Most of it was just really great, and that's the way I like to look at it. I cannot even now really explain what the problem was, so I don't think about it.'

Wilko quickly moved on to other things, amongst them a new band, Solid Senders, as well as a stint as guitarist with the Blockheads, but the documentary refreshed his memory of past glories without bitterness. 'When we started filming I started remembering things,' Johnson reflects. 'I suppose the best bit was when it all started happening – that was a great feeling. Our music was very simple and not reliant upon technology – quite different from what was going down in the '70s.'

Although the band scored their first Top 10 hit, *Milk And Alcohol*, with new guitarist John 'Gypie' Mayo, the original grit was somewhat lost and the punk era ushered in a new wave of bands. But ask any one of those bands and they'll tell you that Dr Feelgood were an intrinsic part of the formation of the punk sound.

'The punk thing all kind of followed after us – I know 'cos I got to know a lot of these people,' says Wilko. 'Most if not all of the punk bands had been to see Dr Feelgood the year before punk. When it all started happening we were all in America. I thought that when we started succeeding it was gonna lead to a big rhythm and blues thing just like the Rolling ↦

Rock'n'roll star: Wilko with his home-built observatory

Turning JAPANESE

Following his diagnosis Wilko could easily have limited his travels to British and European gigs within easy reach, but he made sure he paid a return visit to a place that has a deep place in his heart. 'I love Japan, I really do,' he says. 'I think we've been about 25 times or something, and I've been two or three times myself just on holiday 'cos I like it there so much. Normally when we go there we do a bit of a tour. We don't just do Tokyo and Osaka, we go to Sapporo and Nagasaki and other places. The people down there are just so grateful.

'People came up to us after our gigs going, "Thank you so much for coming to Japan!" I've got these letters that people have sent me... they're really touching because of course many people were cancelling their concerts, and I think they were feeling a little bit rejected or something. I wish we could have done more.'

Stones did in the '60s, but it didn't. In fact a lot of the punk bands were real beginners, they'd just started, so a lot of what we were doing led to that. What they understood was the energy and the commitment of going flat-out – and that's what they did! I think that's what we did for the punk thing!"

Although he'd shy away from taking all the glory from his fellow bandmates, it was Wilko that truly embodied that all-important 'energy'. How did his choppy, adrenaline-fuelled sound come about?

'Mick Green!' comes the short answer. 'I can remember discovering him and being intrigued by the way he played. When the first Rolling Stones album came out two or three of us took the day off school and went and bought their album, and while we were in the record shop I'm flicking through these secondhand singles and I found *A Shot Of Rhythm And Blues* by Johnny Kidd and the Pirates with this Mick Green fella. We went back to someone's place and spent the afternoon just playing the Stones album. It was so exciting, but I kept putting on this Johnny Kidd record and I was like, "This Stones record is fantastic, but there's something about this guitar playing that I really like," and I decided to dedicate myself to trying to copy him.

'The thing that hit me was his style. It was so American. It was a rhythm and blues style, and it didn't sound like what most people were doing over here. One of the many things that intrigued me was when I found out the Pirates didn't have a rhythm guitarist. It was all one guy, and I thought that was great, and I started learning how to do it. That influences the whole way I play, really. I just sat there playing the records over and over trying to work it out.

'But I worked out a way of doing it which of course was wrong – it's not the way Mick Green did it. So if you like, I've ended up with my own style. There are things in what I do... if I look at them I realise that what they are is a misinterpretation, a misunderstanding of something I've heard, but in fact what you end up with is something that's okay and totally your own. Someone does something that gets to you and it's just so exciting, and you aim for it and land somewhere near it.'

Though his frenetic guitar style was central to the Feelgoods' success, Wilko's onstage antics played an equal part. 'What I did on stage, the source of it all really came from Lee Brilleaux,' states Johnson. 'There was just a fantastic energy – a lot of it was kind of coming from tension.

'Also, I try and explain to people... you know when you go down to the disco and some sound comes on and you really dig that sound and maybe there's a fantastic girl... you go up there and you start dancing, and if you stopped and thought for a moment you'd realise you looked ridiculous, but you don't care. It's a little bit like that with what I do. It makes me feel like that – kind of twitchy! You've got to point Percy at the people!' We couldn't have put it better ourselves.

> *'I worked out a way of playing like Mick Green, but it was wrong. That's my style'*

Wilko's choice of a Tele was again a result of the effect his hero had on him. 'Mick Green played one, it's as simple as that!' admits Wilko. 'I'd seen him on the television with a Telecaster and I wanted one – they weren't actually very fashionable at that time. In the big window of the guitar shop in Southend they had two guitars that they couldn't sell 'cos they were just too expensive, and one was this Telecaster. It was £107. I wished I could get it, but £107!! My Dad used to earn £12 a week as a gas fitter, so it was too much.'

Ever the entrepreneur, Johnson found a way around the issue. 'I wanted the guitar more and more, and they couldn't sell it. Then they put the price down to £100, or even £90 just to unload it. My mum wouldn't let me have anything on credit, so I went into the shop and said "Listen, I really want this guitar, can I pay for it week by week?"

'I had this card and I saved up all my dinner money, and every Saturday I'd give them what I had and they'd write it down on this card and then they would bring

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Wilko and Lee Brilleaux onstage with Dr Feelgood at the Hammersmith Palais in December 1976

Photo: David Corio/Michael Ochs/getty

the guitar out and let me play it for half an hour. Then, of course, it would have to go back.

'I said to myself, "When summer comes I'm gonna get a job as a bus conductor and I'll be able to pay it off." I did get that job, but man, I couldn't stand it – it was terrible. So I persuaded my girlfriend that it would be a good idea to draw out all the money from her post office savings account and pay the last £60 for the Tele. I said, "Don't tell your mum and dad!" That's how I bought it. I never did pay her back, but I did marry her!'

Soon the guitar was to take on the famous red and black finish. 'I used to wear this red and black shirt,' Wilko recalls. 'The Tele was sunburst when I got it, so I said to the roadie, "Get a red scratchplate made for it and paint it black". That's the guitar I used all the time. Just after that Teles started to become rather fashionable – I think Jeff Beck and people were using them – and the shop asked if they could have it back!'

Wilko's old Tele features on pretty much everything he's ever recorded, but eventually he put it out to pasture. 'It started getting a bit sentimental, so I had someone go out and get me a pre-CBS Telecaster.'

After a few reissues, Wilko moved on to a custom guitar. 'I started using the Japanese ones I'd seen in Tokyo,' he continues. 'Now I've just got this one that Joseph Kay made. It's brilliant. He said he could make me one based on the old one, exactly the same. He started going on about kinds of wood and I was like "I dunno, man, just make the thing!" I think it's probably the best guitar I've ever played. Every note is true. You won't find no buzzes or rattles on it. I think I've had about six guitars in my whole life and I've still got five of them, so I don't know much about new guitars. I think it's just very well made.'

Although for many years Wilko used a Fender Twin, and before that an HH combo customised with PA speakers, he recently started using a boutique amp made by Dennis Cornell. 'He lives around the corner, actually,' Wilko explains. 'He's got a kind of cottage industry making amps. A couple of years ago someone in the support band came up to me and said "What do you think of this amp?" I thought it was very good so I went round the corner and got myself one. It's just got one speaker in it, but it's really powerful.'

> *'I like an amp with the knobs set halfway and a good Tele that's not falling to bits'*

When it comes to Wilko's inimitable style, simplicity really is the key. 'I always like to use bog-standard equipment,' he states. 'If I have a Telecaster, I like it to be a straight Telecaster. I don't like to change the pickups or have anything extra on it, and with amplifiers I never use pedals or anything like that, I just plug straight in. I like an amplifier where you can just set the knobs up to halfway and it'll sound right. I'm very happy with that amplifier, and it's always been the Telecaster for me, so if I've got a good pre-CBS style Telecaster that's not falling to bits, then I'm a happy man!'

An appearance on *Jools Holland's Hootenanny* on 31 December 2014 demonstrated that Wilko is still committed to the three-piece format that has framed his ferocious guitar playing for so long. 'If you really wanna come into your own then it's got to be a three-piece,' smiles Wilko. 'Just like the whole thing with Feelgood – it was basic. A three-piece is as far as you can go, really. With good music, there's got to be gaps in it!'

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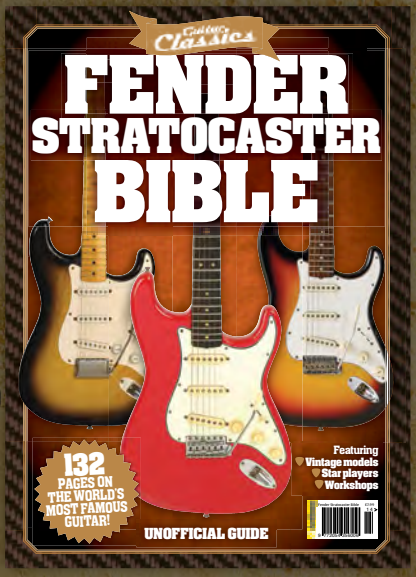

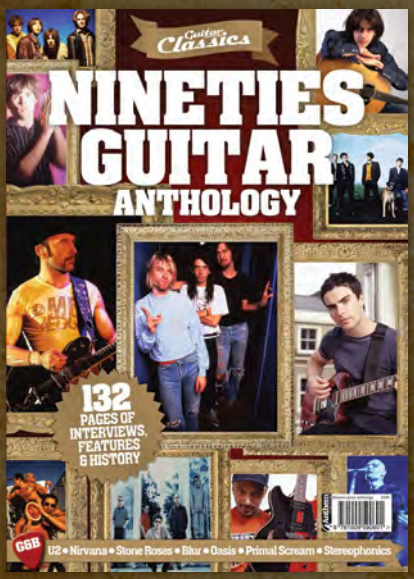

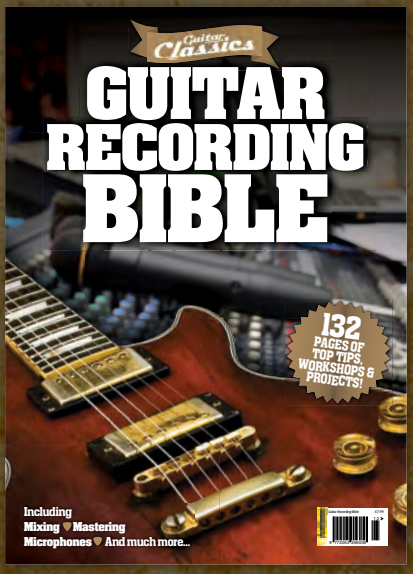

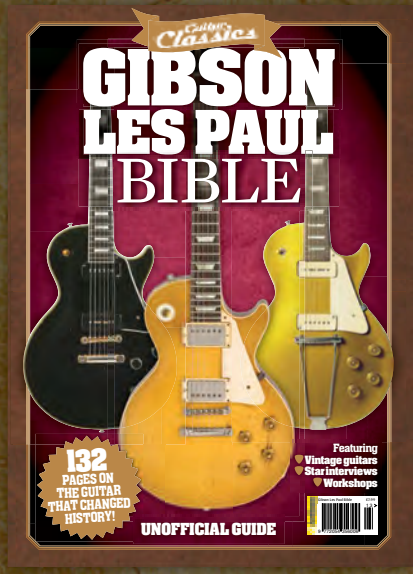

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Hip To Be SQUARE

Though out-flashed by the stylish Stratocaster and Jazzmaster, the plain, plank-bodied Telecaster showed that a simple ol' country boy could play a telling role in the 1960s, the Decade Of Love. Dave Hunter has the story

The abiding image of the Fender Telecaster is one lit in a 1950s monochrome. We see it in the contrasting patina of burnished nickel, scuffed black pickguard, and worn blonde nitro on an ash body with maple neck; Jimmy Bryant's western boot toeing an early Broadcaster; Paul Burlison's knife-creased slacks propping a white-guard Esquire. It all plays so well in black and white. However, come the decade of love, of peace, of flower power and of colour, perhaps the Telecaster was looking a shade dull. The beat was booming, the electric guitar was bursting out in multifarious shapes, hues and designs, and the square hard-tailed plank was already looking so, well, yesterday.

Look past the flares, the hair, and the patchouli, though, and the old Telecaster was often still proving the sharpest tool in the box, and making some of the most radical sounds in what was arguably the most innovative decade in the history of popular music. Meanwhile, Fender wasn't willing to let its original solidbody electric sit idle either, and sought to update it in several significant ways, without ever really altering the main lines of the blueprint that Leo had got so right in the first place. Far from fading away, the Telecaster earned a new lease of life, even if its main turns were less often in the spotlight than they had been a decade before. Join us to follow the twisting tale of the Telecaster in the 1960s...

The 1965 catalogue shows a blonde Esquire, a rare mahogany-body Tele and a sunburst Custom Telecaster

Below, the '63 line up with Custom Esquire and Tele. The text promised 'a wide tone response from ringing "take off" to soft rhythm tones'

Every guitar fan knows the story, or the bones of it at least. In 1950 Fender scored a major first with the release of a guitar briefly called the Esquire, then Broadcaster, then Telecaster (while the Esquire became its single-pickup sibling). It was the first solidbody electric guitar put into mass production, and represented a complete redrawing of the form of the Spanish guitar. And if much of the music world first laughed at his 'canoe paddle', Leo was the one laughing by the end of the decade. Gibson's far more complex stab at a solidbody was fading fast after less than eight years on the market, while the Telecaster, even in the wake of the far sexier Stratocaster, was still selling strongly, firmly established as an industry standard. And then the clock ticked, the decade turned, and so many things seemed to change. The Telecaster was simply cruising, or was allowed to, it might seem, while new developments all over the scene aimed for sharp points and radical curves.

The competition gets spacey

The normally staid, traditional Gibson took a couple of real space shots in 1958 with the stylistically adventurous yet commercially doomed Explorer and Flying V, then updated the Les Paul Standard in 1961 to the radical, devil-horned SG body style. Two years later, Kalamazoo followed this trick with the chic Detroit-influenced, reverse-bodied Firebird. Gretsch had long been dabbling heavily in sparkle, flash colours and lots of fancy knobs, while even Fender had closed the decade with the hip new Jazzmaster, and partnered it with the equally curvaceous Jaguar in 1962. Sure, the Telecaster had received some of the minor specs and components updates that were applied to the Fender line in general, but it appeared quaintly dated nonetheless. This guitar had kicked off a revolution, but was quickly being left in its wake. Was it possible that the Telecaster was actually becoming redundant as the new decade dawned?

As the '50s rolled into the '60s, the Telecaster was still unapologetically Fender's shot at the Country & Western player, and a huge success it was. Leo and cohorts had developed it with the close consultation of several leading guitarists on the scene and it fit the bill perfectly, nailing a bright, cutting, steel-guitar-like twang that sliced through a lo-fi recording or a muddy stage mix. The truth is, that the Tele was still a big, big market sector for Fender, and while the company wanted to grab the new surfers and rock'n'rollers, it wasn't worth changing the Telecaster so much that it no longer suited the many players who still embraced it. Sales records from the era are difficult to pin down, but the most reliable reports indicate that the Telecaster continued to outstrip the Stratocaster throughout the '60s, remaining Fender's biggest seller.

The Telecaster was starting to look quaintly dated. Was it possible that it was becoming redundant as the new decade dawned?

A subtle evolution

For all this, the Telecaster really did evolve in many ways over the course of the decade, while serving as a platform for some interesting new variations on the form. A standard Telecaster from 1969 looks far more like a Tele from 1959 than, say, two Strats from the same years, but there were changes made on a steady basis.

The most noticeable telltale sign of an early '60s Tele actually came to the format shortly before the turn of the decade. In 1959, Fender gave its original solidbody the rosewood fingerboard that had debuted on the new Jazzmaster the year before. From that point on, the last of the revered pre-CBS Telecasters and Esquires all had these darker rosewood-fronted necks, other than some very rare reported custom-order maple neck examples. Fender dealers, and many Fender sales reps, had inquired about the possibility of a darker fingerboard for years. The look would ally Fender guitars with more

Fender TIMELINE

Esoteric and essential Fender Telecaster events of the 1960s

1959
Six months before the '60s Fender unveils the rosewood fingerboard Tele at summer NAMM, the look that would define the pre-CBS Teles of the '60s

1963
On 25 March 1963 Johnny Cash records *Ring of Fire*, with guitarist Luther Perkins laying down his seminal 'boom-chicka-boom-chicka' rhythm style on a Fender Esquire

1963
This was the year that Mick Green recorded several songs with Johnny Kidd and the Pirates. *Hungry For Love* and *I'll Never Get Over You* were Top 20 hits, but the frenzied R&B riffage of *My Babe* and others was perhaps more inspired

1965
On 4 January, 1965 Leo departs Fender for the last time as owner of the company, the evening before the finalisation of the sale to CBS for $13.5 million

Above, a veneer-fingerboard '63 Tele with a single-ply white scratchplate; below, a slab-board in fiesta red with a three-ply 'green' guard and bridge cover in place

traditional instruments, making it easier to win over customers who were still hesitant to embrace the 'plank'. Equally importantly, it would do away with the grimy image of the smudged, dirty-looking maple necks that were being seen so often by this time, nearly 10 years into the model's run, as repeated playing wore away these fingerboards' clear nitrocellulose finishes.

Fender initially applied these fingerboards by milling the front of the maple neck flat and gluing on a thick piece of rosewood with a similarly flat underside, producing guitars with what have come to be known as 'slab-board' necks. From around mid-'62, Fender began radiusing the face of the maple neck and attaching a rosewood fingerboard that was radiused on its underside as well as on its playing surface. Some players look back on the later curved 'laminated' or 'round-lam' fingerboards as inferior, largely because, well, they're thinner. They clearly took more effort to construct, however, in an era when good rosewood was still fairly plentiful, so it wasn't really a cost-saving exercise on the maker's part.

Current Fender Custom Shop Master Builder Chris Fleming has his own thoughts on the subject: 'Somebody asked me why I thought Leo decided to do round lams, and although I can't know for sure, I think it was for a couple of reasons.

'One is that he liked the idea that it was kind of a custom way to do it... it was proprietary. And I'd also like to think that he liked the sound of it. I feel like the slab 'board was the way they did it because they had to figure out how to do it quickly. Then they had to tool up to make the rounded 'board, and never looked back.'

The addition of either type of rosewood fingerboard, whether slab or round-lam, does alter the Telecaster's sonic signature ever so slightly, adding a little roundness and warmth and subtracting just a tiny bit of the characteristic maple 'snap' from the attack. That being said, the tonal influence of that fillet of rosewood is minimal, and arguably always overwhelmed by the character of the Telecaster's distinctive pickups, the all-important bridge construction, and the swamp ash or alder body. Put another way, the Tele still had its twang, and the darker fingerboard didn't seem to turn country players against it in the least.

Martin lends a hand

Another arrival to the Tele's décor in 1959, but seen in greater numbers in guitars made in the early '60s, was the white binding added to the Custom Telecaster and Esquire models. Along with a sunburst finish, not often seen on a Tele before that time, the binding seemed enough of a touch to justify the 'Custom' prefix, although even that proved tricky enough for Fender to master in the early days. Help came, according to then-Fender executive Forrest White, as revealed in his book *Fender: The Inside Story*, from an unexpected quarter: 'Fred Martin, of the Martin Guitar Company, had been kind enough to show me through his factory. He showed me the special tool they made to cut binding strips, and what material and what adhesive to use.' Whatever the extent of Martin's assistance, vintage Customs today exhibit few issues with binding deterioration.

The three-ply nitrate pickguard was another addition first made to the Custom Telecaster and Esquire, and it eventually replaced the single-ply plastic 'guard on the standard models in 1963. It seems these highly flammable pickguards were, however, prone to causing difficulties and dangers ↦

1966
In early 1966 the new, thicker CBS-era Fender logo finally hits the Telecaster headstock, first in a 'transitional' gold design with black outline, then in a thick black font by the autumn of 1967

1966
In the summer and autumn of 1966 Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page briefly apply their duelling Esquire and Telecaster to Yardbirds' guitar duties, recording the psychedelic *Happenings Ten Years Time Ago* and R&B rave-up *Stroll On*

1968
In the middle of 1968 Fender debuts a trio of relatively radical new Telecasters in the Thinline, Red Paisley, and Blue Flower. These are the first significant departures since the Custom of nearly a decade before

1969
On 30 January 1969 George Harrison plays his Rosewood Telecaster prototype in the Beatles' last live performance, the famous Apple Building rooftop concert

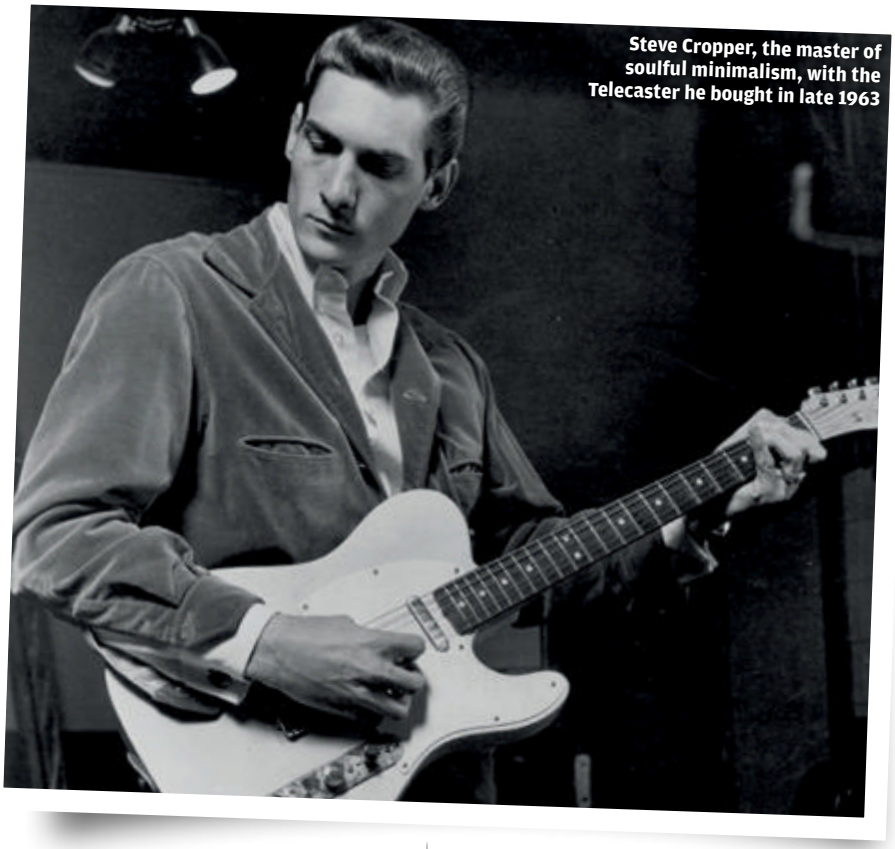
Custom by name, custom by nature

The Custom Telecaster and Custom Esquire were Fender's first significant variations on the original themes for those models, and although they were introduced at the summer NAMM show of 1959, they were more significantly a style of the 1960s, remaining in the catalogue until 1972. Former Fender executive Forrest White, in his book *Fender: The Inside Story*, talks of getting help from the CF Martin guitar company in the effort of getting the binding right on these models, and this tacking toward some traditionalism is a big part of what the Custom models were all about.

