



THE HIT PARADE

The latest in Fender's ongoing makeovers sees the morphing of the popular Mexican-made Classic and Classic Player guitars into the new decade-specific Vintera series. New name aside, has anything actually changed? We investigate...

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker



FENDER VINTERA '50S TELECASTER MODIFIED £869
'60S STRATOCASTER MODIFIED £849
'60S JAZZMASTER MODIFIED £899

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In recent years Fender has refreshed, refocused and renamed virtually all of its key series. The creation of the American Professional range, which gave the long-running American Standards a considerable reboot, was one of the most inspired we've seen. Then it was the turn of the American Vintage guitars; they became the decade-specific American Originals – and that's the style we have here. The new Mexican-made Vintera series amalgamates the previous Classic and Classic Player ranges into one, creating, says Fender, "a line of vintage-inspired models that embody a period-specific vibe. Each model delivers the authentic look and feel of its era, as well as decade-specific tones from the 50s, 60s and 70s."

The reorganised range comprises seven Telecasters, five Strats, a pair of both Jazzmasters and Jaguars, and a single Mustang. Notably absent are any left-hand models. The Classic series replacements are the standard vintage-spec models – all 21 frets with 184mm (7.25-inch) fingerboard radius – while the Modified models replace certain Classic Players, vintage hot-rods if you like. These reflect numerous player mods: improved hardware, a flatter fingerboard radius, bigger frets, hotter pickups and some switching additions.

Price-wise, we kick off at £749 for the vintage models, adding £100 for the Modified models, while the Thinline Tele unsurprisingly tops the range at £999. All include gigbags. Either side of these are the Mexican Player series (previously the Standards), priced between £599 and £729, excluding gigbag, and the start-up American Performer series, which refreshed the American Specials, with a tighter price span of £999 to £1,049, including a gigbag.

So, with considerable choice, let's take a closer look at three (rather familiar-looking) Vintera Modified models...

'50s Telecaster Modified

The Classics and Classic Players had plenty of fans, and models such as the Classic Player Baja Tele achieved almost cult status. It's renamed here as the '50s Telecaster



The '50s Tele Modified uses the same pickups as the out-going Baja Tele, including this Twisted Tele at the neck. Both were designed in the Custom Shop



Like the Classic Player Baja Tele, we have a four-position selector switch that adds both pickups in series and a S-1 switch to offer out-of-phase sounds

Modified. It's important not to equate 'modified' with 'modern', however. There's nothing modern-looking about this 21-fret Tele, and while the vintage model has an all-glossed neck with an early 50s 'U' profile, our Modified version has a satin neck back and a Thick Soft 'V' profile. In keeping with vintage spec, the unmodded model has a 184mm (7.25-inch) radius fingerboard with vintage small frets contrasting the flatter 241mm (9.5-inch) radius and medium jumbo frets of our modded model.

The bridge captures a good Tele's bite and shifts effortlessly from country clean to gnarlier roots-rock

This same duality extends to the pickups; throughout the range, they've been tweaked and reorganised by Fender's Tim Shaw. So while the unmodded model shoots for vintage-style 50s single coils, our Modified version retains the Custom Shop-designed vintage-style single coil at the bridge and the Twisted Tele at the neck that we saw on the previous Baja Tele.

Control wise, the vintage model has the classic (post-1967) wiring: bridge, both (in parallel), and neck selections via a three-way lever switch. Our Modified version uses a four-way lever selector, adding both pickups in series, plus in- or out-of-phase for the combined pickups via the S-1 switched volume pot – again, exactly the same as the Baja Tele.

There's a slight upcharge on this deeply honeyed Butterscotch Blonde model and you can clearly see through the translucent

finish that the body wood is ash. The other two opaque colours – Daphne Blue and Surf Green – use alder.

'60s Stratocaster Modified

Again offered in vintage and Modified versions, our 60s-era Strat replaces the historical rosewood fingerboard with pau ferro. This Modified model is essentially the same as the previous Classic Player version with a Modern C profile neck (the vintage model has a mid-60s C), although the 305mm (12-inch) fingerboard radius of that previous model has been reined back to 241mm (9.5 inches).

Both new versions use vintage-style 60s single coils; our modded versions are classed as 'hot'. On both we have a tone control for the neck and middle (tone 1) and the bridge (tone 2). This Modified version also uses an S-1 switch, adding the neck pickup to position 1 (bridge) and position 2 (bridge and middle). Here, the vibratos also differ: from the six-saddle vintage-style of the vintage version to the 'improved' two-post style of our modded model.

