





FIRST PLAY



PRS SE CUSTOM 24
£825

WHAT IS IT? 2021 SE version of PRS's classic Custom 24



PRS SE CUSTOM 24-08
£899

WHAT IS IT? The same deal as the 24 but with two extra sounds and a different pickup complement

Moving On Up

Two decades on from its single-model inception, PRS's SE range is out-selling the USA Core models by quite some margin. Let's drop in on a pair of grown-up 2021 models

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Olly Curtis

You don't need us to tell you that 2020 was a tremendously difficult year for manufacturers worldwide. Factory shutdowns, shipping difficulties and even good ol' Brexit have all played their part as larger scale makers try to catch up with orders. Is it really the time to be launching major new models?

In another time, perhaps PRS would be popping the champagne corks to celebrate the 20th anniversary of its SE range, a now broad collection of instruments that includes bass and acoustic and has not only contributed considerably to the business but given a vivid taste of PRS's high-line Core and upwards instruments at a fraction of the price. That said, 2020 was the 35th anniversary of PRS Guitars, so it's little surprise the brand is leaving any SE celebrations for another day.



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1. While the headstock hasn't changed over the years, the logo has. Today the 'SE' is downsized in favour of the Paul Reed Smith logo. Here, too, we get non-locking tuners

2. This long-running vibrato is used not only on the SE line but also the USA-made S2 and bolt-on CE 24 models

However, to kick off 2021 PRS has chosen to launch three additions to its SE line: our two review models and a classy makeover of the consistently-selling Zach Myers with its semi-hollow body construction. Our SE Customs are refined and, in the case of the 24-08, tweaked. Both feature what PRS calls a "shallow violin carve" to the maple tops, which we first saw on 2019's SE Paul's Guitar and which moves the appearance slightly closer to the more heavily dished USA-made Core models. And if the 24-08 looks familiar, yes, it's already a Core model and it's also pretty similar to last year's SE 35th Anniversary Custom.

Custom Style

While it might be the guitar that launched PRS back in 1985, this latest SE version (now made by Cor-Tek in Indonesia) is considerably different. That glued-in maple neck, with its natural headstock, actually looks more like the USA-made CE 24 bolt-on. So, is this essence of the classic Custom 24 or a flavour in its own right? Well, a bit of both actually, if we're honest. But let's forget the backstory for a moment and concentrate on what you'll get for your money here.

Not surprisingly, the SE Custom centres on the classic PRS ingredients: a 635mm (25-inch) scale length, 24 frets, vibrato and dual humbuckers that can be coil-split. It remains a 'do-it-all' platform, combining elements of the obvious classics with what is now a hugely recognisable aesthetic.

That shallow violin carve to the figured maple top (actually a veneer over solid maple) does add a little more of the real PRS style, but the light dishing occurs in just a small, approximately 30mm wide portion around the edge; the majority of the top is flat. Compare that with the CE 24 – which, again, uses a lesser dished top carve than the Core models – and you'll see actually how 'shallow' the SE carve is. Mind you, you can't knock the craft. The edges of the vividly coloured veneer are really very clean and it's the only colour on the guitar: the sides, back and entire neck (with the exception of the rosewood fingerboard) are clear gloss coated.

And while PRS built its empire with the use of one-piece necks and one-piece bodies, here both are multi-piece out of necessity. The neck is actually a three-piece longitudinal laminate of maple – the two outer sections diagonally matched either side of that rift-sawn centre piece. The



USA-made S2 and bolt-on PRSes, including the Silver Sky, use a scarf-jointed headstock and a heel stack. The bodies here are a very light coloured mahogany and both are three-piece. The overall body depth is a shade over 46mm, very slightly deeper than our 44mm-thick CE 24, which actually looks thinner at the rim because of its more graduated top carve.

You can't expect the same hardware here that you'll see on those USA Core models and, although the tuners, strap buttons and football jack plate do look a bit generic, the PRS-designed vibrato is the same that's used on PRS's S2-level guitars, not to mention our £2k-plus CE 24. This well tried-and-tested design sits parallel to the guitar's top (with its push-in, tension-adjustable arm and characteristic 'keyhole' saddles) and is cast, or 'moulded' as PRS prefers, as opposed to the machined stock of the Core level vibratos. Both top plate and block are steel; the Core-level vibrato is brass.

So, yes, while different, these SEs certainly uphold the PRS detail statement. There is not a hair out of place and even comparing the figure of these veneered maple tops to the solid figured maple of our reference CE, well, they're certainly not wildly different.