The rosewood fingerboard that appeared on most Fender models from mid-1959 into the mid '60s (having been tried out on the Jazzmaster in 1958) worked hand in hand with the front and back body binding and a three-tone sunburst finish to create a look that Fender genuinely felt was 'custom' enough to warrant the name. Underneath it all, the Esquire and Telecaster were still the same slab-bodied planks they'd always been, but hey, they sure looked good.

While sunburst was standard for the Custom models, it would seem that players already willing to break with Tele tradition and play a guitar with a bound body were also more likely to splash out on something other than blonde, and proportionally more of these guitars were finished in custom colours than were standard Fender Teles and Esquires. Beyond these, truly 'custom' custom colours include the glitter Teles made in a range of shades for Don Rich and Buck Owens through the decade, which became a real badge of honour for diehard country pickers.

A Custom Telecaster from 1963



Steve Cropper, the master of soulful minimalism, with the Telecaster he bought in late 1963

Photo: Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

Steve Cropper was rippin' it up with the best of them, launching a boatload of Top 40 hits on riffs fuelled by his Esquire and Telecaster

in production, and were replaced early in 1965 by a three-ply guard made from modern plastics – a good call, since the newer plastic ones would also prove less susceptible to cracking and shrinkage over the years. Even so, the earlier three-ply 'green guard,' so called for the nitrate's minty hue, has become another indicator of the more collectible pre-CBS 1963-'64 Telecaster.

Woods and custom colours

The highly desirable custom colours were available as an official factory option from the late '50s, but became far more common – if still not the norm – in the '60s. The relatively conservative Telecaster was treated to custom colours somewhat less often than the Stratocaster, or the surf-certified Jazzmaster and Jaguar, but when it did, the livelier finish also signalled a substantial change in the makeup of the guitar itself. As supplies of light, well-aged swamp ash became more difficult to obtain, Fender moved more and more toward alder. It was in prevalent use on the Strat from the later-mid '50s, but became the wood of choice on custom-coloured Teles, while ash's broad, distinctive grain was still thought to be essential beneath the original blonde finish. More than cosmetic, the change of tonewood also brought a sonic shift to these guitars. While swamp ash is considered to be a very lively, slightly 'snarly' sounding wood, alder is generally more open and balanced, with firm lows and clear highs. The difference is subtle, but it exists. At the time, though, that change was never noted in Fender literature, and most players very likely had no idea what lurked beneath their daphne blue or dakota red finish.

CBS takes the reins

Plenty of great guitars were made in Fullerton after CBS bought the company from Leo Fender toward the end of 1964, but most players and collectors still demarcate the pre/post-CBS eras in terms of quality, and indeed there would eventually be a noticeable slide into the '70s. More immediately noticeable, though, were the changes brought to several models – first the enlarged logo, and soon after, the wider 'hippy era' Strat headstock.

The Telecaster's humbler status in terms of flash and pop-rock sex appeal helped it escape these alterations a little longer than Fender's other guitars, so Teles well into the latter-mid '60s still offer a lot of pre-CBS character. The Tele retained its 'spaghetti' logo for roughly a year after the Strat's went fat, bold and flared, and the standard Telecaster and Esquire never lost their elegantly petite headstock shape.

The Paisley Tele's 'hippie nightmare' look didn't succeed with many genuine hippies, but it's become a collectible post-CBS Tele

The return of a maple fingerboard option in 1967 meant that a good old blonde Tele looked more like its predecessor of 10 years before than it had for some time. The seminal fingerboard was back courtesy of a new process in which Fender cut a slice of maple from the carved one-piece neck, installed a truss-rod from the front, instead of using a channel in the back that would need filling with a 'skunk stripe,' and re-glued the board to the neck back, resulting in what has come to be known as a 'maple-cap' neck. However much the post-CBS Fenders are derided, several major players have noted that these 'maple-cap' Teles, and others of their era, can be of excellent quality, and usually sound great and play superbly. Brad Paisley, for one, has praised the magic of these, and has logged some of Nashville's biggest hits of recent years on a 1968 paisley Tele with maple-cap neck. 'I feel the maple-capped neck is one of the factors that makes those such good instruments,' he told *Vintage Guitar* magazine in 2005. 'Also, some of the lightest guitars Fender ever made were from the late '60s.'

The Tele goes wild

The Red Paisley Telecaster was one of two special models unveiled in 1968 in an effort to jump on the flower-power bandwagon. Both guitars, the Blue Flower Telecaster alongside it, were created by applying stick-on wallpaper to the front and back of the bodies, finishing the body edges in colour-matched paint, spraying it with a clear coat, and protecting the surface with a clear Plexiglas pickguard. This 'hippy's nightmare' look apparently didn't succeed with many genuine hippies and both were dropped after 1969, but both guitars have become among the more collectible post-CBS Teles in the years since.

Also in 1968, Fender unveiled a longer-lasting variant on the form in the Telecaster Thinline. This model, available in natural-finished ash or mahogany, made a virtue out of some earlier efforts to lighten heavy timbers with hidden chambers by adding a decorative f-hole on the bass-side bout to show off the air inside. The routed chambers altered the classic Tele tone only slightly, adding some roundness to the guitar's resonance, but launched a look that appealed to many. It also provided Fender the first opportunity in 18 years to change the classic pickguard shape with a large, sweeping curve of white pearloid.

The final significant Tele-themed release of the 1960s was one seen only in small numbers, but which has garnered some cult status thanks to the 'Beatle effect'. Late in 1968 Fender constructed two prototype Telecasters made from two slabs of solid rosewood with a thin maple layer between, and a solid rosewood neck. Legend has it that the best body and best neck of the pair were put together, and the resultant guitar flown to London in its own seat to be delivered to George Harrison in person by Fender head Don Randall. However it got there, the Rosewood Telecaster was used extensively by Harrison for the recording of *Let It Be* in January of 1969, and made a live appearance in the famous Beatles rooftop concert atop the Apple building in London shortly after. The Rosewood Telecaster was produced in extremely limited numbers between 1969 and '72; all but the earliest had chambered bodies to cut down on that tonewood's excessive weight.

From twang to rock

One of the ironies of Fender in the '60s is, perhaps, that however much they tried to tart up the Telecaster to appeal to new waves of players – hard rockers or psychedelic popsters – the most prominent Tele-fuelled noises of the decade were usually being made on good old standard models. Latch on to the first images your mind's eye coughs up to fit the phrase '1960s guitar hero' and you're

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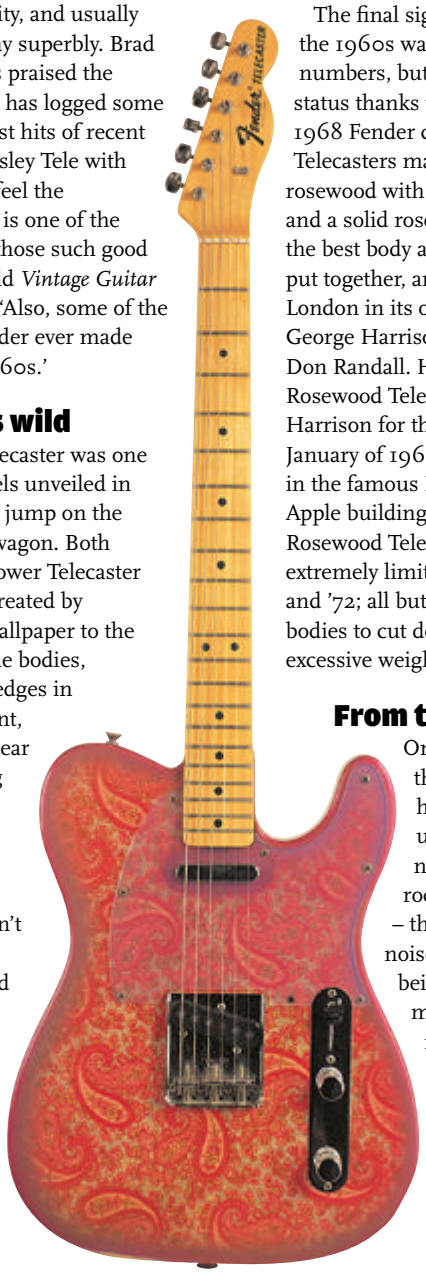


Shot of love: a 1968 Red Paisley Telecaster, as played by James Burton

Teles on vinyl

Three Great Tele-Fuelled Albums from the 1960s

The Fender Telecaster's competition within the solidbody electric guitar field increased exponentially in the 1960s, but the seminal plank still played a substantial role in several classic recordings of the decade. What's more, it branched out from its original country roots to take in blues, R&B, rock, and more...

THE BEST OF BOOKER T AND THE MGs
The band's original *Best Of* came out in 1968, although most classic tracks date to well before that. The organ refrain to *Green Onions* (1962) is so familiar now that it's easy to forget just how beautifully Steve Cropper's spare, angular, and well-paced solo single-handedly defines hip for the era. Also, check out the way Cropper's lithe, wiry rhythm phrasing propels songs like *Jelly Bread* and *Hip-Hug-Her*.

BOB DYLAN: *HIGHWAY 61 REVISITED*
Another subtle example of the Tele's appeal in a powerful song-based context. Al Kooper's spontaneous organ part might have stolen the classic opener to this 1965 album, *Like A Rolling Stone*, but check out Mike Bloomfield's plaintive Telecaster blues licks in *It Takes A Lot To Laugh, It Takes A Train To Cry*, and *Tombstone Blues*, or any of several others here. Bloomfield says he bought his first Telecaster specifically for these dates with Dylan. Good move.

LED ZEPPELIN
For thick, grinding Tele in a classic rock context, you can't do better than Zep's first album, released in 1969. Jimmy Page did most of the tracks on his decorated '59 Telecaster with a rosewood fingerboard, coining so many stand-out riffs that it's pointless to list just a few. But, what the hell, *Communication Breakdown* is absolutely essential.

Above, a rosewood 'board, mahogany-bodied Telecaster Thinline; below, an original-issue Rosewood Telecaster – both made in 1969

likely to come away with someone wielding a fat-toned Les Paul or SG, or a whammy-loaded Stratocaster. The fact is, though, that many of the upper-echelon trendsetters who strutted the stage with these iconic instruments also made musical history on a Telecaster at one time or another, and often simultaneously. Even most hardcore Tele fanatics will concede that the single-cutaway plank didn't quite have the sex appeal of the other big players of the day, and that might have a lot to do with our perception of Jimmy Page strutting the stage with a Les Paul slung low beneath his hips, or Jimi Hendrix tonguing a sleek Stratocaster, lighter fluid at the ready. Few will need reminding, though, that Hendrix actually recorded the solo to *Purple Haze* on a Tele borrowed from bassist Noel Redding, or that Jimmy Page used a 1959 Telecaster with rosewood fingerboard (a gift from Jeff Beck) heavily on Led Zeppelin's first album, and frequently thereafter, including the famed solo on *Stairway To Heaven* from *Led Zeppelin IV*.

Yet even before these iconic late-decade rock sightings, the Telecaster was rippin' it up with the best of 'em. In the early part of the decade Steve Cropper launched a boatload of Top 40 hits on riffs fuelled by his late-'50s Esquire and early-'60s Tele, with Booker T and the MGs and backing artists like Sam and Dave or Otis Redding. Rolling further up the Delta, Muddy Waters laid down his seminal electric blues on a refinished Telecaster repaired with an early '60s Custom Tele neck with rosewood fingerboard (note that this guitar lacked the Custom's defining body binding), while Chicago boy Mike Bloomfield took the blues a step closer to rock, and backed Bob Dylan's infamous electric debut at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, wielding a 1964 Telecaster.

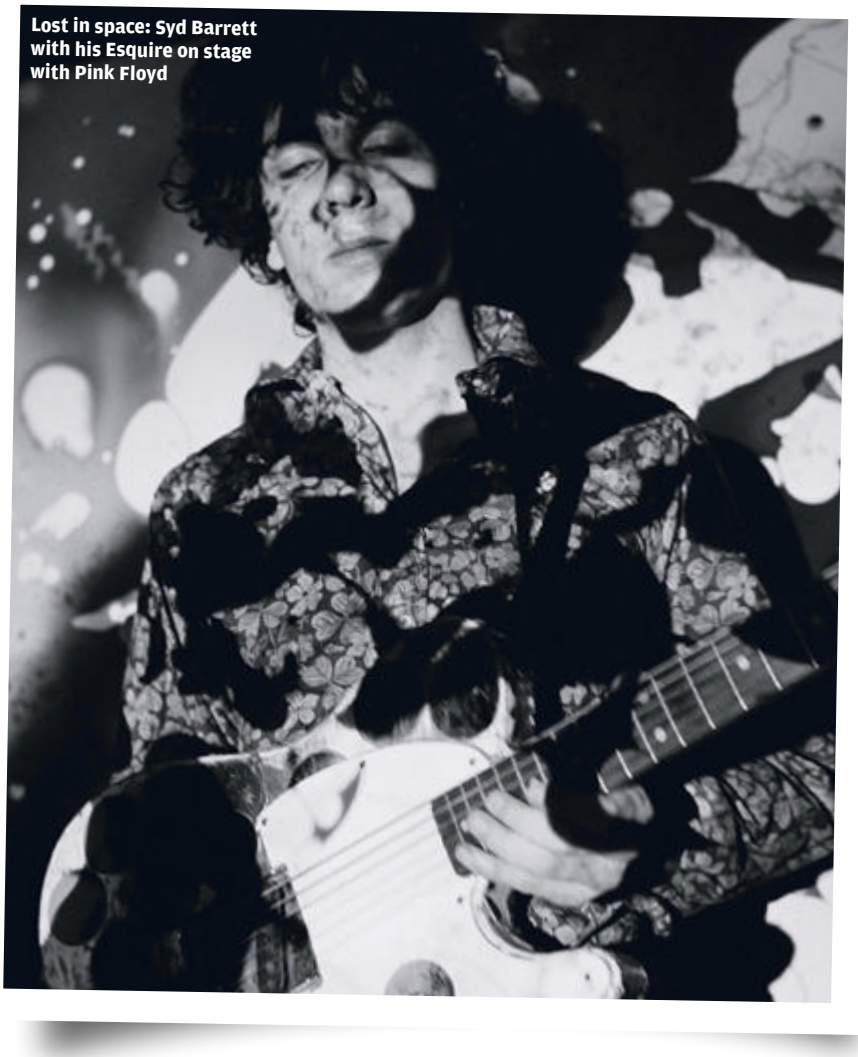
Jimmy Page manipulating a violin bow, an Echoplex and his 1959 'Dragon' Telecaster

Photo by Jan Persson/Redferns/Getty

Over in the country corner, iconic '50s Telecasters remained big players in the hands of several top artists, but one of the biggest hit-makers of the era, Buck Owens, and his sidekick Don Rich both traded their maple-neck Teles for glitter-painted, rosewood-neck Custom Telecasters, twang machines that embodied both the tone and the look of the 'Bakersfield sound'. And, around the middle of the decade, Clarence White established a sound that would come to define one avenue of country playing. Seeking to replicate the sound of a pedal steel bending a note within a chord, he and drummer cohort Gene Parsons installed an elaborate B-Bender system in the back of his maple-board 1954 Telecaster, used to bewilderingly impressive effect on records by the Byrds, Gram Parsons, and others.

Back across the pond, while Hank Marvin was playing a Strat he had bought because he assumed it must be the Fender James Burton was playing with Ricky Nelson (he actually used a Telecaster), Mick Green was wowing

‘I never felt so close to a guitar as that one’ – Syd Barrett



Lost in space: Syd Barrett with his Esquire on stage with Pink Floyd

Photo by Andrew Whittuck/Redferns/Getty

young Britons with his lead/rhythm mash-up style with Johnny Kidd and the Pirates, and then Billy J Kramer and the Dakotas. All three of the most significant Yardbirds played a Tele or an Esquire, even trading off a red early ’60s model that belonged to the band itself. Eric Clapton moved quickly along to Gibsons, then Strats; Jimmy Page maintained a steady allegiance to the plank; and Jeff Beck acquired his own legendary Esquire before evolving to Les Pauls and Strats.

One of the most telling appearances of a Telecaster playing against type, though, came at the hands of sonic explorer Syd Barrett with Pink Floyd. The Telecaster, a psychedelic rock trendsetter? Most certainly, if you cover it in silver plastic sheeting and glue on several reflective metal discs, then, use it to power extended, semi-formless art-rock noise jams at London clubs like UFO and the Roundhouse. Barrett’s guitar was actually an Esquire, believed to be a 1964 model, which attained its performance-art look shortly after the art student teamed up with Roger Waters, Nick Mason, and Rick Wright to form Pink Floyd. Barrett swapped the Esquire for a black Custom Telecaster in the late ’60s, having left Pink Floyd in 1968. In 1971 he told *Rolling Stone* magazine, ‘I never felt so close to a guitar as that silver one with mirrors that I used on stage all the time.’

Despite the myriad minor changes through the course of the ’60s, the Telecaster experienced no severe decline in quality, and lost little of its characteristic tone – a classic blend of beef and bite, with a firm low-end and unparalleled cutting power in the mids and highs – until the end of the decade. The standard Tele and Esquire never suffered the indignities of the overcooked Strat headstock or, in the early ’70s, the much-loathed three-bolt Micro-Tilt system and bullet-head truss-rod nut. The thick polyester finishes of the end of the decade did signal the start of a slide, which hit a serious plummet in the early ’70s when Fender got the shape of the Tele’s rounded upper bout wrong on its new routing machinery.

Through the better part of the ’60s, though, the Telecaster was still the Telecaster, and its voice remained intact. It was no longer the new kid on the block, no longer shocking in any way itself, yet the Tele and Esquire found themselves at the centre of much of the most shocking and most groundbreaking music being made, even amid an age shot through with one musical revolution atop another.

FENDER CURRENT ’60S TELECASTER REISSUES

In the early 1980s, when Fender first recognised the value of recreating its past glories, the rosewood-fingerboard Teles of the 1960s weren’t seen as classics to the extent that the maple-board guitars of the ’50s were, and as a result, would not be reissued for several years. The first ’60s-style Tele reissue actually came from Fender’s Japanese replica series in 1985 in the form of the ’62 Custom Telecaster, and one or another early-’60s-style Tele with rosewood fingerboard has been available in the catalogue more or less ever since.

FENDER CUSTOM SHOP ’63 TELECASTER RELIC

From 1999 until the recent revamping of Fender’s Custom Shop line, the Time Machine series brought us what was probably considered the top of the ’60s pre-CBS Tele replica heap. Although deleted from the standard Custom Shop catalogue in favour of several new short-run models, these great Teles (pictured right) are fairly plentiful on the used market, and might represent your fastest track to that played-in early-’60s look, sound, and feel.

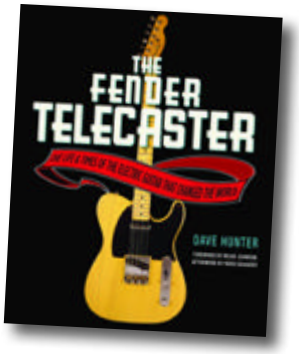
AMERICAN VINTAGE ’64 TELECASTER

This current-production model from Fender’s American Vintage series gives a nod to a lesser-seen pick from the twilight of the pre-CBS years. The guitar features the rounded ‘C’ neck profile and curved round-lam board of the middle part of the decade, in three-colour sunburst or Lake Placid blue over an alder body, or white blonde over ash.

CLASSIC SERIES ’69 TELECASTER THINLINE

Fender’s Mexican-made Classic Series offers great value and a hip, stylish late-’60s alternative in the ’69 Thinline. The semi-hollow mahogany body brings a sonic twist, despite the retention of classic single-coil Tele pickups and a bolt-on maple neck, and looks great in two- or three-colour sunburst, black, or natural finish.

Dave Hunter is the author of *The Fender Telecaster, The Life And Times Of The Electric Guitar That Changed The World*, Voyageur Press



Fender
TELECASTER

FENDER
1964 & 1969 Teles

One blonde, one white, so similar and yet so different: **Rick Batey** looks at two Telecasters separated by the great CBS divide...

Style is a funny and changeable thing. Older readers may recall how, to callow teenagers peering into a shop window or leafing wide-eyed through a catalogue from Bell's of Surbiton in the early 1970s, Telecasters looked rather square and unfashionable. Back then, compared to a slinky Strat or an evil-horned Gibson SGs, Fender's first solid electric resembled a piece of obsolete hospital equipment. Now, in the next century, they look just right: plain, purposeful, classic.

Even though the Telecaster was designed for production-line consistency, every player knows that each one is an individual. The blonde '64 pictured far left is one of the nicest we've tried: perfect weight, a typically succulent C-section neck with unworn cellulose lacquer, and a light but airy tone. It's almost in collector's condition, save for the fact that a past owner took the step of carving his zip code into the neckplate and, worse, the rear of the headstock, obviously in the days before the ultraviolet felt-tip pen and the microchip. That knocks a large chunk off the value, but it's still a great example of a pearl-dot, veneer-board Telecaster, and it's from the pre-CBS era – just about.

And so to the handsome Tele on the right, an Olympic White '69-er, serial number 293063. This guitar is as clean as clean thing – again complete with the usually-junked 'ashtray' bridge cover. Of course, being a late-'60s example it's got different features to the pre-CBS model: different bridge saddles (round types with single slots instead of threaded ones), a three-ply white/black/white scratchplate, 'F' branded tuners instead of Kluson branded items, a visible trussrod fillet and a post-CBS 'Fender' logo with the model legend written large. All of little practical difference, these, but the neck is clubbier than the 1964's, with a thick, super-glossy polyurethane lacquer instead of the earlier model's thin, tactile nitro finish. In recent years late '60s Telecasters have become increasingly appreciated, as though they're not from the hallowed Leo Fender period, CBS production cut-backs left relatively little impression on the Telecaster, and it was only in the early/mid '70s that matters began to go badly wrong with heavy ash bodies and changes to the outline and the neck pocket.

If you want to get into the vintage Tele market, the biggest danger by far is the possibility of a refinish. No way around it: it's a minefield. In days gone by you'd mainly be suspicious of custom colours, but in recent years we've seen refinished blonde Teles so convincing they would make your hair curl: perfect darkening under the scratchplate, believable playing wear, spot-on crazing. Sunburst refinishes are still uncommon and harder to do well: solid colours are relatively easy. All you can do is research very carefully, and try to buy from a reputable dealer – and remember, you can't cover a smell... and a refinish will reek for ages.