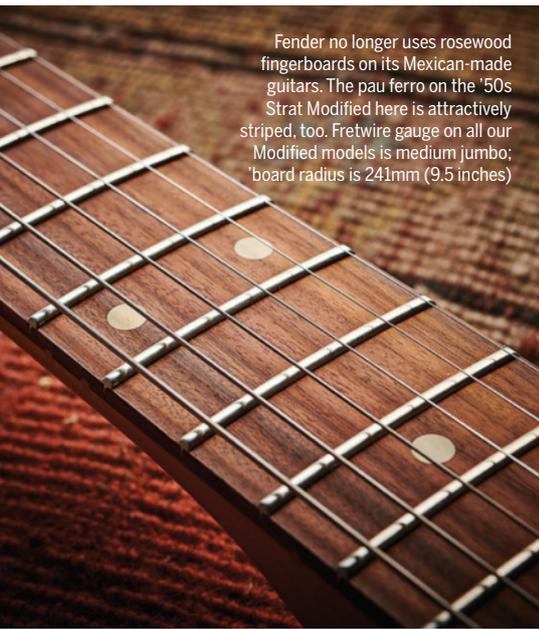
The vintage model comes in three colours, 3-Colour Sunburst, Surf Green and Ice Blue Metallic; our Modified model is available in just two – the Burgundy Mist Metallic we have here and the returning Olympic White.

'60s Jazzmaster Modified

This model might have first surfaced in 1958 and continued throughout the 70s, but it's just the obvious 60s-decade Jazzmaster that's celebrated here, and this Vintera Modified is pretty much identical to the previous Classic Player Jazzmaster Special. The neck style differences mirror those of the '60s Stratocasters; likewise, the hotter single coils of the modded model. The Modified model uses a fixed tune-o-matic-

The combination of
the neck shape and
what seems like a
nicely resonant body
gets to the heart of
what makes a good
Telecaster





Fender no longer uses rosewood fingerboards on its Mexican-made guitars. The pau ferro on the '50s Strat Modified here is attractively striped, too. Fretwire gauge on all our Modified models is medium jumbo; board radius is 241mm (9.5 inches)

style Adjusto-matic bridge – replacing the vintage-style ‘floating’ bridge of the vintage model – and the vibrato is placed a little closer to it than original vintage. “This increases the string-break angle for more stable string placement, and reduces the string length behind the bridge to lessen or eliminate unwanted sympathetic vibrations,” says Fender.

Again, we just have pau ferro fingerboards (dot inlaid only), and while the Modified version comes in just two colours, the Sunburst we see here and Surf Green, the vintage version comes in Ice Blue Metallic and Olympic White with colour-matched headstocks – they’re lookers for sure.

Build

If the Classics and Classic Players have rightfully achieved a reputation for affordable quality, it’s no different here. They’re pretty tidy. From the weights to the fretwork – which uses medium jumbo wire, “the perfect marriage between small vintage frets and modern jumbo,” says Fender – there is a consistency and ‘perfectly good enough’ level to these guitars.

There’s a strong NOS vibe, too: the finishes and hardware gleam and shine, although all three have accurately toned neck finishes with silky smooth satin backs. Our Strat swaps bright white plastic parts for a three-ply mint green scratchplate and aged white pickup covers and knobs.

There are identifiers of price-point and modern production, though. The attractively striped pau ferro boards on the Strat and Jazzmaster don’t look quite right if the deep dark chocolate of rosewood is burned into your memory. The Strat’s vibrato uses a die-cast block, not steel, with narrow string spacing and plated saddles.



PICKUP CHOICES

Fender’s pickup guru Tim Shaw talks us through the Vintera models’ units

“As with the American Original Series, Vintera is a ‘greatest hits of the periods’, so we selected features in a broad-brush way,” explains Fender’s chief engineer, Tim Shaw. “The Classic Player models, for example, didn’t have a unified focus – like the Mexican Standard models, they evolved over time and guitar A didn’t necessarily have anything in common with the specs for guitar B. As with American Professional, American Performer and the Mexican Players [which replaced the Standards], the Vintera models have what’s typically called Line Logic, or this unified focus, but that also means they make sense to the rest of us as well!”

Each model’s pickup set shoots for “era-specific magnet, wire and winding spec”, adds Tim. “The pickups were designed and voiced in sets and each pickup is voiced for the instrument, for the period and for position.”