3. The 85/15 'S' pickups aim to replicate the USA pickups, but these are made in Indonesia. It's one area of the recent SE designs that is continually tweaked

4. The 24-08 features that 'tuning' resistor on the volume control, plus those two DPDT mini-switches

5. Tidy wiring inside the SE Custom 24's cavity

UNDER THE HOOD

How the SE circuits measure up

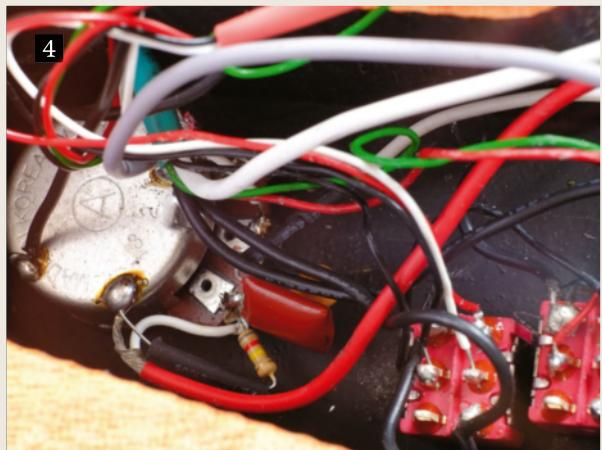
Both the vibrato and rear control cavity covers sit on top of the surface and aren't recessed flush like the USA Core models. Don't feel too short changed, though; it's the same with our CE 24 and the S2 models. The Custom's cavity is shielded with conductive paint, the underside of the cover with conductive foil. It certainly looks ship-shape (we've seen far less tidy soldering on Core models).

The Custom's circuit uses a 180 picofarad treble bleed and a 223J code (0.022 microfarads) tone capacitor on 500kohm pots, with the volume stamped RF. The tone pot has a pull switch that simultaneously dumps the screw coils to ground. On most PRSes that use this switching there are two small resistors that allow some of the dumped coil to remain in circuit, creating a slightly full 'single-coil' split. They're not used here.

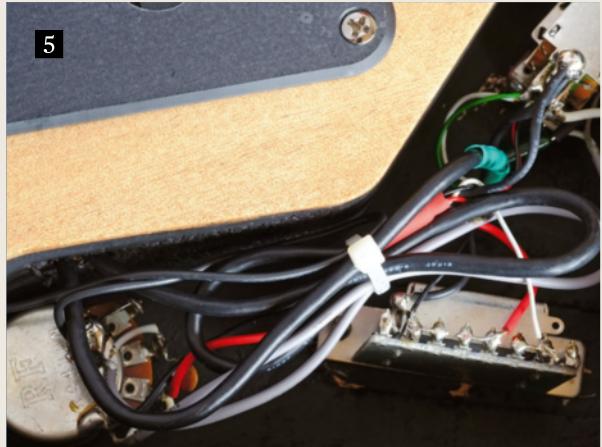
The 24-08 uses Alpha 500kohm Korean-made pots with the same 180 picofarads treble bleed cap and a 333J code (0.033 microfards) tone cap. The way the coil-splits are achieved is different, too: via each of those mini-toggle switches when the single-coil mode is selected, the screw coil isn't just dumped to ground, it's completely removed from the circuit. Another difference, and part of the TCI concept, is that the circuit is tuned via a parallel resistor across the volume pot, which – if our calculations are correct – means the pickups are seeing a 310kohms pot. This, in theory, will subtly reduce the high-end compared with a 500k pot.



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6. The zebra coiled pickups here are down on the spec sheet as TCI'S; although they're certainly close cousins to the 85/15 'S'. A primary difference is the circuit that controls them

Different Strokes

The construction on both our Customs is identical; the differences (colour options aside, see final spec list) lie in the pickups and their switching. The Custom 24 uses the PRS-designed/Indonesian-made 'S' versions of the more modern-sounding 85/15 humbuckers. These have regular-shaped humbucker bobbins, unlike the proprietary rectangular bobbins of the USA versions – so-called ‘squabbins’ by PRS-ophiles. They sit in standard mounting rings, too, and look like generic humbuckers with a single row of slot-head poles and a single row of non-adjustable slugs. The Custom 24-08s have zebra bobbins and are referred to as TCI 'S' humbuckers, presumably similar to those on the SE Paul's Guitar.

The 24 has a three-way lever switch with master volume and tone and there's a pull-switch on the latter that voices both slug coils simultaneously. The 24-08 uses a three-way *toggle* switch for pickup selection with two small-tipped mini-toggle switches, so you can coil-split each pickup independently. The 24 then offers six sounds, but the mini-toggles on the 24-08 mean we can combine the bridge humbucker with the neck single coil, and vice versa, accounting for the two extra sounds and the name.





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Feel & Sounds

After 35 years of making the Custom, PRS should know how to do it by now, right? Both these 'offshore' models certainly capture the style and taste, and not for the first time the progression in quality and sound of the SE seriously challenges older USA models. The Wide Thin neck is eminently playable, even though its relatively slim depth (approximately 20mm at the 1st fret and 22.5 at the 12th) might put off the big neck brigade. Like the sounds we hear, these guitars cover an awful lot of ground. If we're picky we'd love the satin neck feel that we have on our CE 24, and while that would be a pretty easy after-purchase mod, frankly, the more we play the more such thoughts disappear. As ever, brand-new guitars need a little time to settle, and of the two our 24-08 takes a little while and some extra string stretching. But both have identical setups, each fret mirror-polished, the fingerboard edges lightly rolled. C'mon, this is very good craft.