'We've seen refinished blonde Teles so convincing they would make your hair curl'

'60s Tele Timeline

FINGERBOARDS: Slab rosewood, '59; curved veneered rosewood, July '62 on: maple option (with no 'skunk' stripe visible at rear, unlike '50s Teles) from mid-'60s onwards

POSITION MARKERS: 'Clay' dots, '59; bigger pearl dots, early '65

HEADSTOCK DECALS: Silver-centred 'spaghetti' logo changed to gold-centred 'transition' logo in early '66, then to modern black-centred logo in the autumn of '67

PICKGUARDS: On standard models – ie. not bound Custom Teles – single-ply white started to change to three-ply white/black/white in early '62. Some single-plys were fitted up to the end of '63

MACHINEHEADS: Oblong-bodied Klusons changed to 'F' branded tuners with trapezoid bases and 'cornered' buttons in 1967

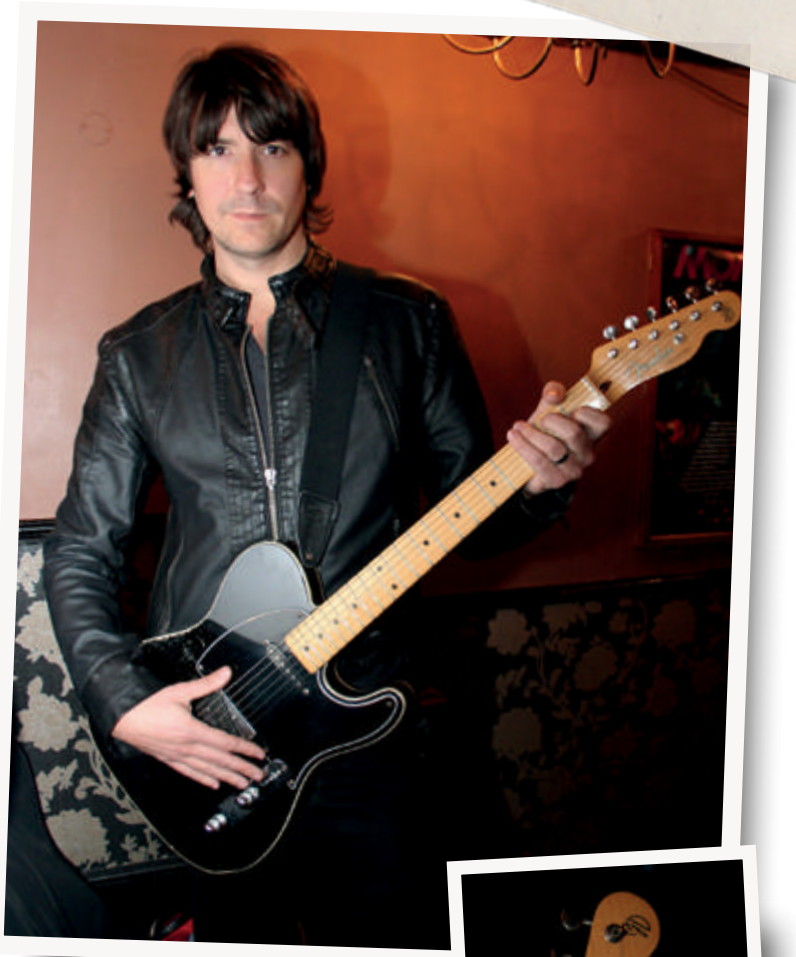
BRIDGE SADDLES: Multi-grooved threaded steel (introduced in mid-'59) changed to plain steel with a single string groove in early '68

NECKPLATES: Early '60s Teles have five serial digits on top or bottom of a plain neckplate. L-series with five digits, 1963-'65. Six digits plus large engraved 'F' on plate, 1965-'76

TREASURED POSSESSIONS

Dan Hipgrave and his JERRY DONAHUE TELECASTER

Faced with an entire roomful of Fenders, Toploader's guitarist picked the one that simply felt the best – and it's a decision he's never regretted for a second



Toploader have ridden the rollercoaster of the music industry, enjoying exhilarating highs as darlings of the pop charts then enduring some cruel treatment as their star faded. Quite rightly, affable guitarist Dan Hipgrave wouldn't have missed any of it... and his battle-scarred Jerry Donahue signature Fender Tele has served alongside him every step of the way.

The guitar was bought with the band's very first advance, so for Dan it has become a potent symbol of the times. 'I was a young lad in a newly-signed band who was given a budget to go and buy gear,' he recalls. 'I was still learning to play, really, so I was a bit like a rabbit in the headlights.'

He was given the run of the Aladdin's cave that was the Fender showroom. 'I remember being wowed by all these lovely guitars! Without knowing anything about it, I picked up the Jerry Donahue and I really liked the neck. It was really fat and it felt comfortable. It looked good, too. You can get Donahue Teles that are properly blinged-up, but I like the black. It's got loads of bashes and scratches, but I know every mark on that guitar came from a gig that I played. It's not a vintage guitar, it's not even a super-expensive guitar, but it's come to mean a lot to me.'

> *'I know every mark on that guitar came from a gig that I played. It's not vintage or super-expensive, it's just come to mean a lot to me'*

Toploader's other guitarist Julian Deane opted out of the band's return in 2011 and Dan is now the only guitar player, handling both lead and rhythm duties, but back at the beginning he was very much a rhythm'n'riff man. 'We were a piano-led band with two guitars, bass and drums, so there was a lot going on. With the Jerry Donahue it doesn't matter how distorted your sound is – you can still hear the individual notes very clearly. A proper Tele pickup plus the Strat pickup at the neck gives you lots of options, too. Chords are punchy and stand out with real clarity. That fitted well for us because Julian was playing a Gibson through a Marshall, so the Tele was a good counterpoint. I also had a Traynor amp... it was a beast! To this day it's the heaviest amp I've ever lifted. The road crew didn't like that thing much.'

Dan is relishing his role as sole guitar player but he isn't one to seek the spotlight. 'It doesn't work with us. I don't even clarify what I do as lead guitar... I see it more as playing melodic riffs. The space that we've got now has changed the dynamic of the band. With age, I suppose, you acquire an appetite for space. When I first started, I hammered my guitar all the way through every song. That seems crazy now.'

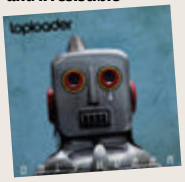
Toploader opened for Bon Jovi at Wembley the night before the old stadium was closed for demolition, which makes them the last Brits to perform there and the JD Tele the last guitar strummed on stage by an English guitarist below its hallowed twin towers. 'No one can take that away from us – it was a real moment! All 90,000 people there felt the sense of occasion. There was a feeling of sadness, but also one of celebration. That adds a bit of history to it and makes this guitar even more special.'

Album

TOPLOADER

Only Human

Even those wearied by heavy rotation of *Dancing In The Moonlight* will find the songs on this 2011 album both anthemic and irresistible



MORE INFO:
www.toploaderofficial.com Guitar: www.hellecasters.com

All photo: Steve Catlin/Redferns/Getty

Slab Happy

Ex-Pretender and McCartney sidekick **Robbie McIntosh** loves Telecasters and, particularly, Esquires. 'I don't like decisions,' he laughs. 'With the Esquire I don't even have to decide which pickup to use!' Back in 1995 Robbie tested three prime '50s examples, with **Paul Trynka** and **Dave Burrluck** listening in

As a man who runs his own band plus a hired gun who has completed mammoth world tours with Paul McCartney and who is also known for his work with the Pretenders, John Mayer, Roger Daltrey and Norah Jones, Robbie McIntosh should really have an extended armoury of guitars. But for many gigs McIntosh has stuck with the most basic of basic instruments – the Fender Esquire, the one-pickup version of the more familiar Telecaster.

Today he's brought that very guitar along, a fine model from '52. 'I don't like decisions,' he laughs, 'and with the Esquire I don't have to make any. Don't have to worry about what guitar to use, or even what pickup!' He's also brought along a blonde Tele he bought new in 1977 and which played a formative role in his career. 'I was in a band, got a record deal and my first decent guitar was a Gibson L6S which my mum and dad bought me. I've got nothing against Gibson, but it was horrible! Then it got nicked. Then I got the '77 Tele – it was £212. I used that one guitar faithfully for around five years, and did all the early Pretenders stuff on it.'

'Teles are as solid as a rock and have the most unmistakable back pickup sound there is'

Robbie joined forces with Chrissie Hynde in 1983. He'd discussed joining the band before, with his friend and then Pretenders' lead player James Honeyman-Scott, but the latter's drug-related death in 1982 scotched what should have been an exciting partnership. McIntosh was to join nonetheless, and his first album with the band was *Learning To Crawl*. His £212 Tele is all over it. 'Then I started getting into Strats – I'm still fond of that middle pickup sound, I must admit. Then when I was on tour with the Pretenders, I got the Esquire from a guy in LA. He sold it to me as a '53, although it's a '52 according to the neck date, and I ended up using it for the whole Pretenders set.'

As it is for most of the guitar's fans, it's the basic no-nonsense nature of the Tele that appeals to Robbie: 'They're solid as a rock – you can drop it down the stairs and it'll still play. I think they're louder than a lot of other guitars, a Strat for instance, and they're certainly brighter! That bridge pickup has got a powerful output, even though they're prone to whistle a bit. I love that back pickup sound – it's the most unmistakable guitar sound there is. Overall, it's got a distinctive sound, and has that utter simplicity.'

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the staying power of this pioneering solidbody guitar was Robbie's use of his venerable Esquire during a Paul McCartney world tour. 'You just turn the thing up and away you go. It always cuts through live, and you know you can rely on it. The tuning stability on some of these old guitars is amazing – although, that being said, one of the machineheads did go on this guitar, one of the cogs went, although we did manage to fix it. The string had gone down by about an octave... it wasn't hard to spot!'

Although vintage Fenders are now reaching elevated values – today in 2015 it would be impossible to replace Robbie's Esquire for much less than £16,000, although at the time of writing it was worth a mere £4000 – he's not too worried about taking it out for live work. 'But I wouldn't leave it on stage at the Half Moon in Putney! I wouldn't sell it – I've had it too long. Although I didn't pay that much, for a guitar that does the job, a few thousand pounds isn't a huge amount. I personally think it's worth it. The big shame is that only a small percentage of musicians can afford these guitars now, and they go to collectors who don't really play them. Then again, if people did play them, there'd be less of them around.

'In terms of the vintage thing, I would personally always say old is better – but then I'm into older music, and those guitars were around when it was born, and there's got to be some sort of magic in it. But quite honestly, BB King could pick up any of my guitars and sound like BB, so it doesn't really matter when it comes down to it. If you get a buzz from playing old guitars it makes you play better, but I wouldn't say it really matters.'

Robbie's personal tastes in music are strongly evident in his choice of classic Telecaster records: 'Look out for anything Albert Collins did – he's the master of the Telecaster.

'Then there's Roy Buchanan, although I was never a huge fan – I'd hate to have gone to one of his gigs, his sound was so bright. So basically, anything by Albert Collins, or NRBQ, anything by Jim Mullen, and all the James Burton stuff.

'Then there's Muddy Waters, who had that inimitable slide style, and he played a Tele, and early Gatemouth Brown, early Johnny Guitar Watson. Anybody from Texas, really ... why is it that all the great guitarists seem to come from Texas?'

FENDER
Broadcaster Circa 1950

SERIAL NUMBER **0080, stamped on bridgeplate**

BODY **Two-piece ash with offset, well-matched joint. Suspected refinish; in colour it's lighter than a '52 Telecaster, slightly greeny – almost Gibson TV-like, thinner than the others, and sunk noticeably into wood grain**

NECK/FINGERBOARD **One-piece maple neck with truss rod and skunk stripe. Nitro-cellulose finish is beautifully worn, though has clearly been over-sprayed over bare wood giving a 'sealed' finish that looks worn. Likewise the fingerboard – inlaid with 6.5mm diameter black dots – has been refretted (with wide and low gauge wire, 2.79mm wide x 0.9mm high) and resprayed. In section the neck is wide and deep, with a slight V profile and a definite flat spot at the back of the neck around the 12th fret. The neck-to-body joint is via four screws and a blank chromed neck plate. The Fender headstock logo appears to be gold-on-black (caused presumably by the overspray tinting the originally silver-on-black logo). Also note the maple (rather than walnut) truss rod plug behind the nut, while the truss rod access nut, at the body end, is slot-headed not cross-headed. The white plastic nut is 2.92mm thick, and the single, circular string retainer is placed 94mm behind the nut**

SCRATCHPLATE **Black bakelite and 1.98mm thick, the top coat lacquer wearing through due to pick wear. Five slot-headed screws secure it**

MACHINEHEADS **Rusty, with 'Kluson Deluxe' stamped on the covers**

BRIDGE **The steel bridge plate holds three 7.75mm-diameter brass saddles with a flat base. The two height adjustment screws are drilled through at an angle, leaning towards the back of the bridge. On the back of the body the ferrules are flush and rather haphazardly laid out**

PICKUPS **The neck unit has a bright chrome cover. The bridge six poles are slightly sunken, about 0.5mm-0.76mm below the top of the bobbin**

CONTROLS/ WIRING **Wiring follows the original specifications with a three-position lever switch, master volume and blend control. In position 1 it's neck pickup only with a treble roll-off capacitor kicked in (master volume active, blend control inactive); in position 2 it's the neck pickup but with no treble roll-off or blend control; in position 3 both pickups can be blended by the lower control knob: fully anti-clockwise voices the bridge, and fully clockwise voices the neck. On this sample, however, the blend pot is very worn and crackly, effectively making the blend facility unusable. The chromed and knurled control knobs have very domed tops**

FACTFILE
1950 FENDER BROADCASTER

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 40.9mm
12th fret 50.3mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 23mm
12th fret 25mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 54mm
BODY THICKNESS
43.5mm
WEIGHT **3.18kg/7lb**

'This is brasher, more steely, less acoustic-sounding than my Esquire, but the neck pickup is plummy and defined'

FENDER
Telecaster circa 1952

SERIAL NUMBER **3412, stamped on bridgeplate**

BODY **Two-piece ash, very well joined and matched. In colour it's more yellow than a later '59 Esquire that we had at the session, and slightly more opaque too**

NECK/FINGERBOARD **One-piece maple as above. Lovely, worn rounded fingerboard edges with the lacquer cracked and worn through in numerous places. Sloped section of headstock just behind the nut is particularly steep. Black plastic position dots as per the Broadcaster, but noticeably closer-spaced at the 12th fret than those on the '59 Esquire. The fingerboard has been refretted, and rather well, with a suitable medium-gauge wire (2.16mm wide x 1.35mm high). In section the neck is less V'd than the Broadcaster's and also slightly thinner in depth and width. Silver-on-black Fender logo; also, there's a slight but noticeable forward pull on the headstock. The standard nut is 3.4mm thick and the single circular string retainer is placed 92mm from the nut**

SCRATCHPLATE **Five-screw type, but it's a replacement made of non-original black plastic, 1.9mm thick**

MACHINEHEADS **Klusons (minus branding) with a tight positive feel**

BRIDGE **Standard baseplate has three brass saddles (7.7mm in diameter) with flat bases and are filed for better intonation. Note how saddle height screws are drilled, conventionally, at right angles to the bridge plate**

PICKUPS **Bridge pickup has very slightly sunken polepieces, while the neck pickup's cover looks very worn and more like nickel plate than chrome – in other words, more yellow rather than blue in colour**

CONTROLS/ WIRING **This guitar has been rewired to modern (post-'67) Tele specs. The three-way lever switch offers neck, both, or bridge pickup; the volume and tone controls work in all positions. The control knobs are less severely domed than the Broadcaster's, but there's the same Dakaware tip on the three-way switch**

FACTFILE
1952 FENDER TELECASTER

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 41.3mm
12th fret 50.2mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 22.6mm
12th fret 24.6mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 34mm
Bridge 54mm
BODY THICKNESS
43.6mm
WEIGHT **3.2kg/7lb**

'Again, the bridge pickup is more steely than the Esquire's, but more open than the Broadcaster's. Even with a crunchy amp you can still hear the separation in a chord'

FENDER
Esquire Circa 1952

SERIAL NUMBER **2750 stamped on bridgeplate**

BODY **Very similar in colour to the '52 Tele, but more crazed and very worn, and it looks like one-piece ash. Interestingly, the edge radius is very tight – like the Broadcaster's only more uniform, and noticeably smaller than the '52 Tele's. Slightly thicker-bodied and a little heavier than other two**

NECK/FINGERBOARD **One-piece maple but with an attractive light flaming. Very worn, especially on the back of the neck on the treble side and on fingerboard; this one really has been played. Inlays are as '52 Tele. Again the board looks like it has been refretted with fairly authentic small wire (2mm wide x 1mm high). The actual neck is the biggest we evaluated – less V'd than the Broadcaster's but broader, with a similar first-fret depth and very little taper (the back of the neck is virtually parallel to the face). Headstock has a silver-on-black logo. The nut itself is slightly thinner at 3.2mm, while the single string retainer is 95mm from the nut. More noticeable is the body heel that supports the neck joint: on the treble side the tip of the heel extends almost 2mm proud of the neck, and it's not tapered at all to match the width taper of the neck. Also, the neck plate has 'Bob Eaton RDZ 393' hand-engraved on it. Bob, are you out there somewhere?**

SCRATCHPLATE **As Broadcaster, but more worn**

MACHINEHEADS **Same style as the '52 Tele but they look like replacements**

BRIDGE **Same as '52 Tele, though saddles are unfiled**

PICKUPS **Bridge pickup only, slightly sunken polepieces as per Broadcaster**

CONTROLS/ WIRING **Standard Esquire wiring via volume, tone and three-way lever switch. Position 1 gives pickup with preset (a bassy, even, woolly tone created by two capacitors and a resistor); position 2 gives pickup with both volume and regular tone control; in position 3 the pickup goes direct to output, bypassing the tone control and creating a slight treble lift. Knobs are more domed than the '52's... more like those on the Broadcaster, in fact**

FACTFILE

1952 FENDER ESQUIRE

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 41.9mm
12th fret 51mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 23mm
12th fret 22.8mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 34.5mm
Bridge 53mm
BODY THICKNESS
45.2mm
WEIGHT **3.6kg/8lb**

'The Esquire has a really poky tone, not as bright and brittle as many. I play a Les Paul Junior, and this is a little fatter with a bit more growl'

Sounds and conclusion

Each of the three early '50s instruments Robbie tested exhibits a dramatic acoustic ring. Most noticeable is the strong body resonance – clear and defined, with a breathy acoustic guitar-like tone. Plugged in, and using Robbie's '52 Esquire as a reference point, the Broadcaster's bridge pickup sounds slightly brighter.

'This guitar sounds very much like my Esquire in terms of that pure sustain you get on the B string past the seventh fret,' comments Robbie, 'but it's definitely more "steely"' – a term we adopted for the archetypal lap steel type tonality that's synonymous with the Telecaster, though too much of this quality can make a Tele too bright and hard – 'and less acoustic-sounding. Yeah,' he decides with the help of some scary country-style licks, 'it's definitely much brasher than the Esquire.

'The low E string is a bit too close to the fingerboard edge, mind – I keep failing off the board. Generally, though, I like the neck... like mine, it's pretty big.'

The '52 Tele has a slightly lighter bridge tone, a little more open than the Broadcaster's with more of those hallmark Tele highs.

'This is a lot more "steely" again,' reckons Robbie, 'but the frets are in much better nick than mine – it plays really well. You know, another great thing about the Tele's bridge pickup is, even with quite a crunchy amp tone, you'll always hear the separation of the notes within a chord.'

Robbie's Esquire, however, sounds really sweet, even with the single pickup going straight to the output (position 3). 'It's certainly not as bright or brittle as many Esquires and Teles I've played, and it's a really pokey tone,' he comments. A bit like a classic Gibson P90, in other words? 'Yeah, I agree. I play a Les Paul Junior, and it's a little fatter with a bit more growl. My Esquire has a good, full midrange, though.'

Even just playing solo Robbie constantly fiddles with the volume knob. 'I always do that,' he says. 'I'm really particular live, and I can't play unless I hear the right mix between my guitar and the rest of the band.' He also admits that he never uses the preset 'bass' tone that '50s Telecasters came with, and we definitely agree that viewed from today's perspective it's a pretty useless sound.

Robbie refers to the neck pickup on both the Broadcaster and Tele as being 'plummy'. 'I can't hear a lot of difference between the two – they're really similar,' he adds. 'If anything, the Broadcaster has a little more presence and treble clarity than the Telecaster, more acoustic-ness. The bass end is similar on both of them. It's a great tone for playing jazz, but it's equally at home with country stuff – plummy, yet defined.'

The Broadcaster's neck pickup sound (with the preset bass tone on position 1 introduced) is very muffled, while the dodgy blend control makes sonic evaluation of the two pickups together rather difficult. It's interesting, though, how the neck pickup is the only 'solo' tone. This may have seemed like a good idea to Fender at the time, but by 1953 the layout was changed by to neck pickup alone with preset bass tone in position 3, neck pickup alone with tone control in position 2, and bridge pickup alone with tone control in position 1.

Obviously we're being very (ahem!) picky here, and at the end of testing everyone had to admit that all three guitars sounded spectacular. While old needn't necessarily mean best, the resonant 'acoustic' ring and fatness of sound offered by this vintage trio differentiates them dramatically from, say, a modern US Standard Telecaster or even Robbie's own '70s Tele. It makes you wonder whether the bright, ultra-steely sound that most of us associate with the Tele was actually the sound intended by Leo Fender. Sure, these '50s guitars are bright, but they're certainly not as brittle-sounding as some of the more recent editions.

And if Robbie didn't have his Esquire, which one would he pick? 'That's difficult. While both are brighter than mine, I think I'd go for the Broadcaster because of its bigger neck, but I'd rewire it like a standard Tele. But either would do!' Indeed they would.