The 50s-era Strat pickups employ various period-specific features such as staggered Alnico V magnet sets with individual bevelled magnets: “The original stagger was developed for even output with the original heavy strings and helps create the classic Strat ‘chime’ as its distinctive magnetic field affects the strings as a group,” says Tim. “50s pickups also used Formvar-coated wire. Formvar has the thickest coating of all Fender’s magnet wires and gives this pickup series the classic mid-50s bright and open voice. The ‘50s Strat set is wound and calibrated for each position; middle pickup is RWRP.”

The same magnets and wire as the 50s Strat set are used on the Modified version “but wound slightly hotter overall”, says Tim.

“60s Strat pickups still used Alnico V magnets, and their magnets were bevelled early in the decade, but we chose to use the non-bevelled versions here. The original 50s magnet stagger was still used but the coating on the magnet wire was changed to plain enamel, which was thinner than Formvar. The sound is tighter and more focused than the ‘50s Strat pickups.” Again, the ‘60s Strat set is wound and calibrated for each position; middle pickup is RWRP.

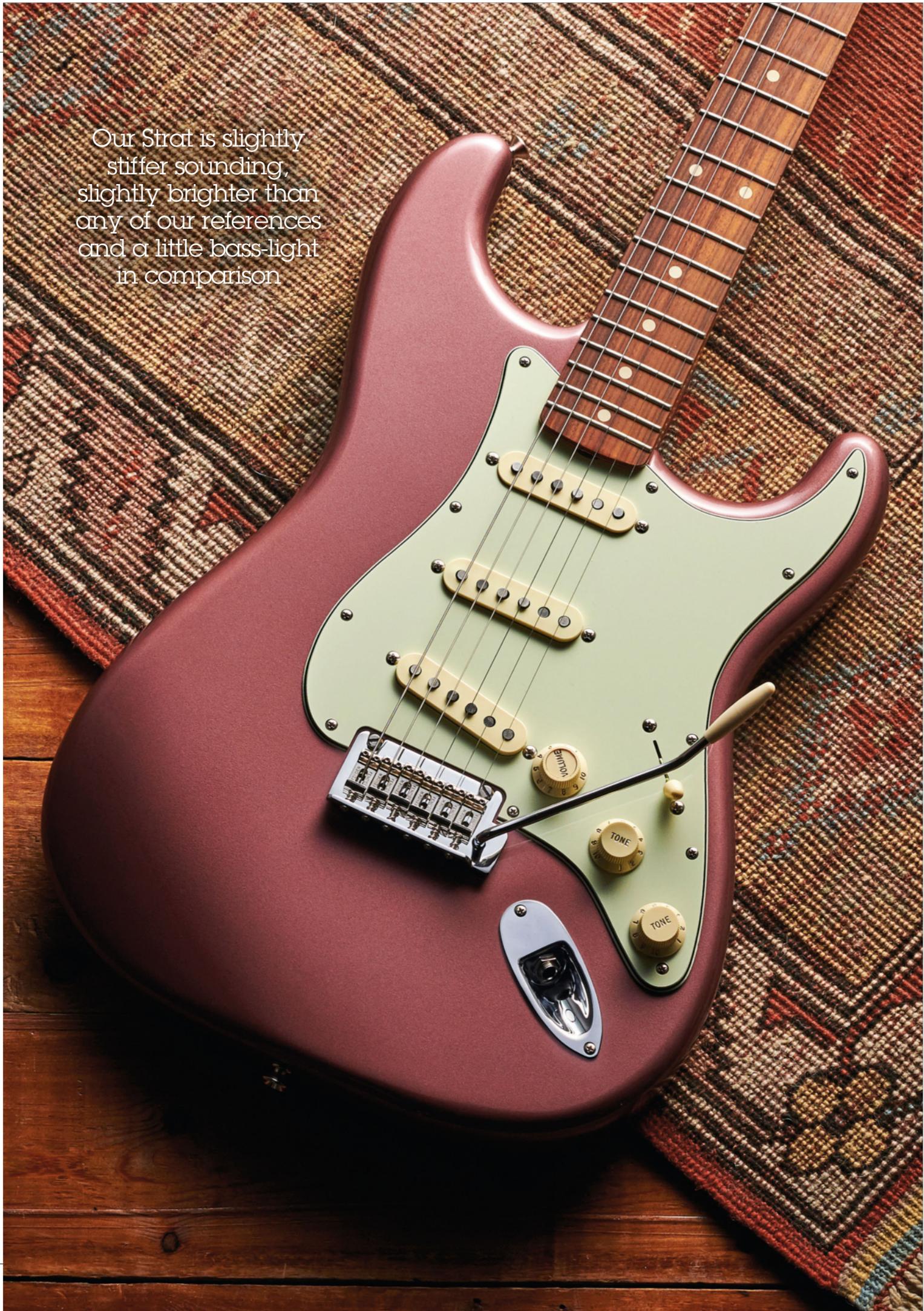
“The basic core assemblies – magnets and wire – are the same on both sets of Jazzmasters,” says Tim. “These are the traditional size and height with Alnico V magnets. The vintage unmodified ones are essentially the same as other stock Jazzmaster pickups. The modified versions have about five per cent and 10 per cent more wire on them [neck and bridge] respectively.”