Obviously, we're in the same ballpark sound-wise, and to generalise we have a sort of slightly hot vintage-y voice in humbucker mode that suits a multitude of uses. The more we swap between the guitars the more subtlety we hear. To split hairs the Custom 24 seems to have slightly more stridency to its voice; the 24-08 is slightly softer,

which many of us might call a tad more vintage-y. The Custom 24's coil-splits are perfectly usable, primarily on neck and in mix positions, which certainly supplies some expected Fender-y bounce and funk. The 24-08, though, sounds very slightly sweeter.

Both really benefit from pulling the tone control back a little – the volume, too, which keeps things clear when reduced but doesn't overly 'enhance' the treble response. While we can't speak for everyone, both guitars in single-coil mode benefited from both tone and volume roll-off just to reduce that presence. Conversely, and of particular note if you're using lashings of modulation/delays, that presence can really enhance what you hear with both controls on full.

Let's be honest: the two extra sounds of the 24-08 are subtle but noticeable. Those two very discreet mini-toggles are really fast and intuitive – you just need to remember humbucking is 'down'/away from you and single coil is 'up'. The pull-switch on the Custom 24, of course, is fine – we've used that plenty of times over the years – but we have to be honest and say we really like the setup of the 24-08.

If we were to pigeonhole, the Custom 24 model comes across as a very rock-ready humbucker guitar with single-coil splits if you need them; the 24-08 is slightly more balanced, a guitar that excels at both.

7. While the two mini-toggle switches of the 24-08 increase the number of sounds, they also switch from humbucker to single coil in a subtly different fashion (see Under The Hood on page 17)

8. PRS's fabled bird inlays come in different guises, particularly when you get to the USA Core range and above. These follow the original 'solid' designs, and if there's one at the last fret it immediately identifies a 24-fret as opposed to a 22-fret model

The progression in quality and sound of the SE range seriously challenges older USA models



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Verdict

The past year has seen high demand for PRS guitars, which makes virtually any criticism or observation redundant. There will be plenty of guitar players, for example, who would enjoy a more 'working player's' version of either of these in opaque colours, such as a black or gold-top with less ostentatious inlays. But with such demand for its core classic style, sorry, that isn't going to happen!

Prices have risen, too, in line with most brands and, certainly, at £899 the Custom 24-08 is no cheap date (although you can expect to see lower dealer prices as usual); we already have £1k-plus SE models in the form of the Hollowbody II Piezo. Of course, the all-mahogany USA S2s start lower than that at £1,185, but the S2 Custom 24 is still nearly £1,000 more expensive than either guitar on review here.

The thing is, with essentially the same hardware and pickups these SEs march hard on the tails of the S2, none of which feature the 'tuned' TCI circuitry of our 24-08 or its expansive switching. In short, the SE line has the wind behind it. Great design, beautiful execution and sounds that just continue to evolve: a serious amount of guitar for the money. **G**

9. PRS's patented vibrato is a cast design with steel top-plate and block, plus push-in stainless steel arm

**PRS SE CUSTOM 24**

PRICE: £825 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany back with maple top (w/figured veneer facing) and shallow violin carve
NECK: Maple, Wide Thin profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/43.2mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 'old-school' bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 24, medium
HARDWARE: PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed non-locking tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS 85/15 'S' Treble and Bass humbuckers (open coil, double black bobbins); 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (w/ pull switch to simultaneously coil-split both humbuckers)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 7.6/3.45
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: Other SE include the Custom 22 and the Custom 22 Semi-Hollow (both £825), and the Custom 24 Floyd (£899). The USA Core Custom 24 starts at £3,599 and the S2 version costs £1,779
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, in Charcoal Burst and Faded Blue Burst at £845
FINISHES: Bonnie Pink (as reviewed), Black Gold Burst, Faded Blue Burst, Charcoal Burst

Guitarist CHOICE **9/10**

PROS Seriously well-sorted Custom with not a hair out of place; versatile rock-ready sounds with good coil-splits

CONS We'd love a less showy looking version and, thankfully, there are more classic colours offered here, too

**PRS SE CUSTOM 24-08**

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ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Mahogany back with maple top (w/figured veneer facing) and shallow violin carve
NECK: Maple, Wide Thin profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")
NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/42.8mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 'old-school' bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius
FRETS: 24, medium
HARDWARE: PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed non-locking tuners – nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm
ELECTRICS: PRS TCI 'S' Treble and Bass humbuckers (open coiled zebra bobbins); 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone, 2x mini-toggle coil-split switches

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 8/3.6
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: See Custom 24. The SE Paul's Guitar uses the same mini-toggle switches and TCI 'S' pickups as the 24-08 and costs £899. The USA Core 24-08 starts at £3,799
LEFT-HANDERS: See SE Custom
FINISHES: Eriza Verde (as reviewed), Vintage Sunburst

Guitarist GOLD

10/10

PROS It's impossible to question the craft: what seals the deal are the slightly sweeter sounds here and the expanded switching

CONS Bright green guitars might not be your thing, so there's just Vintage Sunburst as an option; no lefties... but it's still a cracker