'I always use the volume knob. I'm really particular. I can't play unless I hear the right mix between the guitar and the band'

Telecaster Masters

JAMES BURTON One-time Presley sidekick and rock'n'roll journeyman, Burton's solo outings are easily forgotten but his stinging solos as a sessioneer put him at the very top of the Telecaster tree
Recommended: Ricky Nelson *The Best Of I* and *II*; Gram Parsons *GP/Grevious Angel* (double CD)

KEITH RICHARDS The guvnor of groove. The simplicity of the Tele is belied by Keef's unique lurching riffing style
Recommended: Loads... but why not try the Rolling Stones' *Flashpoint* live outing to hear a Tele in full flow

STEVE CROPPER Stax Records' house songwriter and archetypal R&B hero, with economy and taste always on show
Recommended: Any pre-1970 Booker T & The MGs or Otis Redding recordings

CLARENCE WHITE Master of the Parsons-White B-bender, the device that further helps Teles simulate a pedal steel. Perhaps best remembered for taking folk-rockers the Byrds countrywards
Recommended: The Byrds' *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo* and *Dr Byrds And Mr Hyde* and Nashville West's *Nashville West*

JERRY DONAHUE Renowned sessioneer whose precise picking has enlivened records by artistes as diverse as Fairport Convention, Joan Armatrading and Roy Orbison, and he's made some decent solo LPs to boot
Recommended: Fairport Convention '73-'75, Fotheringay, The Hellecasters

ALBERT COLLINS The late Texan blues legend sounded like no other, in large part due to his steely picking style and open F minor tuning
Recommended: Albert Collins with Johnny Copeland on Robert Cray's *Showdown*; Albert Collins' *The Cool Sound Of Albert Collins*

JIMMY PAGE Best known for his Les Paul-fuelled riffing, Page nevertheless played much of Zep's first two albums on a Tele – and the solo from *Stairway To Heaven*...
Recommended: *Led Zeppelin I* and *II*

MUDDY WATERS His songwriting often overshadows his shimmering slide work, but Mr Morganfield was no mean guitar player. Essential listening either way
Recommended: Muddy Waters (box set)

ROY BUCHANAN The man who turned down the Stones gig was one of the guitar's best-kept secrets and he chalked up a huge list of studio credits
Recommended: Solo LPs *Roy Buchanan* and *Dancing On The Edge*

ROBBIE McINTOSH Exemplary twangy rock with the Pretenders and versatile rock'n'roll with Paul McCartney
Recommended Pretenders, *Learning To Crawl*

ALSO CHECK OUT Joe Strummer (the Clash), Andy Summers (the Police), Zoot Horn Rollo (Captain Beefheart), Mike Bloomfield (esp. Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited*), Will Sergeant (Echo & The Bunnymen), Mick Green (Johnny Kidd And The Pirates), Wilko Johnson (Dr Feelgood), Jim Mullen, Snooks Eaglin, Chuck Prophet (ex-Green On Red), Danny Gatton, early Albert Lee and, inevitably, the Quo...

Ultimate Intonation

Diehard Telecaster lovers say the three-saddle bridge is a vital part of the whole design... but what about intonation? Back in 1998 **Dave Burrluck** persuaded Tele maestro Jerry Donahue to spill his top tips for making those twang machines play

Jerry Donahue with his Fret-KIng JD signature guitar

There's no denying the guitar-wrangling prowess of Jerry Donahue – just flip any Hellecasters CD into the drawer and prod 'random play' to generate umpteen examples of his Celtic-influenced melodies and tendon-boggling multi-string bending techniques. A confirmed Fender fan, Jerry splits his time between Telecasters and Strats – and has managed to wangle himself a signature model of each. The various Donahue signature guitars all employ well thought-out wiring trickery, but this month we decided to quiz Jerry on a subject particularly close to his heart – how to set the intonation on a Telecaster with a vintage-style three-saddle bridge.

Basic intonation

Before we get into what Jerry does on his Telecasters, let's backtrack. The theoretical scale length of your guitar – 25.5", for example, on a Fender – is the measurement from which the fret positions are calculated. These fret positions, however, don't take into account the mechanical realities of guitar playing, including such factors as the height of the strings above the fingerboard and the string gauge you've chosen to use. To compensate for this, the actual scale length of each string on your guitar is longer than the theoretical scale length, and that length increases with string gauge and lower pitch. Setting the basic intonation on any electric guitar is pretty simple (just remember, it must always be done with new strings freshly fitted). Here's what you do...

- Tune to pitch, and sound the harmonic over the 12th fret on the 1st string. Now, compare this with the note produced by actually fretting the same string at the 12th fret.

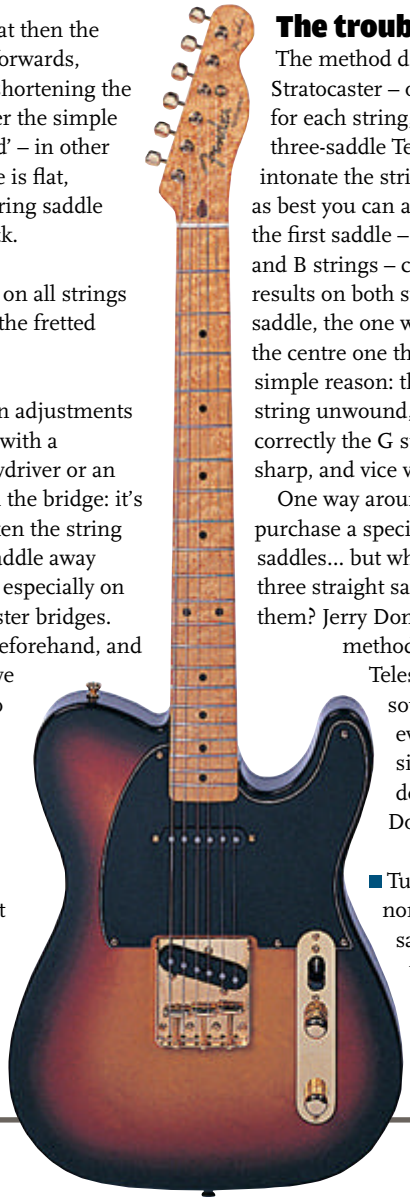
- If the fretted note is sharp compared to the harmonic, the string length must be increased by moving the saddle away from the neck.

Jerry Donahue's intonation method can offer tuneful twanging without having to buy slanted saddles

■ If the fretted note is flat then the saddle must be moved forwards, towards the neck, thus shortening the string length. Remember the simple phrase 'fret, flat, forward' – in other words, if the fretted note is flat, you need to move the string saddle forward towards the neck.

■ Repeat this procedure on all strings until the harmonic and the fretted notes are the same.

These basic intonation adjustments are usually made either with a crosshead Phillips screwdriver or an Allen key, depending on the bridge: it's highly advisable to slacken the string off before moving the saddle away from the bridge pickup, especially on Fender Strat and Telecaster bridges. Always fit new strings beforehand, and make sure you don't have the pickups adjusted too close to the strings... especially the neck pickup, as the magnetic pull will interfere with string vibration and distort the pitch. The action, truss rod and nut height should all be attended to prior to setting the intonation and, ideally, the frets should be in good condition, too.



The trouble with Teles

The method described above is fine for a Stratocaster – or any guitar with one saddle for each string, come to that – but on a three-saddle Telecaster bridge you can only intonate the strings in pairs. Intonate a Tele as best you can and you'll generally find that the first saddle – the one holding the high E and B strings – can be set to give pretty good results on both strings, as can the lower saddle, the one with the low E and A. It's the centre one that causes problems, for one simple reason: the D string is wound, the G string unwound, so if you set the D string correctly the G string will be noticeably sharp, and vice versa.

One way around the problem is to purchase a special set of three slanted saddles... but what do you do if your Tele has three straight saddles, and you want to keep them? Jerry Donahue reckons that he has a method for intonating three-saddle Teles that will make any model sound better – sometimes even better than a guitar with six saddles! Here's what to do if you want to follow the Donahue method...

■ Tune all open strings as normal, but set the centre saddle so that when you fret the G string at the 12th fret it sounds marginally sharp of the 12th fret harmonic (which is in tune). Get this right and you'll find that when you fret the D string at the 12th fret will now sound very slightly flatter than the associated harmonic.

■ Now, via the machinehead, adjust the G string so you get that fretted note in tune – effectively flattening the G string. Use your ears as a guide. To check that it works, play a root position E major – the chord that sounds so painful to hyper-sensitive ears thanks to the apparently sharp-sounding G# at the first fret on the G string. With Jerry's intonation method this note will be slightly flat, making the E major chord more bearable, but not so flat as to make a root position E minor chord sound 'out'.

■ Jerry's method on the top saddle is to set the B string so that when fretted at the 12th it sounds very slightly sharper than the harmonic. Make sure that the top E string fretted at the 12th and its harmonic are absolutely spot on.

■ On the low E and A string saddle Jerry sets the A so that the fretted note at the 12th is as perfectly in tune as possible. The difference here is usually minimal – and Jerry usually flattens the low E very slightly anyway.

So effective is Jerry's method that he even intonates his Strats in the same way. For the record, Jerry uses a set of Ernie Ball stainless strings made from the bottom half of a set of .009"-.042" and the top half of a set of .010"-.046". Try the JD system – after all, it'll cost you nothing but a few minutes.

FENDER
Cabronita Telecaster

Few Fender designs in recent times have generated as much interest as the La Cabronita, and the Mexican version – launched in 2012 – makes rockabilly guitarists' lingering resistance futile. Review by **Huw Price**

It's well-known that Gretsch players tend to have an affinity with Telecasters, and vice versa – so dropping a pair of Gretsch pickups into a Tele and throwing in a prototype pickguard and hot-rodded controls was a fantastic concept, and all credit to Fender for doing it so well. Unfortunately the La Cabronita dream guitar looked likely to remain a 'dream' for most players, as few could afford the Custom Shop price of an original.

The Mexican-made version changes all that. Of course, Fender has to ensure that the quality gap between its Mexican-made guitars and the Custom Shop models is apparent enough to justify the price differential; however, at the same time the quality of the mid-price guitars mustn't suffer because that could damage Fender's reputation. Naturally, comparing the Mexican and Custom Shop versions of the Cabronita, there are compromises: most significantly, there's no S1 switch, the pickups are factory-made, and the neck has a slim rather than a full profile. Finally, even fans of the Custom Shop version have expressed their distaste for the hardtail six-saddle bridge it came with and we must say that, if anything, this one's even less appealing.

The neck has 22 frets and there's no rosewood board option

The body is made of ash but this Cabronita isn't too heavy

Sounds

The Cabronita Telecaster is a perfect example of a guitar that adds up to more than the sum of its parts. The obvious assumption would be that Cabronitas are going to sound like the bastard offspring of a Gretsch and a Telecaster. That's what the name implies, and of course that's what they do... but like any wilful child, this one has a personality of its own.

Cabronitas do sound like the bastard offspring of a Gretsch and a Tele, but this one has a personality of its own

In clean mode the bridge pickup has a discernible 'brrrang' that combines the meaty mids of a Gretsch (pseudo) solidbody with the twang of a Tele. At the risk of over-simplifying things, it's like mixing the sound of a Gretsch with the dynamic response of a Tele. You also get an extra frisson of bite, and way more sustain than you'd expect from a traditional Gretsch Duo Jet.

In contrast to the raw, rude and slightly aggressive bridge pickup, ➔

FACTFILE

FENDER CABRONITA TELECASTER

DESCRIPTION
Solidbody electric guitar. Made in Mexico
PRICE **£646.80**

BUILD **Ash body with maple neck, 22 frets, hardtail bridge, diecast tuners**
ELECTRICS **Two Fidelitron Gretsch-style pickups, three-way pickup switch, single volume control**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Black, three-tone sunburst, white blonde**

SCALE LENGTH
648mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 42mm
12th fret 52mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 20mm
12th fret 21mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35mm
Bridge 54.5mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2.0mm
12th fret bass 2.5mm
WEIGHT **3.5kg/7.7lb**

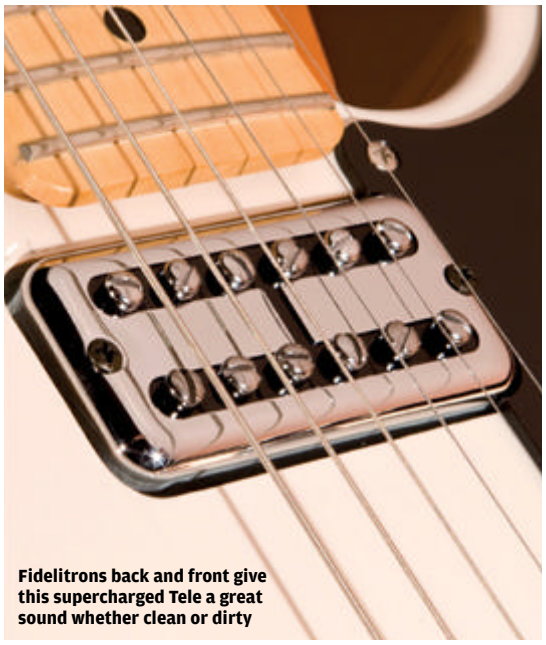
CONTACT **Fender Europe**
01342 331700
www.fendereurope.com

Like this? Try this...

Fender
JA-90 Jim Adkins
From Fender's Artist Series, this semi-hollow ash-bodied Tele has a set C profile mahogany neck, 22 fret rosewood finger board, pickups are a Seymour Duncan Vintage P90 and a Custom P90, while the bridge is an Adjusto-Matic and the scale length is 648mm
RRP **£514**

Fender
FSR Telecaster Deluxe MN SFP
A Fender special run with an alder body, maple neck, 21 frets, two Wide Range humbuckers, three-way switch, individual Volume and Tone controls, and a Strat-style hardtail bridge
RRP **£623**

Fender
69 Tele Thinline
A Mexican-made reissue of Fender's semi-solid with a mahogany body, maple neck, 21 frets, two vintage-style single coil pickups, a three-way switch and master Volume and Tone controls
RRP **£672**



Fidelitrons back and front give this supercharged Tele a great sound whether clean or dirty

Just as with the Custom Shop La Cabronita, a chopped three-saddle Tele bridge would be so much nicer

the neck setting is sweetness itself. It's not exactly mellow; instead you get a hi-fi kind of quality with tremendous clarity and a real sense of the timber underpinning the tone. The in-between setting provides just the right degree of phasiness and midrange scoop to reward you with a sound that's absolutely killer for picking Merle Travis-style. Add some slapback echo or reverb, and it's blissful.

Few guitars seem to handle clean and overdrive with equal aplomb, but the Cabronita Telecaster certainly can. The bridge pickup thickens up to deliver real grunt and grind, with the neck setting morphing into something that sounds not unlike a Les Paul. You even get that 'note bloom' effect, and both pickups have an expressive and vocal quality that soloists will love.

The fine Cabronita Telecaster has much of the feel and sound of its Custom Shop cousin at a fraction of the price

But the big question has to be how the Fidelitron pickups compare to TV Jones Classics, and luckily we had a Cabronita with TV Jones pickups on hand to compare. The bottom line is that the TV Jones units sound smoother, clearer, and far more refined. Having said that, the Fidelitrons have their charms too, and they're not that far off. In fact the extra growl of the Fidelitrons works particularly well for harder rock, grungy Gibson-esque blues and even fusion. They're also highly effective for clean and semi-dirty stuff, so there's not too much to concern us there.

Fender's standard cast tuners add a modern touch

Verdict

It's hard to put one's finger on the lure of Cabronitas, but we believe it's the easy combination of vintage fantasy styling with tones that are at discernibly classic yet just different enough to be intriguing. With the Cabronita Telecaster, Fender has compromised on the hardware, which is fair enough given the price; ditto the impressive poly finish that's standard on Mexican-made guitars, rather than relic'd nitrocellulose. However, the bridge is somewhat graceless and it makes this version look and feel a little too cheap when compared to various Mexican-made vintage reissues and 'Player' models that cost about the same. Without a treble-filtering S1 switch, the absence of a conventional tone control may be viewed as churlish – particularly when there's ample space in the control cavity rout to accommodate one. Of course stripped-down functionality is a big part of the Cabronita appeal, but Filtertron/Fidelitron pickups can sound superb with some treble rolled off.

Essentially, the Mexican-made Cabronita Telecaster is a fine guitar that provides much of the feel and sound of its Custom Shop cousin at a fraction of the price. Given the culture, few rockabilly fans would shy away from modding one of these, and as such we think it's a prime candidate for cool hardware upgrades and electronic tweaks – once the warranty period has expired, of course. If you're a fan of classic tones but you feel the need for something new, this Cabronita may provide exactly the inspiration you've been looking for.

FINAL SCORE

FENDER CABRONITA TELECASTER	
Build Quality	**17**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**18**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Vibe	**20**/20
TOTAL	**89%**

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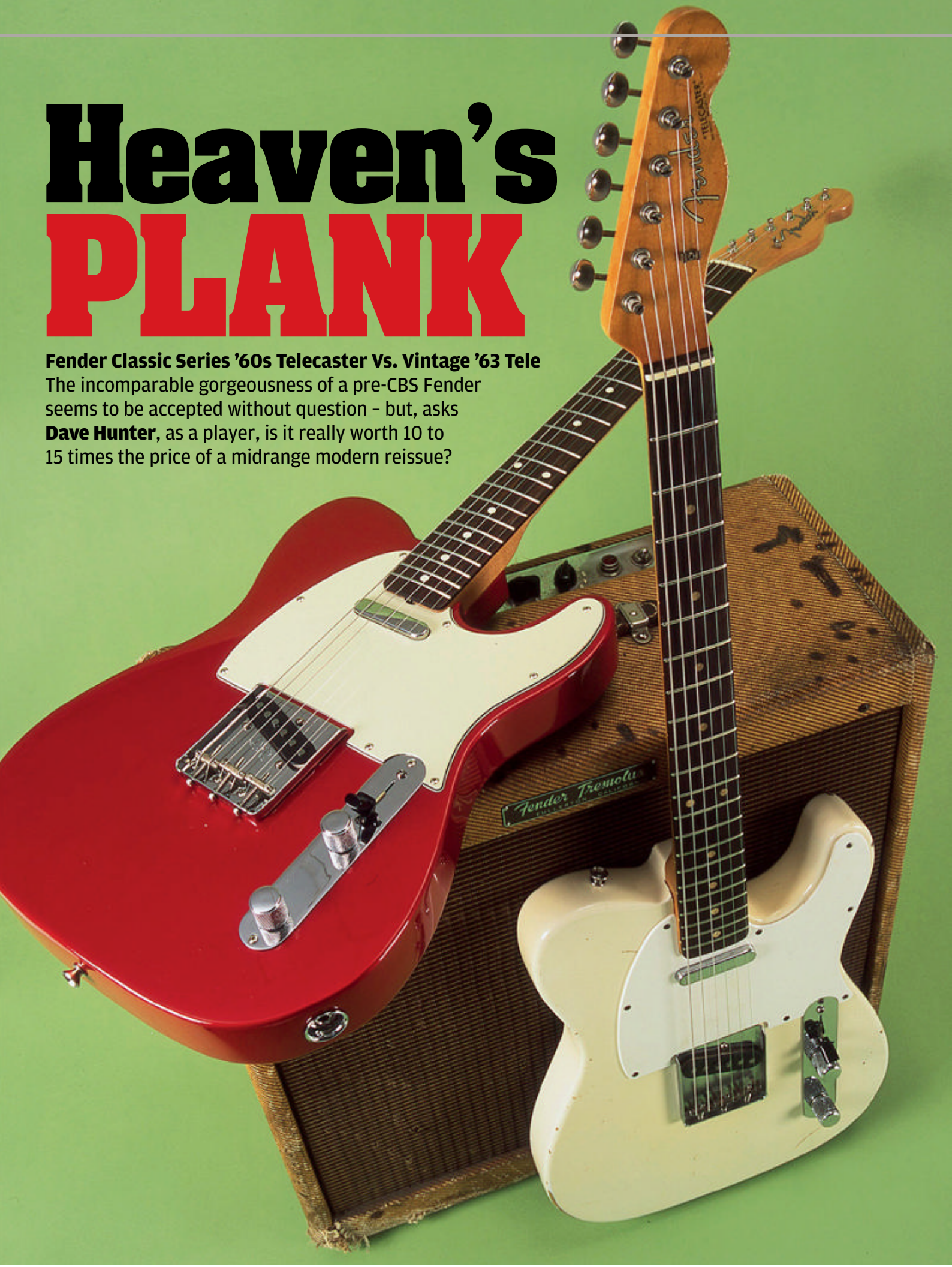
Heaven's PLANK

Fender Classic Series '60s Telecaster Vs. Vintage '63 Tele

The incomparable gorgeousness of a pre-CBS Fender seems to be accepted without question – but, asks **Dave Hunter**, as a player, is it really worth 10 to 15 times the price of a midrange modern reissue?



There are two possible explanations to the 'vintage mystique'. One: they really did build much, much better guitars back in the '50s and '60s than they do today. Two: it's all in the head, a brilliant brainwashing job by the vintage mythology.

One quick way to find out the truth is to put two similar instruments – vintage original and reissue – into the hands of an open-minded, nonpartisan guitar journo and let him judge. Well, guitar magazines have been doing just that since the dawn of the reissue, particularly pitting high-concept 'custom shop' models (relics or otherwise) against their forefathers.

Well, that's not quite what's happening here: I am partisan, right down to my nitro-cellulose-finished heart. Hypnotised, brainwashed, or just plain daft, I've been bitten by the vintage bug, and hard. So let's stage an unfair fight: original vintage item versus a third-world-built, midrange, standard production reissue. Teles at dawn: my refinished-body olympic white '63 Fender Telecaster pacing off against a brand-new, Mexican-built reissue Candy Apple Red Classic Series '60s Fender Telecaster. Both have dual single-coils; both have three-threaded-saddle bridges; both have rosewood fingerboards on early '60s neck shapes ('C' profiles, that is: wide-ish across but fairly thin front to back); both are custom colour finishes on alder bodies. Hardly a fair fight, you postulate, but let's play it like golf: assign a handicap according to price difference – considering the £5000 to £15,000 value of the '63 (depending upon condition, originality of finish and components, etc) and the £549 price tag of the reissue – and see how each plays the game against its own standard.

Of course the '63 is off the blocks with a distinct advantage. I acquired it the way, I suspect, so many players pick up their own rarified sweeties: I wasn't out shopping for a pre-CBS Fender, I wasn't even looking to spend the cash on any guitar that day, but this one caught my eye from its wall hanger, beckoned me to play... and play... and play... and half an hour later I was begging the shopkeeper to tuck it out of sight behind the sales counter while I nipped to the bank.

Its ultra-light weight (6lb 10oz) was appealing from the start and as soon as I wrapped my hand round the back of its varnish-free, playing-smoothed neck it felt instantly warm and comfy – like coming home. There are certain guitars that are just players; you know they're right and this was – and is – one of them. Whack the strings hard, unplugged, and it feels solid as a rock (believe me, you don't need a 10lb-plus Les Paul for that sensation), responding with a resonant, woody sprang of a voice that holds true to pitch, rings long and sweet, then dies away evenly. Single notes are clear and round, with the alder, maple and Brazilian rosewood combo yielding brightness, good definition, and plenty of sizzle. As all guitars should, plug it into a good valve amp and all these acoustic characteristics ring through.

Ergonomics-wise, the vintage Fender radius and true-noting narrow frets really invite you to dig in and keep playing. Beyond what you might put down to fairy dust, there's something eminently inviting in a played-in guitar – and I reckon you can get that feeling from a 50-year-old guitar that's been well maintained, looked after, and played regularly, or a 10-year-old that's been carefully kept and played a lot. It's a combination of the years of flesh on wood and – snake oil or not – quality tone woods resonating at the correct frequencies to open them up and mature the voice in just the right way. Maybe that's all bunk, but it seems to explain the magic... and there must be an explanation somewhere.

Right off, though, this '60s Telecaster reissue feels pretty solid. The weight is not bad at about 7lb 12oz – on the light side for a modern guitar if not a featherweight like the '63. Though thick-skinned, the finish looks good for its price range, darned sweet even, if not vintage-precise. At a glance, the rest of the accoutrements look pretty much correct in the broad sense, too.

Feel-wise, this is another inviting neck. It's got a little more fullness in the hand than the '63, more a 'C' evolving toward 'D' as profiles go, which is not a bad thing and probably promises a slightly wider appeal. The fingerboard is a nice thick slice of rosewood – modelled after the '59-'62 'slab boards' rather than the veneers that followed – though it doesn't have the dark-chocolatey richness of the thinner Brazilian cut on the '63. It feels pretty good as you run up and down its length, with no sharp fret ends to catch you on the way. The fret tops could be polished a little better, but this is the kind of finishing detail that you'd expect to distinguish a Mexican-built Fender from an American or indeed Custom Shop job. It feels a little stickier to play, too, with that fairly thick varnish at the back of the neck; ➔

DIMENSIONS

1963		1960s
648	SCALE LENGTH	648
	WIDTH OF NECK	
42	at nut	42
52.2	at 12th fret	52.2
	DEPTH OF NECK	
21.2	at 1st fret	19
24	at 12th fret	23.8
	STRING SPACING	
35.5	at nut	35
54.5	at bridge	54.5
	ACTION AS SUPPLIED	
2	12th fret treble	1.5
2.2	12th fret bass	2
7.25"	FRETBOARD RADIUS	7.25"
3.0kg	WEIGHT	3.52kg

but hey, it's a new guitar. However, one slightly more off-putting oddness creeps in as you begin to play in earnest and indicates a more dismaying failure in the downmarket workmanship. The string spacing on this sample feels a little 'off' to the left hand, and closer examination puts this down to a slightly poorly cut nut. As well as missing the string-spacing widths they must have overcooked the slot depth on the G string, too, because there's clearly not enough break angle – and thus string tension – over the contact point here, so this string suffers a little tonally as a result, as well as continuing to ring behind the nut with a sitar-like 'zing' even after you dampen the chord at the business end. It's not the end of the world, but a pernickety player would want a new nut.

This Mexican reissue isn't purporting to be dead-on vintage correct but it's worth noting the several niggling misfires in detail without necessarily passing judgment – if only to let you know why it's worth paying twice the money for an American Vintage Series model and four times the price for a Custom Shop version, if these things really matter to you. Without even getting into major constructional points or looking under the control plate:

- These were the 'clay dot' years, but the reissue's fingerboard sports white plastic position markers
- The knurling of the knobs looks slightly off, and the top profile is somewhat different too
- The bridge is very close, but examine it carefully and you'll see it's not quite matte enough of finish behind the pickup
- The bridge pickup clearly sports black plastic bobbins rather than the '63 model's fibre bobbin top...
- ...and for some reason, the string tree has been mounted unusually high.

Of course the switching is the modern neck/both/bridge arrangement too, rather than the bonkers early Tele wiring that gave you only two really useable sounds; but the '63 has been modded to this arrangement too, as most players' old Teles have.

SOUNDS

It seems appropriate to fire these through a '60 tweed Fender Tremolux, so here we go. You know, this new Mexican Telecaster isn't a bad player at all. Once you get it cranked up a little then the niggles of feel that were bothering us fade away some (though a touch of that annoying G string ring still comes through) and this proves to be quite a pokey and powerful example. The bridge pickup is pretty ballsy and is certainly not as as harshly bright as many of the American Series Teles (though those are generally better-built guitars overall). There's plenty of grunt and grind when you whack it, enough bite to get this old valve amp breaking up. Roll off the guitar's volume a little and there's a pleasing, mellow warmth, too.

The neck pickup gives more warmth, though it's less inspiring in general; somewhat woolly and dark, as Tele neck units often are. Overall, it's a touch 'new sounding' at all settings, perhaps – not an overly resonant or sweetly rounded voice, but that's fair enough. Very usable Tele sounds and a range of power, twang and jangle to suit a plethora of styles.

As for the '63 – well, I feel rather guilty again; this really isn't a fair fight. What the Mexican Tele lacks in resonance and sweetness of voice is all seen in relation to this vintage example: it's all here by the bucketload, with a broad, open musicality that's blended with more than enough cut and note definition to keep things focused. It's worth saying, too, that as much as people rave about 'slab boards', this old veneer fingerboard Tele has it all over the slab-topped youngster for richness, texture and depth. Who knows; another great Fender myth, maybe? Or perhaps the rest of its aged splendour makes up the difference.

To give credit where it's due, the Mexican's bridge pickup does pack a little more oomph than this original's, though it can't match its chime and sparkle by a long chalk. And to put paid to the notion that Tele neck pickups range from dull to useless, the '63's is a punchy, fat, muscular example that does all of what you'd expect from a good Strat neck pickup, excelling at anything from juicy blues to smooth jazz. Bonus balls, you could say.

CONCLUSION

Okay, so it wasn't a fair fight – but you knew that. The question was, just how unfair was it? Well, to cut to the chase, yes, the original has a vibe, voice and feel that really does put it in another league entirely (say, Premiership vs. Third Division). Is it worth the cash? If you've got it, then damn right – find a good example and you're not likely to regret it. On the down side, it can be tricky to locate an honest original, and authenticating one is a minefield (seriously: be warned on this front). And if you just haven't got the readies to spare, it certainly isn't worth it in any case.

A vintage original might be a satisfying instrument to own, which sounds amazing and plays great – but there are plenty of new guitars capable of filling exactly that ticket too, especially with a set-up and maybe some boutique pickups selected for your preferences. Seek out a good new example that's right for the money – as this Tele certainly has the potential to be – and play it, love it and make it your own.

FACTFILE: Classic Series '60s Telecaster

DESCRIPTION: Mexican built early '60s reissue style Telecaster

PRICE: £547

BUILD: Solid alder body, bolt-on maple neck with unbound 21-fret 'slab' rosewood fingerboard. Three-saddle bridge with through-body stringing

ELECTRICS: Dual single-coil pickups with alnico magnets, three-way selector switch, master volume and tone controls

OPTIONS: Classic Series '50s Telecaster (£547), with ash body and integral maple neck/fingerboard

LEFT-HANDER: No

FINISH: Candy apple red (as reviewed), olympic white, black

CONTACT: Fender GB&I ☎ 01342 331700

WEB: www.fender.com

See text for vintage '63 Telecaster build and specs

EVERYBODY Scream

There's a Telecaster to suit pretty much all musical tastes, stylistic needs and budgets. **Huw Price** selects half-a-dozen from the present and the recent past

There's a popular notion that the Telecaster has remained unchanged since its inception. Not so: with an inveterate tinkerer like Leo, nothing ever stayed the same.

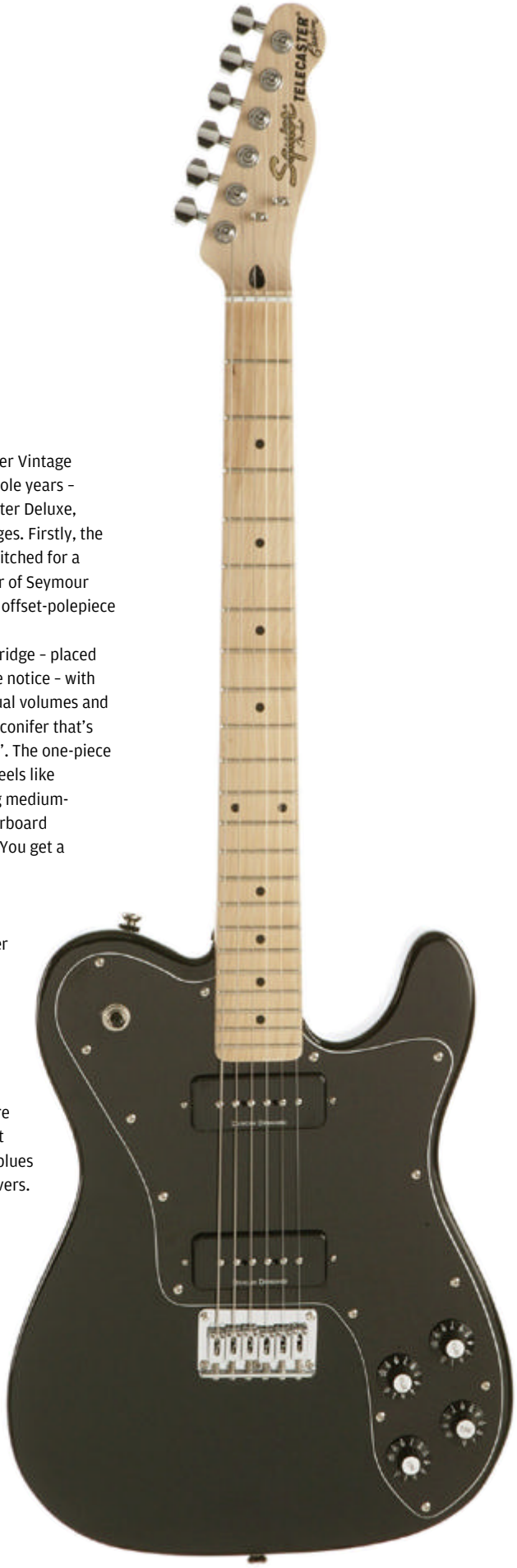
Some early Teles had pine bodies, but they soon changed to light ash. In the late '50s alder became the body wood for all colours (except sunburst and blonde). Maple necks were fitted with rosewood fingerboards – first slabs, then veneers. Changes were made to the electronics: early bridge pickups had Alnico III slugs, but Alnico V became standard around 1955. The number of turns of magnet wire always seemed to vary wildly. The flat polepieces became staggered, and eventually machine-wound plain enamel magnet wire replaced the hand-wound formvar wire.

The controls evolved, too. Originally, the second knob was a pickup 'blender' control when the switch was in the bridge position; the middle position gave the neck pickup, the middle setting gave the neck pickup with a preset treble roll-off. The blender became a regular tone control but that muddy neck option remained, and you could only get the two pickups working together if you jammed the switch in between the bridge and middle settings. Some put the change to the 'modern' layout as late as 1967.

Then in the CBS era the finish changed from nitrocellulose to polyester, neck joints went from four bolts to three with a Micro-Tilt, and the body weight on some '70s examples approached 3.5 metric tonnes. It's bewildering when you consider that all these changes only apply to the regular Telecaster model, and we haven't even mentioned the early Custom Tele models with white or black body binding, the later unbound Tele Customs with neck humbuckers, that double 'buckered Deluxe or the two semi-hollow Thinline models!

These days, if we're talking Telecaster reissues, it's a case of 'which model do you want?' and 'how much do you want to pay?' You can get near detail-perfect reissues of all the classic pre-CBS and post-CBS Teles with vintage-inspired neck profiles, and there are other models with modern features like flatter fingerboards, fatter frets and the option of hotter pickups. It seems that Fender has a reissue to suit every taste and pocket, and there are even some new mutations in the Tele gene pool. Let's twang!

SQUIER Telecaster Custom II



At a glance

RRP **£322.80**

IMPORTANT SPECS
Solid body electric guitar. Made in Indonesia. Agathis body with bolt-on maple neck, 22-fret fingerboard, stop-tail bridge, sealed tuners Three-way switch, individual volume and tone controls

PERFECT FOR **Retro and modern clean and dirty plus bottleneck sounds**

LOOK ELSEWHERE FOR
traditional Telecaster tones

This model – a favourite in the Squier Vintage Modified line for around seven whole years – closely resembles a 1970s Telecaster Deluxe, but there have been two big changes. Firstly, the awkward Strat-shaped headstock has been ditched for a regular Telecaster shape, and secondly a pair of Seymour Duncan Designed P90s has replaced the two offset-polepiece Lover-designed humbuckers.

Other Deluxe features include a hardtail bridge – placed slightly crooked on our particular sample, we notice – with through-body string attachment and individual volumes and tones for each pickup. The body is agathis, a conifer that's sometimes called 'the poor man's mahogany'. The one-piece maple neck's matt finish is so thin it almost feels like you're playing bare wood. It's a fine handling medium-depth C-shaped profile with a fairly flat fingerboard radius and very well-installed medium frets. You get a set of quality sealed tuners, too.

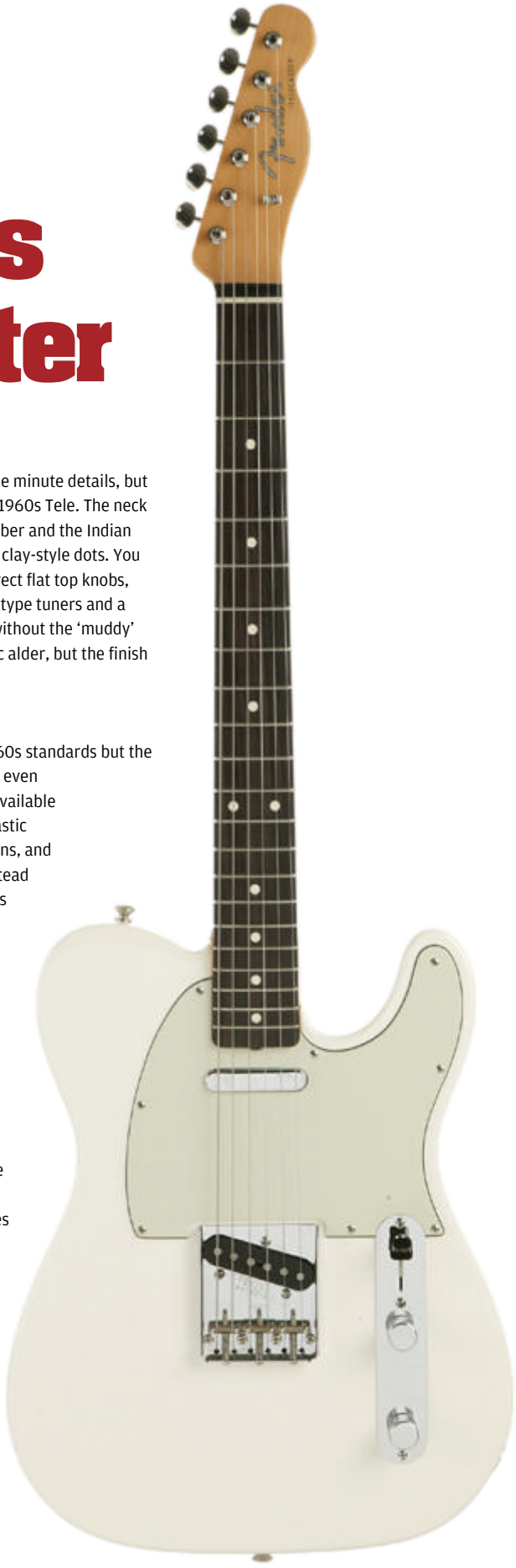
Sounds

The Custom II's acoustic tone is mellow rather than Telecasterishly snappy, but there's plenty of resonance. The pickups are dark and gnarly with two distinct tones: the bridge has an appealing nasal bark, while the neck is pure and sweet. Together you get a cool phasey chime, and there's plenty of output to drive an amp. The clean tones are certainly impressive – but this guitar also just loves distortion. Whether you want a valvey blues overdrive or pedal to the metal, it really delivers.

Verdict

Although built to a budget with certain hardware quality compromises, this guitar plays as well as any in this group and it sounds superb, covering a whole range of dirty and clean tones. It's no traditional Telecaster, but it's still a fine guitar regardless of the price.

FENDER
Classic Series '60s Telecaster



At a glance

RRP **£718**

IMPORTANT SPECS
Solid body electric guitar.
Made in Mexico.
Alder body with bolt-on maple neck, 21-fret rosewood fingerboard, three steel-saddle bridge, vintage tuners,
Three-way switch, single volume and tone

PERFECT FOR **Steve Cropper chops, rock and indie**

LOOK ELSEWHERE FOR **purist country, 1950s sounds, tonal refinement**

Train-spotters can pick over the minute details, but this is a tidy take on an early 1960s Tele. The neck lacquer is shaded a lovely amber and the Indian rosewood fingerboard sports clay-style dots. You get a green-tinted scratchplate, the correct flat top knobs, proper '60s-style steel saddles, vintage-type tuners and a three-way 'top hat' switch – thankfully without the 'muddy' option. Best of all the body is 1960s spec alder, but the finish is polyester, not nitrocellulose.

Sounds

The body is fairly heavy by authentic 1960s standards but the acoustic tone actually sounds like a Tele even before you plug it in. There's little info available on the 'Alnico pickups' but they have plastic rather than vulcanised fibreboard bobbins, and the bridge unit is wrapped with tape instead of with old-fashioned string. This guitar's sound is unmistakably 'Telecaster', but not necessarily a fabulous Telecaster. It plays nicely with its early 1960s neck profile and skinny frets, but the top end of the bridge pickup is a bit edgy and the muted neck tone might confirm some people's prejudices. We alleviated the neck setting problems on ours by moving the unit closer to the strings, but if you already own one of these or you're thinking of buying one and changing pickups, we'd suggest considering swapping those steel saddles for compensated brass saddles first.

Verdict

Considering that these guitars are built to a price, it's hard to see how they could do it better. It deserves its safe seat in the line, but do check out the subtle upgrades offered by 2014's Classic Player Baja '60s Telecaster, which costs a touch more.

FENDER
Classic Player Baja

At a glance

RRP **£874.80**

IMPORTANT SPECS
Solidbody electric guitar. Made in Mexico. Ash body with bolt-on maple neck, 24-fret rosewood fingerboard, three brass-saddle bridge, vintage tuners, S1 switch, four-way pickup switch, single volume and tone

PERFECT FOR **trad Tele tones, rock and funk**

LOOK ELSEWHERE **for metal**

Weighing 4kg/8.8lbs, this '50s reissue is a bit porky for those who like their Teles verging on the featherweight, but the Mexican factory has come up with the goods again. Granted, the finish is polyester, but the blonde finish over the ash body is wonderfully translucent and the nice vintage details are all there. The bridge pickup has flat polepieces, the saddles are brass, and the tuners are old-school. You also get a flatter-radius fingerboard with nice fat frets and a four-way pickup selector with a clever S1 switch concealed in the top of the volume control.

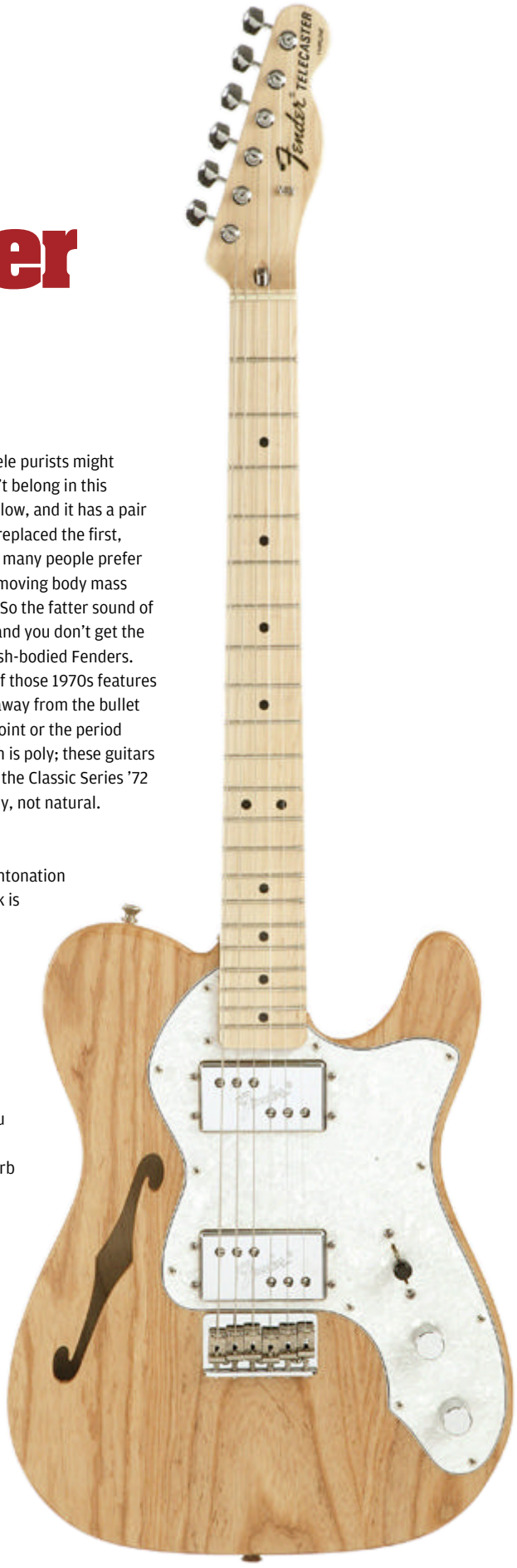
Sounds

With S1 in the 'up' position, positions 1 to 3 are bridge, both (in parallel) and neck, with position 4 combining both coils in series for a fat humbucker tone. With the S1 'down', positions 1 and 3 are the same, but the coils in parallel and series mode are combined out of phase. The out-of-phase series mode is particularly great because it produced a subtle 'auto wah' effect... honestly, it does sound like that. In phase it's not quite a humbucker tone, but it's close. So you can have fun leaving the S1 switched up and flick from a glassy neck rhythm tone straight to a fat rock tone for power chords and solos. This guitar's controls unlock all the sonic potential of a stock Telecaster.

Verdict

The Classic Player Baja comes in at roughly the same price as the Mexican 1950s and 1960s reissues, but you get a whole lot more – and the great thing about the S1 switching, sounds aside, is that no-one need know it's there. Watch out for the weight, but vintage good looks, modern playability, superior pickups and six distinct and useable tone options add up to a great value package.

FENDER '72 Telecaster Thinline



At a glance

RRP **£948**

IMPORTANT SPECS
Semi-solid body electric guitar. Made in Mexico. Ash body with bolt-on 21-fret maple neck, hardtail six-saddle bridge, F-brand tuners, Two Seth Lover-designed humbucking pickups, three-way switch, master volume and tone

PERFECT FOR **blues, indie, slide, roots rock**

LOOK ELSEWHERE FOR **trad Tele tones**

There are two reasons why Tele purists might argue that this guitar doesn't belong in this group – the body is semi-hollow, and it has a pair of humbuckers. This model replaced the first, conventional-pickup Tele Thinline, and many people prefer it. Teles are toppy to start with, and removing body mass simply accentuates this characteristic. So the fatter sound of humbuckers helps to even things out, and you don't get the back-breaking weight of many 1970s ash-bodied Fenders.

Enough time has elapsed for some of those 1970s features to look very cool. Fender hasn't shied away from the bullet truss rod, a three-bolt Micro-Tilt neck joint or the period 'F'-branded tuners. Naturally, the finish is poly; these guitars always were. Bear in mind that in 2015 the Classic Series '72 Thinline will be arriving in sunburst only, not natural.

Sounds

With six individual bridge saddles the intonation is accurate, and the medium-sized neck is very playable. Predictably the acoustic tone is loud, but it has plenty of meaty midrange and resonance. The semi-solid tone is most noticeable on the neck pickup, especially when you roll off a little treble. It's no mini jazzbox, but you do get a slight hint of ES-335. The bridge is gutsy and fat but there's enough twang and quack to remind you it's a Fender, and both pickups sound fantastic clean and distorted with superb touch dynamics and clarity.

Verdict

Maybe Fender was originally trying to make a guitar that sounded more like a Gibson – but it ended up closer to a small-body Gretsch. It's got a great combination of sparkle and meat, so it's no wonder these unique and versatile guitars are so belatedly popular.

FENDER
Vintage Hot Rod '52

At a glance

RRP **was £1499**

IMPORTANT SPECS
Solid body electric guitar. Made in the USA. 'Premium' ash body with bolt-on 21-fret maple neck, vintage-style tuners, Trad Tele bridge pickup plus Seymour Duncan Vintage Mini Humbucker, 3-way switch, volume, tone

PERFECT FOR **country, rock, blues, bottleneck, jazz, rockabilly**

LOOK ELSEWHERE FOR
metal

Sadly discontinued but not impossible to find on the used market, the Hot Rod '52 came with a rather compelling spec: a premium ash body, a 'manageable' 1950s-spec neck with a flatter 9.5" radius and medium jumbo frets, a nitro-cellulose finish on the neck and body, vintage-style tuners and modern-style controls, intonation-compensated slanted brass saddles, a thin black guard and a Gibson Firebird-style Seymour Duncan mini-bucker at the neck with a Custom Vintage single coil at the bridge – and inside the tweed case lurked candy that includes a 1950s strap, a cable and a Mist & Wipe cleaning kit. Now, Fender's current Tele range does have a few models that combine a trad bridge pickup with a humbucker at the neck – the Graham Coxon and the Vintage Modified tele Special, for instance – but those both have full-size 'buckers, and that's not the same as a Firebird, not by a long shot.

Sounds

This thing has the tone to slay a redneck at 20 paces. The pickups are perfectly balanced and the bridge unit can cover Roy Buchanan to Keef without piercing your eardrums. It's that perfect balance of quack, sprang and grunt that leaves Strats stranded on the bridge. The neck humbucker is a revelation – woody, jazzy and clear when clean, barking, dynamic and still clean when, er... dirty. Back off the tone control for the best 'woman tone' you've ever heard, or switch to the middle and hit the bottleneck. It's got everything you need for country and Chet-picking too... and that butterscotch finish has the potential to relic itself as nature intended.

Verdict

Old-school vibe plus that clangy Firebird pickup... wow. The little Seymour Duncan is a fine-sounding – and fine-looking – addition to the Tele, and a secondhand Hot Rod '52 is well worth seeking out.

FENDER '51 Nocaster Relic

At a glance

RRP **approx £2750**

IMPORTANT SPECS
Solid body electric guitar. Made in the USA. Premium ash, bolt-on maple neck, Three-way switch, Custom Shop pickups, volume and blend control

PERFECT FOR **vintage Tele fantasists seeking retro tones with good touch-dynamics**

LOOK ELSEWHERE FOR
versatility, controllability, more pickup power

The hefty-necked Nocaster is a mainstay in Fender's Custom Shop line, and it's always one which divides opinions. Some tend to get upset about the 'relic' finish, and even those who approve might find the baseball-bat neck a little hard to handle: it's so massive that the back of the neck and the headstock form a continuous line. Though butterscotch is by far the commonest finish, they've been built in other finishes as well, and the one we have is a rather unusual, '60s-style Lake Placid blue metallic. Naturally it's all nitro, which has been aged to match the worn plastic parts and corroded hardware.

The relicing isn't entirely convincing on this particular guitar because the virtually unworn neck doesn't match with the aged look of the body. In Lake Placid Blue this guitar looks like an old re-fin anyway, and the cracking seems a bit like crazy paving. Most of the metal, including the period-correct flat-head screws, looks the part but the bridge appears almost brand new. The black guard looks amazing, especially the wear and the distressed edges, but there's no 'can ring' on the back. Also, the switch tip keeps falling off because the shaft is too short.

Sounds

At 3.5kg/8lbs the weight is about right for the '51 era. Acoustically the tone is vibrant and it just sings through a '51 Fender Deluxe. These aren't hot pickups, but they make up for it with balance, dynamics and clarity. But there's little tonal difference between the bridge and the neck and this limitation renders the vintage-style controls, where the rear knob is a pickup blender and the third setting rolls off all the treble, somewhat ineffectual.

Verdict

A super-cool vibe with potential for outstanding tone – if you can live with the daunting neck and the archaic controls.

Extra WIDTH

Not long ago, the Fender Tele Deluxe was a dead duck. Then a new wave of bands took a closer look, and found it made perfect sense after all. **Steve Bailey** has the story of a guitar that sank and rose once again

Thanks to Radiohead, Sonic Youth and Franz Ferdinand, the Deluxe is one of the best loved guitars of the 21st century

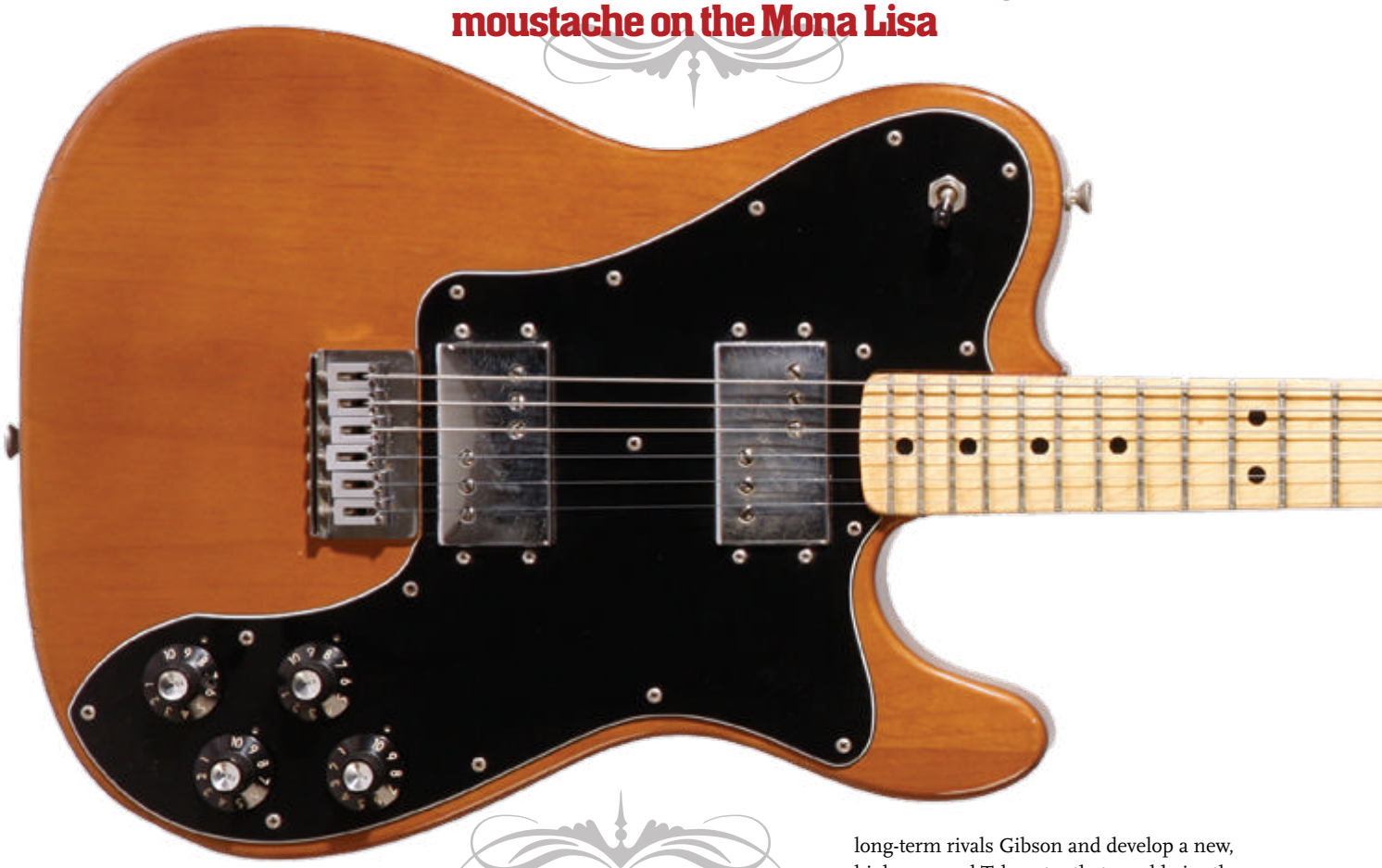
Few instruments successfully combine elements of the three most revered guitar designs in history. The Telecaster Deluxe does just that – and if it hadn't have been done with typical Fender finesse, we could easily have been presented with an unholy monster only Dr Frankenstein could love. Instead, some players believe it to be the ultimate six-string, eclipsing even the Strat and Les Paul. It was a fiendish plan: take a robust Telecaster body, add Strat-style gizmos like individual adjustable saddles, and then, as the clincher, bring in the man credited with the invention of the humbucker to design some all-new pickups. How could it possibly fail?

The story of the creation of the Telecaster Deluxe highlights the rivalry between Fender and Gibson perhaps more than any other, as the two goliaths of the industry struggled for an advantage during the corporate days of the late '60s. Like many innovative instruments before it, the Deluxe wasn't welcomed with open arms at its launch in 1972 and could easily have became nothing more than a footnote in guitar history. But now, almost 40 years on, thanks to alternative acts who have conquered the mainstream like Radiohead, Sonic Youth and Franz Ferdinand, it's fast becoming one of the best-loved electric guitars of the 21st century.

Fender has been alive to the shift in vogue, reissuing a Mexican-made version of the guitar in 2004, just in time to equip a vast wave of budding art rock axe-slingers with shiny new humbuckered Teles. The plank de jour is usually coupled with a 60W Hot Rod DeVille or a Deluxe Reverb, creating a sound that has become as essential in recent years as skinny-fit jeans, the beginnings of an unruly beard and a foppish Dickensian street urchin persona.

Original Deluxes don't come up for sale too often, and prices are actually rising, against the general current trend. So just why was it that these guitars, which Fender spent a great deal of time and money on, fail to impress the first time round?

To country legend Roy Buchanan, installing a humbucker in a Tele was like drawing a moustache on the Mona Lisa



It all started back in the late '60s when the Small Faces' Steve Marriott, Chicago slide man Mike Bloomfield and celebrated chicken-picker Albert Lee were ripping out the Tele's much-maligned single coil neck pickup and replacing it with a beefier, darker-voiced Gibson humbucker. This mod was so rife that country legend Roy Buchanan warned that installing a humbucker on a Tele was like drawing a moustache on the Mona Lisa – they were defacing a work of art. But revolution was in the air, and when high-profile figures like Keith Richards jumped on the bandwagon, Fender started to think there might just be something in it.

Due to popular demand created by high-profile players like Eric Clapton, Gibson had reissued the Les Paul in 1968 but inexplicably not in the 'Standard' format of the 1958-'60 model that guitarists were clamouring for. Instead they brought back the P90-equipped Custom and Gold Top. Dealers were crying out for a Les Paul with humbuckers, so at the factory Gibson simply took the bodies routed for the smaller P90s and fitted mini humbuckers taken from the Epiphone models of the era. This way the company avoided extra costs, but it left a small gap in the market that rival companies felt they could exploit. Tellingly, the resulting model was named the Les Paul Deluxe.

Seth Lover decided to go for a completely new pickup design in keeping with the Telecaster's character

SETH LOVER KILLS THE HUM

Fender, now owned by the huge CBS corporation, decided that the best way to ensure market domination was to poach the architect of the famous PAF humbucker from long-term rivals Gibson and develop a new, high-powered Telecaster that would give the punters what they really wanted.

In a way, the story of the Telecaster Deluxe is the story of electronics legend Seth Lover and his inspired innovations. Lover was born in Gibson's home town of Kalamazoo, Michigan on January 1, 1910. He had been obsessed with electronics as a boy, assembling complex radio kits plucked from ads in the newspapers. By his early 20s Seth had opened his own radio repair shop, and a few years later Gibson hired him to test the amps they were selling with their fashionable new electric Hawaiian lap steel guitars. Lover went off to spend his war years as a radioman in the US Navy and returned to Gibson fully acquainted with all the latest developments in electronic technology.

Six cast saddles gave the Deluxe better intonation control than any older Tele

The three-bolt neck plate had a tiny hole for an Allen key to tweak the Micro-Tilt neck adjusting device

But, of course, it was Fender that rocked the instrument world – with Gibson feeling the shock more than most – by launching the first solidbody electric in 1950. After a few legal wranglings about the name, Leo Fender's Broadcaster became known as the Telecaster in 1952, and twangy electrified sounds began to echo around a brave post-war world.

Gibson responded later that year with the Les Paul, initially equipped with P90 pickups – fatter-sounding than Fender pickups, but still with a single-coil design. Yet some players were already complaining about single coil hum – a side effect which tainted quieter sections of music. At Gibson, Lover had concocted a solution by 1955. He put two coils side by side with the magnets and windings opposed and wired in series, which cancelled the hum. The new pickups were installed in steel guitars by 1956, and in Les Pauls by 1957. It was fiendishly simple – yet it unleashed a thicker, more powerful sound that Gibson would capitalise on to claw back lost ground from the single-coiled Fenders.

LOVER JOINS FENDER

That could have been the last we heard of Mr Lover had it not been for Fender's intervention in the late '60s, when Seth accepted a hefty pay rise to leave Gibson, cross over to Fullerton, California and join the opposition. Work began on the project that was supposed to put Fender in the guitar industry's driving seat once and for all – the first humbuckered Fender.

What Fender really wanted was a pickup identical to Gibson's, but Seth wasn't satisfied with simply replicating his earlier work. He took it upon himself to go for a completely new design with a brighter sound, in keeping with the Tele's intrinsic character. The result was the Wide Range humbucker – wide in every sense, for it made the Gibson Deluxe's mini humbuckers appear quite insubstantial by comparison. The PAF's single 'alnico' ↦

Pickup gurus together: Seymour Duncan with the great Seth Lover

The new Wide Range pickup gave a crisp, clearer tone while maintaining plenty of PAF-style punch

bar (an alloy of aluminum/nickel/cobalt) that magnetised the steel polepieces was dropped. Seth went for individual magnets instead, similar to those used in Strat single coils. The alloy he chose for these polepieces, however, was 'Cunife' (copper/nickel/iron) a material that doesn't seem to have been used in any other pickups before or since. Some say that Lover selected Cunife because it was more easily machined than Alnico, thus suiting the mass production, penny-pinching CBS-era philosophy, but the new wide-coil design also helped give a crisper, clearer tone while maintaining plenty of thick PAF-style punch.

Aside from the size of the covers, the most obvious visual difference is the positioning of the six exposed polepieces (though the Wide Range contains 12 in total). The three visible bass poles are at the front, with the three trebles at the rear. This was probably more to distance the design from Gibson's patent rather than for any sonic advantage.

In 1971 the chambered Fender Telecaster Thinline was the first to get the Wide Range treatment, plus a fixed bridge with Strat-style individual saddles, but the changes stopped there. Next in 1972 came the Telecaster Custom, basically a normal Tele with the traditional single coil on the ashtray bridge but sporting a brand new humbucker at the neck. Keith Richards stocked up immediately.

Late that same year came the more considered Telecaster Deluxe with twin Wide Range humbuckers and extra added innovations intended to place it right at the top of the range. It had the individual saddles to eliminate intonation problems plus the late '60s/early '70s type enlarged Strat headstock. This instantly gave the guitar a hybrid Tele/Strat appeal. Other features borrowed from the Stratocaster included a belly-cut contour on the back for extra comfort and, for a while at least, the option of a vibrato – an option that few customers took advantage of.

Each pickup had a separate volume and tone control with a three-way toggle on the upper horn, Les Paul-style. The first models had the added attraction of knobs similar to those on the Fender blackface amps complete with a chrome skirt on the top; very stylish. Eventually these gave way to more run-of-the-mill black knobs, more akin to those found on a Stratocaster. Wood was ash or alder, while

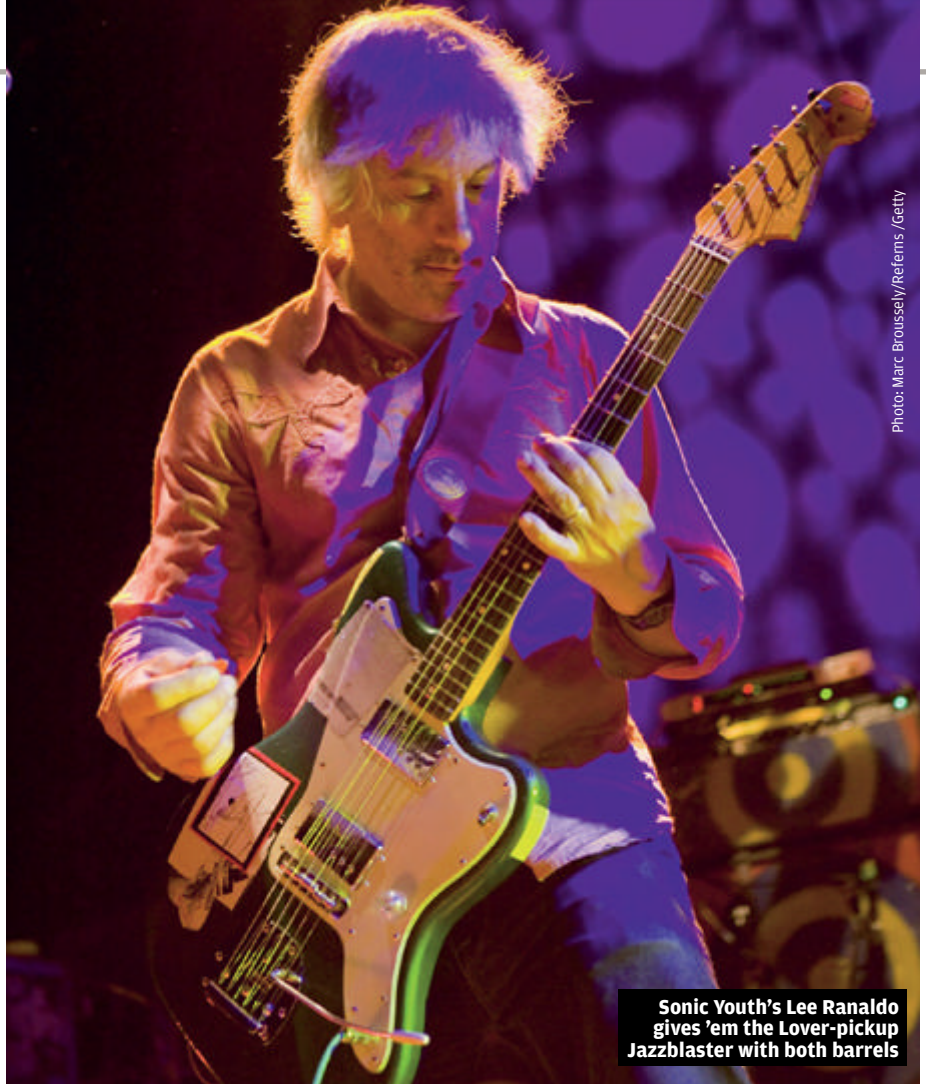


Photo: Marc Broussely/Referns /Getty

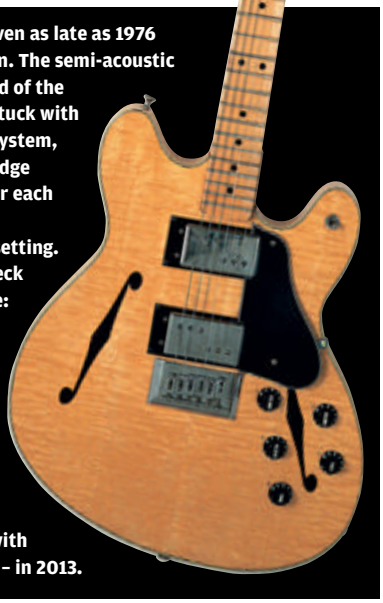
Sonic Youth's Lee Ranaldo gives 'em the Lover-pickup Jazzblaster with both barrels

the finishes were black, three-colour sunburst, natural or walnut, though a few people claim to own white Deluxes – possibly a limited run.

A more controversial feature was the Micro-Tilt adjustment device placed in the heel of the neck. The idea was you could tweak the angle of the neck to the body with an Allen key screw accessed through a tiny hole in the neck plate. This meant you no longer had to remove the neck to place a 'shim' in the socket for neck angle changes.

Fender claim they swapped the tried-and-tested four-bolt plate to a three-bolt to accommodate this gizmo, but many feel it was actually another cost-cutting tactic for cheaper manufacture. The device can only be used sparingly: too much tweaking of the Micro-Tilt can create airspace, leading to a loss of resonance and sustain. The

Starcaster: Last Original Wide Ranger



Despite the slow sales of the Deluxe and its Tele siblings, even as late as 1976 Fender hadn't given up on wrestling sales away from Gibson. The semi-acoustic Starcaster was an attempt to emulate the styling and sound of the successful ES-335, albeit with a few quirky twists. Fender stuck with their maple bolt-on neck and even included the Micro-Tilt system, as featured on the Deluxe. A new bridge with individual bridge saddles was also included, along with a tone and volume for each Wide Range pickup. The added extra was a master volume, presumably for easy tweakage when on the middle toggle setting.

Despite excelling at clean tones, particularly from the neck pickup, the original Starcaster fared worse than the Deluxe: lasting just four years, it was struck from the catalogue by 1980 (or even earlier, according to some sources) and has never been reissued. For a long time, if you stumbled over one of these rare beasts, they were priced in the realms of affordability. Now, because the endorsement of the Zutons' Boyan Chowdhury and the Killers' Dave Keuning has earned a them a certain cult status, the originals go for a fair whack. As unlikely as it would have seemed a few years ago, Fender reissued the Starcaster – with four-bolt neck join, a different bridge and simpler controls – in 2013.

It took a while, but the Tele Deluxe gradually came to embody the edgy and the experimental

high-gloss 'thick skin' finish containing more than a dozen coats of polyester probably didn't help on that score either, yet this finish found its way on to most Fender guitars of the era.

Unfortunately, despite all this innovation, on its release the guitar was met with almost total indifference. Jimmy Page was busy making the Les Paul Standard even more iconic, and other top '70s rockers rarely looked beyond a Gibson or a Strat when selecting an instrument to keep a stadium audience enthralled. To make matters worse for the Tele Deluxe, Gibson finally reissued the Les Paul Standard in 1976 complete with original-style PAFs and all the trimmings. Within 10 years, all three Wide Range Telecasters had bitten the dust. The Thinline disappeared in '79, while Custom and Deluxe quickly followed suit in 1981.

But even as the line was being cancelled, the seeds were being sown for its revival. In New York, art rock renegades Sonic Youth were busy breathing life into post-punk, with lead man Lee Ranaldo making an anarchic statement with his Telecaster Deluxe. Ranaldo, an inveterate tinkerer, just loved the Wide Range pickups, so even when he fell under the spell of the Jazzmaster he knew just what to do – put the two together, and with devastating effect. The Wide Range-loaded Jazzmaster is now known in the Sonic Youth camp as the Jazzblaster, and the band regards it as their secret weapon.

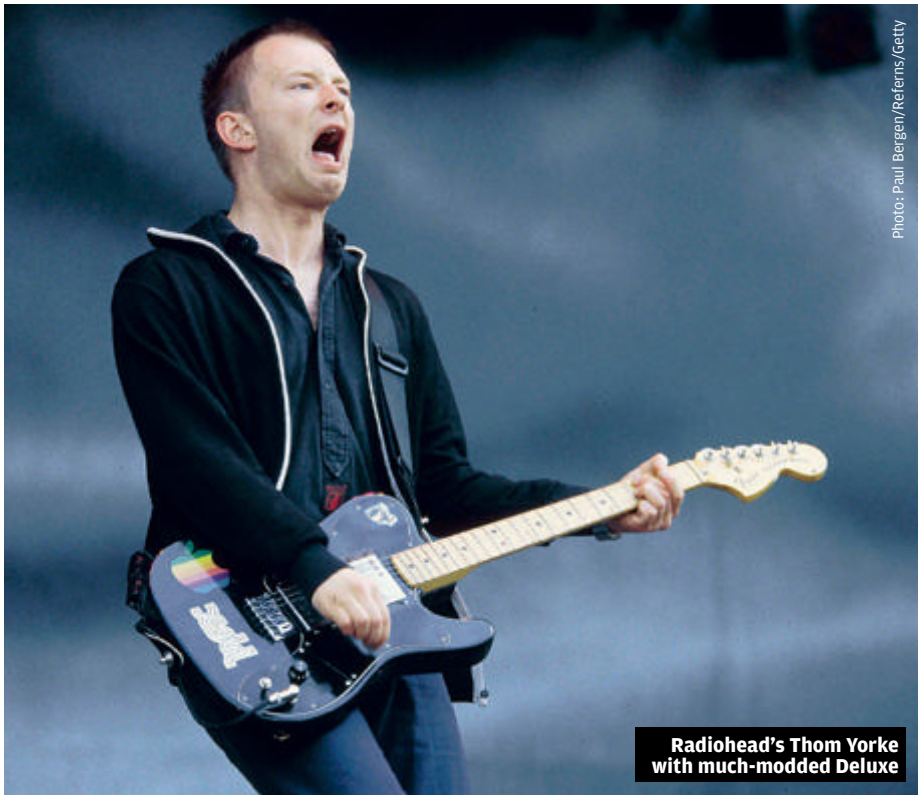


Photo: Paul Bergen/Referns/Getty

Radiohead's Thom Yorke with much-modded Deluxe

BACK INTO STYLE

It took a while, but gradually the Deluxe became to embody the edgy and experimental. It was championed by Pavement's Scott 'Spiral Stairs' Kannberg throughout most of the '90s, while soundscape obsessive Jason Pierce of Spiritualized was rarely seen onstage without his '70s Tele Thinline. But it was Thom Yorke, frontman of the world-straddling Radiohead, who really brought the profile back up, consistently sporting a Deluxe slung round his neck from 1997 onwards.

Yorke's black Deluxe is a 1973 model with a host of modifications to keep the signal as direct as possible. In a total re-think, the controls have all been swapped around; one ↦

A Stone's Tone: Micawber, Malcolm and Sonny

As Keith Richards chooses to wield Telecasters loaded with neck humbuckers there's really no denying that rock simply wouldn't be quite the same without them. Keith switched to Teles in the late '60s under the influence of Ry Cooder and Gram Parsons. He reckons it was a defining moment: 'I realised I had graduated, this was a big boys' tool'.

It's unclear when the Gibson PAF humbucker was first added to his most famous 'blackguard' Tele – the intriguingly-named Micawber – but most pinpoint it to 1972, around the time of the recording of *Exile On Main St*. These days it also sports a brass replacement bridge with individual saddles. This guitar has probably appeared on more Stones recordings than any other, and as we all know, like most of Keith's guitars it's kept in open G tuning with the low E string removed. Live, it usually sees action on songs like *Brown Sugar* and *Honky Tonk Woman*. He does have a black 1975 Tele Custom that often handles Jumpin' Jack Flash but this guitar doesn't seem to have earned an endearing monicker like his other blackguard, a '54 known as Malcolm. This Tele is a blackguard with the same mods as Micawber but can be identified by its more transparent finish and a capo that seems to be welded on at the fourth fret. *Tumbling Dice* generally benefits from its slightly brighter tones. Finally, Sonny is a '66 sunburst model with an uncovered humbucker installed at the neck that usually crops up on *You Can't Always Get What You Want*. The Human Riff can sometimes be seen playing Telecasters with standard single coils, but if you truly want a classic Stones tone, then you've got to think fatter.

Keith Richards and the famous Micawber

Photo: Martin Philbey/Referns /Getty

Kapranos with Franz Ferdinand: putting the Deluxe centre-stage

'You get some really strange sounds you wouldn't expect. It's an amazing guitar' – Alex Kapranos, Franz Ferdinand

of the tone knobs has disappeared completely, while the other has been replaced by a jack. The hole for one of the volume pots now houses the pickup selector, which has been shifted down from the upper bout, leaving just one volume pot. He also uses a heavily customised Tele with a Strat neck, a humbucker and an active preamp control. Both of these guitars can be easily identified by the large Apple Mac stickers above and behind the bridge.

It just needed one final push, and in 2004 Franz Ferdinand supplied it. Their breakthrough single *Take Me Out*, powered by Alex Kapranos's Deluxe, turned many heads in the now all-pervasive indie scene and the guitar's rehabilitation was almost complete.

Kapranos had been so desperate to get his hands on a Deluxe that he was prepared to travel from Glasgow to Stansted airport to do a deal after he'd won an eBay bidding war for a mere £600. Like many others, he believes that the pickups create some unusual harmonics and retain much of the famous Tele tone while driving that bit harder; 'You can get some really strange sounds that you wouldn't expect – it's a totally amazing guitar.'

More famous users soon followed: the mocha brown Deluxe that graces the first page of this article was used all over *Up All Night*, the first Razorlight album. The retro-friendly Fender Japan reissued the Telecaster Custom and Telecaster Thinline – both now known as '72 models – as early as 1986, adding a Deluxe in 1995. A steady increase in interest saw the Custom and Thinline reinstated at the Mexican plant in 1999, with the Deluxe joining them in 2004.

When the reissues arrived, those lucky enough to own vintage versions of the guitars felt the pickups on the new models didn't quite match up to the originals. On inspection, it transpired that Seth Lover's design had been ousted in favour of a more standard reworking. The Wide Range casing survived, but what was underneath was very different, with the defining characteristic of individual Cunife magnets superseded by standard steel poles with a magnet beneath. The new pickup's bobbin was also much smaller than a true Wide Range's, meaning that the extra space in the casing had to be filled with wax. This holds true with both the Japanese and Mexican models. The values of the volume and tone pots have been altered to create a sound closer to the originals, but many insist a further upgrade of the volume pots is essential for anything approaching the quality of tone from one of the '70s models. As people craved that true Deluxe tone, vintage Wide Range humbuckers began changing hands for increasingly large amounts of cash. It took a long time for accurate replicas to appear from small builders, as the cost of threaded cunife rod is prohibitive and pickup makers have to find another solution– but we do now have the excellent Regal humbucker by Jason Lollar, which is getting excellent reviews, plus another from the well-regarded Curtis Novak. More and more big names are taking up the Telecaster Deluxe cause, including Chris Martin of Coldplay, Dave Grohl of the Foo Fighters and Rich Robinson of the Black Crowes – even Chicago blues legend Buddy Guy is a convert. After a terribly shaky start, it appears that the Telecaster Deluxe has found a very wide-ranging appeal indeed.

Current 'bucker Teles

How times have changed: now Fender's line-up is stuffed with humbuckin' Teles at prices to suit all pockets...

Classic Series '72 Telecaster Custom Nice reissue of the neck-humbucker original

Classic Series '72 Telecaster Deluxe As above, with Stratty bridge and two WR's

Classic Series '72 Telecaster Thinline Popular take on the Mk2 Thinline: two WR's

Albert Collins Telecaster Spendy Tele with binding, maple neck, neck humbucker

Jim Root Telecaster Two EMGs for the Slipknot/Stone Sour guitarist

J5 Triple Tele Deluxe Three WR humbuckers, plus a trem and a sea of chrome

Chris Shiflett Telecaster Deluxe Foos guitarist's siggie has PAF-type CS pickups

Graham Coxon Tele '60s-type build with a Seymour Duncan SH-1 at the neck

Select Telecaster HH An unusual model with two WR's and a blackwood top

Standard Telecaster HH Strat-type hardtail bridge and two 'Twin Head' humbuckers

Classic Player Tele Deluxe w/Tremolo Just that: a reissue of the rare whammy Deluxe

Cabronita Telecaster Reviewed in this issue, a Mex version of the Gretschy CS classic

Cabronita Telecaster Thinline Modern rocker meets CBS-era lightweight

Special Edition Custom Telecaster FMT Seymour Pearly Gates + '59, maple top

Blacktop Telecaster HH High-gain dual 'buckers, Strat bridge, reverse control plate

Modern Player Telecaster Plus Tele neck pickup, Strat middle, bridge humbucker

Avril Lavingne Telecaster Like a humbucker Esquire, plus chequered guard

Squier Vintage Modified Tele Custom II Custom with two PAF-style humbuckers

Squier Vintage Modified Tele Deluxe Affordable Deluxe reissue

Squier Vintage Modified Tele Custom Straight reissue for bargain hunters

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FENDER
1950 Broadcaster & 1957 Telecaster

Working tools have become collectable icons. **Rick Batey** examines the fruit of the first and seventh years of Fender's guitar production...

Who made the first electric guitar? The many claimants include such names as Rickenbacker, Vega, Lloyd Loar, OW Appleton and Paul Bigsby, but most agree that the first genuinely production electric solidbody Spanish (as opposed to lap steel) guitar was definitely down to Leo Fender. Guitar technology has moved on a bit in 65 years, but Teles are still the blue-collar heroes of rock'n'roll... and, as with Harley-Davidsons, some players still wouldn't be caught dead throttling anything else.

Exhibit Number 1, pictured far left, is a Broadcaster from 1950... possibly '51, but by then the lawsuit from Gretsch over the name 'Broadkaster' had kicked in and, to be on the safe side, Fender took to snipping 'Broadcaster' from their headstock transfers to make what later became known as 'Nocasters'. This one – serial number 0729, once part of the legendary John Entwistle collection – comes complete with barometer-shaped form-fit case and has an unusually slim and playable neck. Not all early Fenders are baseball bats, not by a long chalk.

Exhibit 2 is a Telecaster from 1957 (note the colour change from a clear, almost Scandinavian blonde – so much more subtle and less yellow than the vast majority of modern-day '52 reissues – to a thicker, more custard-like look). The year 1957 is unique when it comes to the specs of Strats and Teles, as many sport sharply V-profiled necks. Generally, as the Tele matured through the '50s, the sound of the bridge pickup became sharp and lairy rather than round and fat... although of course there's a lot of variation.

Nowadays, buying a '50s maple neck Fender Telecaster is a major investment. Here in 2015, original-finish examples range, very roughly, from the high-teens and then go up, up, up from there, and the earlier and the finer the finish, the higher they can go. Finish, again, is all-important; refins, while still respected as player guitars, can be half the value of an all-original example. You need to forge a relationship with a reputable dealer and educate yourself on the tiny signs that all is as it should be; the web is a good source, but nothing helps more than seeing good vintage examples, and plenty of them.

As well as the finish and neck lacquer, parts can be easily swapped. Reissue neckplates, bridges, saddles, pickguards and even screws can be swapped, or faked; there's a whole network out there dealing in iffy Fender parts. But if you've ever played a '50s Tele, a good one, then it's a musical – and historic – experience that you'll never forget.

'Telecasters are the blue-collar heroes of rock'n'roll. As with Harleys, some wouldn't be caught dead throttling anything else'

Tele Tales

- **'50s Teles usually had hand-written dates both at the end of the neck and also somewhere in a body routing**
- **All '50s Teles had maple necks with walnut 'skunk stripes' around the back until September 1959, when 'slab' rosewood fingerboards became the norm**
- **Post-1951 Teles gained a channel under the scratchplate, between the pickup routs**
- **Neck bolts changed from straight to Philips type in early '52; pickguard screws followed suit later that year**
- **In late 1954 the black bakelite pickguard changed to white plastic and the brass saddles were swapped for steel**
- **Tuners had single 'line' and Kluson Deluxe, '50-'51; no writing, '51-'52; same but with shaft end protruding through cover, '52-'55; single 'line', Kluson Deluxe with shaft protruding, '55-'64**
- **In mid-'55 the bridge pickup gained staggered poles, serial numbers switched from bridge to neckplate and string trees changed from round to 'butterfly'**
- **In late '58 the round steel saddles changed to the 'threaded' types and the strings anchored at the bridge. Through-body stringing returned in early 1960**

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FENDER

Paisley & Blue Flower Reissue Telecasters

These handsome Telecasters have long been a part of the Japanese reissue range. **Marcus Leadley** dons some rectangular sunglasses and a white rabbit costume for a dose of late-'60s Californian sunshine...

Once upon a time and far, far away there lived a roll of wallpaper. Like most rolls of wallpaper he was content enough, preparing himself for a life stuck on a wall somewhere. But this was no ordinary roll of wallpaper – oh, no. Our roll was a flash modern paisley – and self-adhesive to boot. Oh, how happy he was. He knew he was destined for some pretty thing's wall and, given that all wallpaper is voyeuristic by nature (you didn't know this?), our Herbert was looking forward to an action-filled life. Ah – such is youth; not a thought for those final years hidden under a dull coat of Artex...

Before long, Herbert was purchased by a young man in a very loud shirt. 'Great,' thought Herbert. 'Now I can really start living!' But the young man turned out to be an employee at the Fender guitar plant in Fullerton and pretty soon, much to his surprise, Herbert found himself being cut up into little bits and stuck to the front of guitars. True, it was a bit difficult seeing through the spray paint and all that lacquer but, hey, this was one happy roll of wallpaper. In particular, Herbert found the experience of multiple parallel realities most interesting.

Yes, the first Paisley Telecaster and its sibling Blue Flower issue, Fender's sharp-looking new models of 1968, really were covered in wallpaper. Frankly, it was a gimmick, a gesture in the direction of pop-art fashion and, despite a bit of well-aimed product placement in the Elvis Presley camp, the model soon slid off the shelf. Mind you, finding an original Paisley or Blue Flower Tele today would equate to a decent win on the lottery.

We first saw a born-again Japanese Paisley reissue Tele in 1985 (pink and blue paper was also applied, perhaps with less success, to the Stratocaster in 1988), and it's made several returns since then, with the most recent being the FSR Black Paisley model. These real Paisley and Blue Flower reissues, however, are only available on the used market, although it's worth keeping an eye on the Fender Japan site for models such as the TL69-SPL, which updates the Paisley and Blue Flower themes with Japanese silk-influenced designs. ➔

Below the flash dressing lies a basswood body

Late-'60s style grooved steel bridge saddles and flat-top knobs

Finding an original 1968 Paisley or Blue Flower Fender Telecaster today would equate to a decent win on the lottery

FACTFILE

FENDER PAISLEY & BLUE FLOWER TELECASTERS

DESCRIPTION
Japanese-built, '68 themed Telecaster
PRICE **approx £650 used**

BUILD **Solid basswood body, maple neck with 21-fret maple fingerboard. Ashtray-style bridge with three adjustable saddles and strings-through-body anchoring. Kluson-style machineheads**
ELECTRICS **Two single coil pickups, master tone and volume controls, three-way pickup selector**
LEFT-HANDERS **No**
FINISH **Paisley or Blue Flower**

SCALE LENGTH
645mm/25.5"
NECK WIDTH
Nut 43mm
12th fret 51.8mm
DEPTH OF NECK
First fret 21mm
12th fret 23mm
STRING SPACING
Nut 35.4mm
Bridge 53.9mm
ACTION AS SUPPLIED
12th fret treble 2mm
12th fret bass 2mm
WEIGHT **3.52kg/7.75lb**

Not the most accurate Paisley pattern possible, but it's close enough

Both the reissue Telecasters we're looking today, then, are by Fender Japan – and we've simply not seen enough of these well-built guitars in recent years. Japanese Fenders offer exceptional value for money and the production standard of the Fuji-Gen Gakki plant is legendary.

Focussing on the Paisley model (the Blue Flower is the same in all but finish), first impressions are most favourable. However, this is notably not a slavish copy of the original. The visible rosewood plug on the headstock, filling the hole made during truss rod assembly, is out of keeping: so is the use of early-'60s Kluson-style tuners. Colour-wise, the paisley finish is a modern reproduction rather than an historically accurate copy – I certainly don't remember the original having a silver ground. The '85 issue was also less spangly and closer in tint to the more restrained original.

However, in all other respects this guitar is a time-traveller from the late 1960s. The neck is finished with a (now) retro high gloss, the frets are the correct narrow gauge and the 'ashtray' bridge assembly has only three adjustable saddles. The transparent scratchplate is also nicely in keeping.

The electrics, too, are spot-on for the era. There's a chunky single-coil mounted into the bridge assembly – such a significant element of the Tele sound – with a smaller chrome-covered pickup at the neck. The chromed control plate has a single volume and tone control and a three-position selector switch. Nothing unusual here.

At this point it's really starting to become apparent just how good a player this guitar could be – and straight out of the box it performs perfectly, with the quality of Japanese Fenders in evidence once again. Some people don't get on with gloss-finished maple fingerboards, complaining that they're too fast and slippery, especially when the gig gets hot. We love them – and this, we reckon, is a fine, speedy example of the breed.

Sounds

Starting with a clean tone, I'm pleased to find this instrument isn't quite as bright or brash as I was expecting – an anticipation perhaps based on my experience of Fender's recent American Series instruments as well as the sight of a maple fingerboard. The bridge pickup tone is full-bodied, cheerful and tight, while the neck pickup sound is more open and jazzy: a well-rounded tone for most applications.

The sound of both pickups together has that typically bell-like, jangly character, which of course leads us easily into psychedelic action. A lot of freak-era guitar-band music was essentially based around the sound of sharp-sounding instruments and strong notions of melody and harmony – with or without ethnic influences – so you can see why the Telecaster, with its pristine tone and simple, cutting capabilities, made it ideal for vocal pop accompaniment.

Good news for FX processing fans is that you can add a lot of extra toppings from distortion and other effects before you lose sight of the instrument's natural voice. Remember, though, that there weren't really that many effects to get 'experimental' with back in the late '60s – at least, not outside the studio. Valve amp feedback, short echo repeats, a helping of spring reverb, rude fuzzboxes and a cheeky bit of phasing all conspire here with the Paisley Telecaster to yield decidedly authentic tones. And just because this guitar has a '60s theme to its finish doesn't meant it isn't able to perform in all the blues, jazz, rock and pop settings to which Telecasters have always adapted so well.

Verdict

If you're into psychedelia or happen to play in a '60s covers band, then the Paisley or Blue Flower Telecasters will suit you – they really look and sound the part. Leaving aside those extrovert finishes, however, as Telecasters go these guitars are truly excellent value for money, if you can find one for around £600 privately, or a little more from a dealer or imported via the Ishibashi U-box. They play beautifully and deliver the goods across a broad range of genres, so there's no reason for them to be confined to theme gigs. If your soul contains a germ of flash and you have the bottle to handle a slightly flamboyant look, try one.

FINAL SCORE

PAISLEY & BLUE FLOWER TELECASTERS	
Build Quality	**18**/20
Playability	**17**/20
Sound	**16**/20
Value for money	**17**/20
Vibe	**19**/20
TOTAL	**87%**

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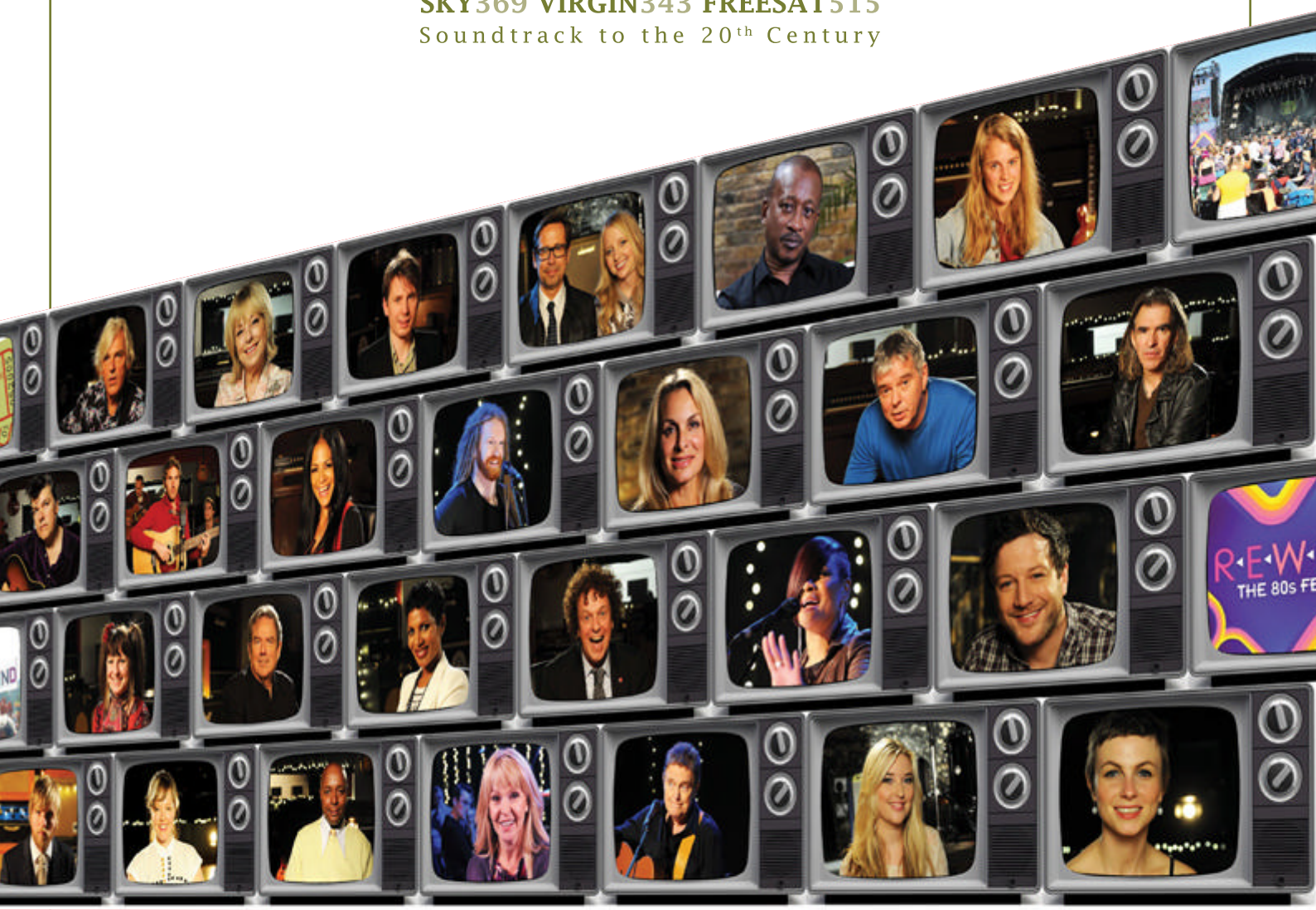

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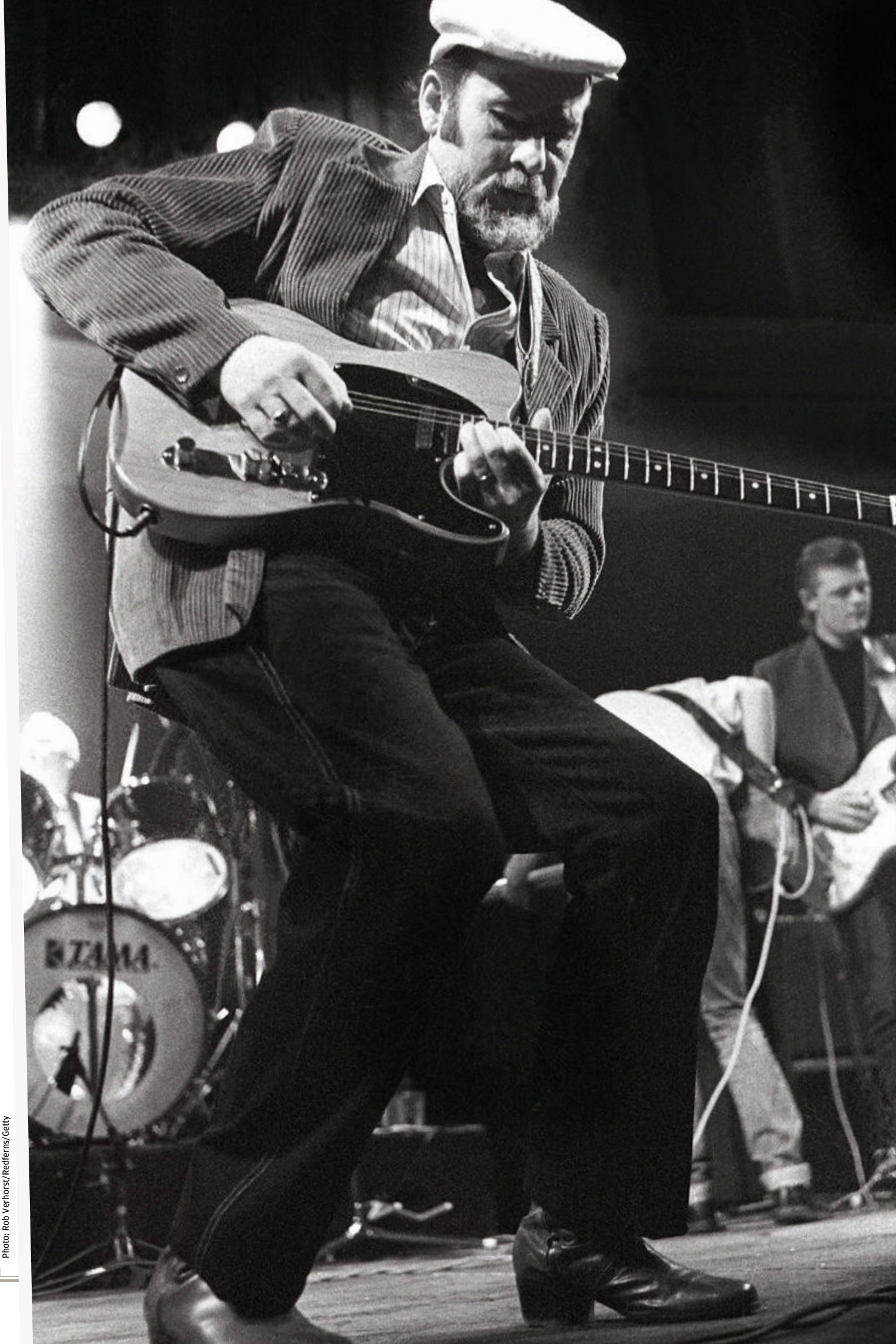


Photo: Rob Verhorst/Redferns/Getty

Legend Remembered

Soulful, skilful... Roy Buchanan, a true maestro of the Telecaster, had it all. It's been 26 years since the tragic passing of 'the best unknown guitarist in the world', and **Michael Heatley** has his story...

You've heard the cliché 'guitarist's guitarist'? Well, Roy Buchanan was all that, and more. Another late great, Mick Ronson, used to feature Roy's aching instrumental version of country classic *Sweet Dreams* in his show, while David Gilmour ranks him as a legend of the six-string alongside Clapton, BB King, Van Halen and Beck. Jeff Beck himself thought so highly of the American guitarist that he dedicated a song on his 1975 album *Blow By Blow, Cause We've Ended As Lovers*, to him.

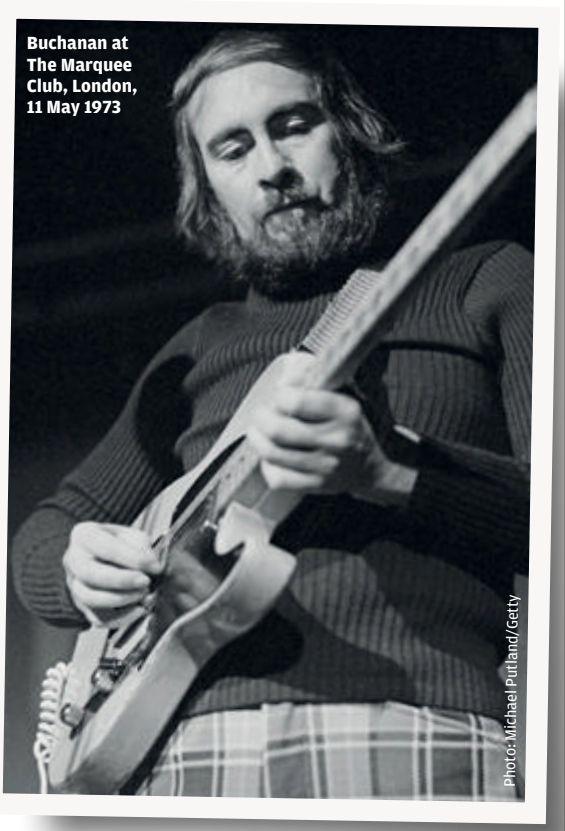
Being Jeff Beck's hero qualifies Roy Buchanan not only as a guitarist's guitarist, but as an enigma's enigma. Myth and reality have constantly combined to make him one of rock's most confusing yet fascinating characters, as this was a man whose incredible instrumental virtuosity was rivalled only by his perverse, wilfully self-destructive nature.

Born Leroy Buchanan of Scots parentage in Arkansas, Roy grew up in the '40s in Bakersfield, California. The town was famous as the home of country music giant Buck Owens, but it was gospel that first got under Roy's skin; his family were devout Christians who attended racially mixed revival meetings. 'Gospel was how I got into black music,' he later recalled, pointing out the close affinity between gospel and blues.

By the age of nine, Roy was playing *The Old Rugged Cross* and *Amazing Grace* to church congregations. He grew to believe a performance should be like a sermon by a fire-and-brimstone preacher, bringing everybody to an emotional climax.

Early lessons on the pedal steel guitar found him memorising the music instead of having to go to the trouble of learning to read it. When his teacher, a middle-aged lady, discovered this she burst into tears and imparted a truth he took to heart: 'Roy, if you don't play with feeling, don't play it.'

Roy was an early Telecaster believer, buying his first one in 1956. 'I liked the tone... it sounded a lot like a steel guitar, he explained. How, at the tender age of 13, he salted away the $120 required to buy the instrument



Buchanan at The Marquee Club, London, 11 May 1973

Photo: Michael Putland/Getty

'I was into backing people up and making them sound good' – Roy Buchanan

is not known, but it proved his ticket to ride, and two years later he'd left home, heading to Los Angeles where he sought out two older siblings.

This was the era of Elvis Presley's rock'n'roll breakthrough, and many managers were looking to profit from what they thought would be a

Photo: Rob Verhorst/Redferns/Getty

passing fad. One such hustler recruited Roy into a band called Heartbeats, newly created to appear in a rock exploitation film called *Rock, Pretty Baby* (Heartbeats drummer Spencer Dryden would later thump the tubs for Jefferson Airplane). However, Roy's first big gig, which lasted three years in the late '50s, was playing lead guitar for Dale Hawkins. This was significant not so much because Hawkins was the maker of US Top 30 hit *Susie-Q*, but because the shoes that Roy stepped into were those of James Burton. '$100 a week and all I could drink' was Buchanan's comment on this upturn in his fortunes. Indeed, alcohol had got him the job with fellow boozer Hawkins, but it would also would prove to be a factor in his eventual downfall. His first recording came around this time, a 1958 version of Willie Dixon's blues classic *My Babe*.

> *'I didn't know the material and I didn't figure I could do the job right' – Roy on the Stones*

Around '61 he moved on to the employ of Dale's cousin Ronnie Hawkins. The young man he trained to replace him when he moved on, Robbie Robertson, later of Dylan and The Band, later described Buchanan as 'the most remarkable guitarist I had seen'. Roy admitted he did a good job as Robbie's tutor: 'He'd be playing lead when Ronnie was singing and it just wouldn't work out. So I showed him how to do it, because that's what I was really into – backing up people and making them sound good.'

Music history may have been made the world over in the '60s, but not by Roy Buchanan. Having married, he spent most of the decade in Washington DC and at one time worked as a hairdresser. With five kids to support, the road was not an option. However, in 1968 he witnessed a Jimi Hendrix show and, convinced rock'n'roll had passed him by, decided to re-focus on his musical roots. He began playing in earnest again and, just as Robbie Robertson had benefited from his tutelage, the young Danny Gatton began coming to gigs and staying behind to pick up hints and tips.

In 1970 he formed a band called the Snakestretchers (recordings of whom, sold at gigs, now fetch premium prices), and his return to full-time music paid off when the *Washington Post* devoted a feature to him. This was somehow reprinted by *Rolling Stone* magazine, following which television picked up on 'The Best Unknown Guitarist In The World', as he was billed,

Roy playing the Paradiso in Amsterdam in '85, three years before his death

with a small-screen documentary. It was time for the journeyman to enjoy some star-quality attention.

After nearly two decades on the boards, Roy Buchanan had yet to begin his solo recording career. This was rectified by *Roy Buchanan* and *Second Album*, released in 1972 and '73 respectively. The first sold a quarter of a million copies, the second double that, each spending three months in the Billboard chart. The albums, like most of Roy's output, mixed songs with instrumentals, and Roy himself exercised his tonsils on *The Messiah Will Come Again*.

Ears were also pricking up over the world as the Stones had allegedly offered him the gig as Brian Jones' replacement before settling on Mick Taylor. Roy turned them down, just as he'd later rebuff Bob Dylan and John Lennon. It seemed he preferred to pilot his own course round the US minor tour circuit rather than be chauffeur-driven as a superstar's right-hand man. 'I didn't want to travel... I didn't know the material and I didn't figure I could do the job right,' was his explanation of the Stones snub.

Second Album, which peaked inside the US Top 100, would prove Buchanan's commercial highpoint. Two more LPs appeared on Polydor in 1973-'74, *That's What I'm Here For* and *In the Beginning*,

Cranked Amps & A Tele Called Nancy

'Nancy', Roy Buchanan's 1953 Telecaster, is the guitar that remains most associated with him. 'It's the best all-round guitar... I keep it stock,' he said in 1972. Nancy had a massive neck, and pickup guru Don Mare says it had a partially-shorted bridge pickup coil, giving a uniquely shrill sound. Buchanan preferred a high action for sustain and kept his thumb wrapped around the neck 'for strength and balance'. He also had '54 and '55 Teles in his studio armoury, while his acoustic workhorses were two Martins, a D-28 and a D-35.

Towards the end of his career Buchanan worked with luthier Roger Fritz to create a line of signature guitars. The Bluesmaster was effectively a sophisticated Telecaster copy, and George Harrison – to whom one of the first production examples was sent – was so impressed he took it on a rare tour of Japan in 1991. Gary Moore has also used the Bluesmaster, which had three single-coil EMGs. Roy appreciated the tonal possibilities of different pickup combinations, and, surprisingly for a long-time Tele man, went as far as to say anyone sticking to one guitar was 'cheating themselves'.

Amplification in Buchanan's early career came from a 4x10" Super Reverb or, more commonly, a 2x10" Fender Vibrolux, with reverb on 2 and volume and tone on full – but he would use rarely open the volume knob on his Tele to maximum. This, he explained, was why he couldn't play a Les Paul – 'you got to have it full out to get a good sound'. It's said that in his early days at the Crossroads bar in Washington, Buchanan played with his back to the audience so no-one could steal his licks. His Vibrolux combo, too, pointed away from the punters, but this was apparently to soften his icepick highs in such a confined space.

During his comeback years with Alligator Buchanan combined a Guild T-200 Tele copy with a Les Paul for rhythm work. Amplification varied between a Roland JC120 Jazz Chorus, a 100W Marshall with reverb, or a Peavey Classic 2x12" combo.

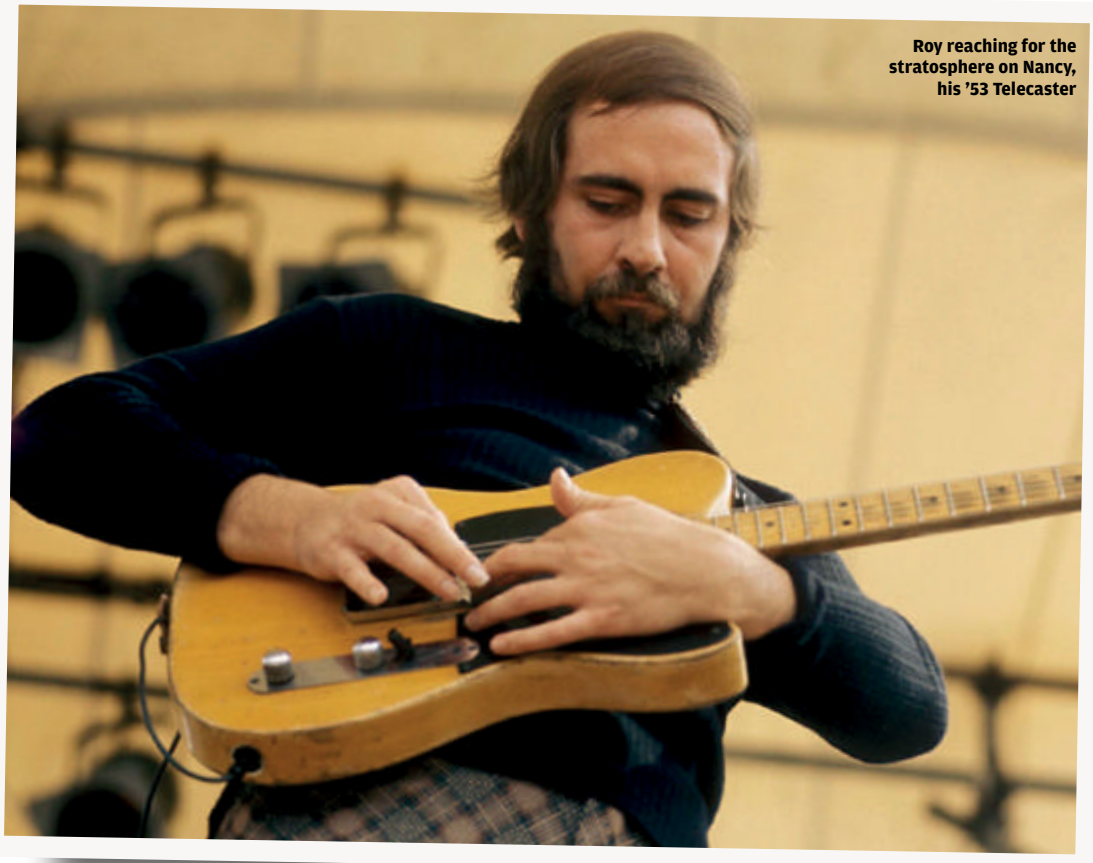
Swells, Bends & Harmonics: A Roy Buchanan Style Guide

Roy Buchanan's love of fingerpicking was retained from his steel guitar days, but he abandoned picks for fingernails and/or a small mandolin pick. Combining a pick with third (ring) and fourth fingers was a favourite technique, and he would often create lead lines with three-note chord patterns moving up and down the neck. This required careful muting. He also used circular picking, like John McLaughlin and Larry Coryell: listen to *Thank You Lord* on his second album.

Another technique inherited from the steel was using the tone control to achieve a wah-wah effect. In pre-fuzzbox days he 'did a Dave Davies' and slashed speaker cones to obtain a distorted effect, but by and large he eschewed effects, though he appreciated the sounds of Hendrix, Clapton and Beck. Another effect was a pseudo-whammy achieved by pushing down the strings behind the nut. The showboating track *Guitar Cadenza* on *A Street Called Straight* (available via BGO Records in a 2-in-1 CD with Live Stock) displays a motorcycle effect obtained by picking a down-tuned string, plus Buchanan blowing on his Telecaster's pickup to simulate a howling wind.

He was an exponent of hammering-on notes, and would build up speed by practising with a felt pick on a heavily-strung acoustic. He sometimes used his right index finger to roll up the volume knob of his Tele after striking a note, giving a distinctive and almost human 'crying' sound; Buchanan explained he envisaged forming the word 'help' when trying this. It was a technique he'd first witnessed used by steel guitarist Speedy West, who played in a duo with Jimmy Bryant. Another trick of the trade inspired by his steel training was to and bend strings to the required pitch, rather than starting on the desired note.

The effect we now know as 'pinch harmonics' was pioneered by Buchanan. He used his thumbnail to hit the string and then partially mute it, suppressing lower overtones and exposing the harmonics. He uncovered the technique by accident on an early recording called *Potato Peelings* with Bobby Gregg. Roy called for another take, but the studio staff wouldn't hear of it. Later, record-buyers would ask him how he'd got the sound; 'I had to go back, listen and re-learn it,' he admitted.



Roy reaching for the stratosphere on Nancy, his '53 Telecaster

Photo: David Redfern/Redferns/Getty

Listen up

ROY BUCHANAN
Roy Buchanan
(1971)
Contains two of his best-known tracks, *Sweet Dreams* and *The Messiah Will Come Again* – the last tune in a typical Buchanan performance

ROY BUCHANAN
Second Album
(1973)
The presence of *Tribute To Elmore* (James) makes this a must. This comes teamed with the first album on a BGO Records reissue

ROY BUCHANAN
Live In Japan
(1977)
Buchanan declared this hard-to-find record one of his best performances; it's now available via Repertoire

Gear

Guitars
Fender Telecaster, Fritz Bluesmaster, Gibson Les Paul

Amps
Fender Super Reverb and Fender Vibrolux combos, Peavey Classic, Roland JC120

And another thing...

Roy's first-ever guitar hero was the jazz player Barney Kessel

the latter retitled *Rescue Me* in Europe. His contract ended with *Live Stock*, recorded at New York's Town Hall in late 1974, though Polydor retained the rights to his recordings outside America when he signed for Atlantic. Eric Clapton was a recipient of a pre-release copy of *Live Stock* and allegedly added Buchanan's arrangement of Bobby Bland's standard *Further On Up The Road* to his repertoire soon afterwards.

Back in the studio, Atlantic's Arif Mardin, whose golden touch had recently been applied to the Bee Gees, produced 1976's *A Street Called Straight*, which contained a tip of the hat to Beck in *My Friend Jeff*, while the Stanley Clarke-produced *Loading Zone* (1977) was followed within a year by *You're Not Alone*. Roy wanted Steve Cropper and his MGs colleague Duck Dunn to play on the album, but producer Clarke had never heard of them. Nevertheless the trio jammed out on *Green Onions* with enthusiasm, though legend has it Clarke speeded up the tapes to make it seem like an axe battle. Another live recording in Japan ended this chapter of the Buchanan story, and he resumed a low profile.

After another half-decade out of the spotlight and a rumoured suicide attempt, Roy signed for Alligator Records, a new blues label run by aficionado Bruce Iglauer. Given he'd been playing with pickup bands on tours booked by his wife, it was a step in the right direction. Musically, it was the first time he had set out to cut a totally blues-based album.

When A Guitar Plays The Blues was released in 1985. It stayed on Billboard's pop charts for 13 weeks and earned a Grammy nomination for best blues album of the year – reward for the fact that Roy had, for the first time ever, been given total artistic freedom in the studio. Follow-ups *Dancing On The Edge* (teamed with Texan vocalist Delbert McClinton) and *Hot Wires* were released in successive years. He toured the world; a jam with David Gilmour in an Australian club was witnessed by just 200 lucky people. A US tour in support of one-time Dylan backers The Band brought back old memories, even if Robbie Robertson was long gone, and post-gig sessions have entered legend.

Without a band to frame his talent, Buchanan was forever fated to be a super sideman

All was looking set fair for a Buchanan revival, but tragedy struck when his youngest grandchild became a cot death victim. This presaged some unusual events, including Roy completely shaving his head. Finally, he was picked up by the police for drunken behaviour in Fairfax, Virginia in August 1988 and, left alone in a cell, where he apparently hung himself. The manner of his death was disputed by his family, and Buchanan wouldn't be laid to rest until a year later.

The rock world is full of casualties, but maybe the reason Roy Buchanan is not as famous as he could have been is that he never hooked up with a band that could frame his talents in a suitable setting. With no great vocal ability, he was forever fated to be a super sideman.

He may be gone, but Buchanan is far from forgotten. In 2006, Martin Scorsese's Oscar-winning movie *The Departed* concluded with *Sweet Dreams*, while 2007 saw French guitarist Fred Chapellier releasing a CD entitled *Tribute To Roy Buchanan*. A book, *American Axe*, by Phil Carson, featured interviews with those who had worked with him, and revealed that Roy's plans had included an all-instrumental offering and a duo album with Les Paul. So let's leave the last word to Les Paul, no mean judge of a guitarist: 'Roy Buchanan and Jimi Hendrix had some things in common. Roy was one of the creators in the pioneering of unusual sounds. It seemed as though I was hearing them come first from Roy.'

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