The ‘50s Modified Tele, however, mixes things up a bit: “The Classic Player Baja Tele had a Twisted Tele neck pickup, which is about 2.5mm taller than a traditional Tele neck pickup. This was originally developed by Alan Hamel in the Custom Shop, and I use this architecture a lot for Tele neck pickups. It uses Alnico V magnets, and this version was wound with 42-gauge instead of the 43-gauge you’d find on a traditional Tele neck pickup. You can get away with this because the taller magnets are more powerful and you can get a fair bit of 42-gauge on the taller bobbin. It has a nominal DCR of 6kohms. Its bridge pickup was a flat-top Tele bridge pickup with Alnico V magnets, wound with 43-gauge wire. The DCR here is about 9k.”



These ‘60s-era single coils use period-correct plain enamel wire and unbevelled Alnico V magnets. Note the vintage-style magnet stagger

Our Strat is slightly
stiffer sounding,
slightly brighter than
any of our references
and a little bass-light
in comparison



FENDER VINTERA DIMENSIONS

(in mm unless stated)



TELECASTER



STRATOCASTER



JAZZMASTER

Neck width (nut)	42	41.6	42.17
Neck width (12th fret)	51.64	51.15	51.93
Neck depth (1st fret)	22.8	21.4	21.2
Neck depth (12th fret)	25.3	22	21.8
Weight (kg/lb)	3.27/7.19	3.7/8.14	3.7/8.14
Bridge string spacing	54	51.5	51
Bridge pickup DCR (kohms)	9.04	6.14	7.62
Middle pickup DCR (kohms)	N/A	5.53	N/A
Neck pickup DCR (kohms)	5.84	5.68	7

Feel & Sounds

This production level does create what many might view as a generic feel that's less 'vintage' than an American Original or certainly a Custom Shop model. But they feel far from cheap and not a million miles away from the American Performers or even Professionals. Our '60s Strat really would give the latter a run for its money, even though its neck is slightly less deep in higher positions and the fretwire, as we said, is slightly wider and a little lower. The Jazzmaster has a very similar feel to its neck, both in contrast to the much bigger and lightly V'd feel of the Telecaster (see Dimensions box above).

Setups, too, are very good, despite the fact that the height-adjustment screws of the Tele protrude considerably and most would have shimmed the neck. The Strat's screw-in arm is a little sloppy in feel (there's no tension adjustment) unless you screw it in very firmly, and the high E saddle is so close to the pivot post that as you bend the vibrato down it makes contact and pushes the saddle back a little. The Jazzmaster's vibrato has a less positive, almost Bigsby-like feel and you can lock it to prevent up-bend. Again, the arm is a little sloppy, but the tune-o-matic bridge, with heavily notched saddles, lightly rocks back and forth as you move the arm.

With little more than string stretching, the Strat's vibrato doesn't cause us any problems. The Jazzmaster's needed just a little lubrication at both the nut and saddles, but return-to-pitch was perfectly acceptable – we've wrestled with worse. The hardtail Tele is obviously the most

stable, even though intonation will always be compromised by the saddles. And we do wonder if offset compensated types should be part of this Modified specification...

The vintage-style truss rod access of all three isn't the easiest if you need to make any adjustments, but there's little to moan about in terms of playability. As supplied, all are fitted with 0.009 to 0.042-gauge strings, which give all three guitars a slightly snappier feel and sound. We're all different, but 10s and a little more fight to the setup wouldn't go amiss for many of us.

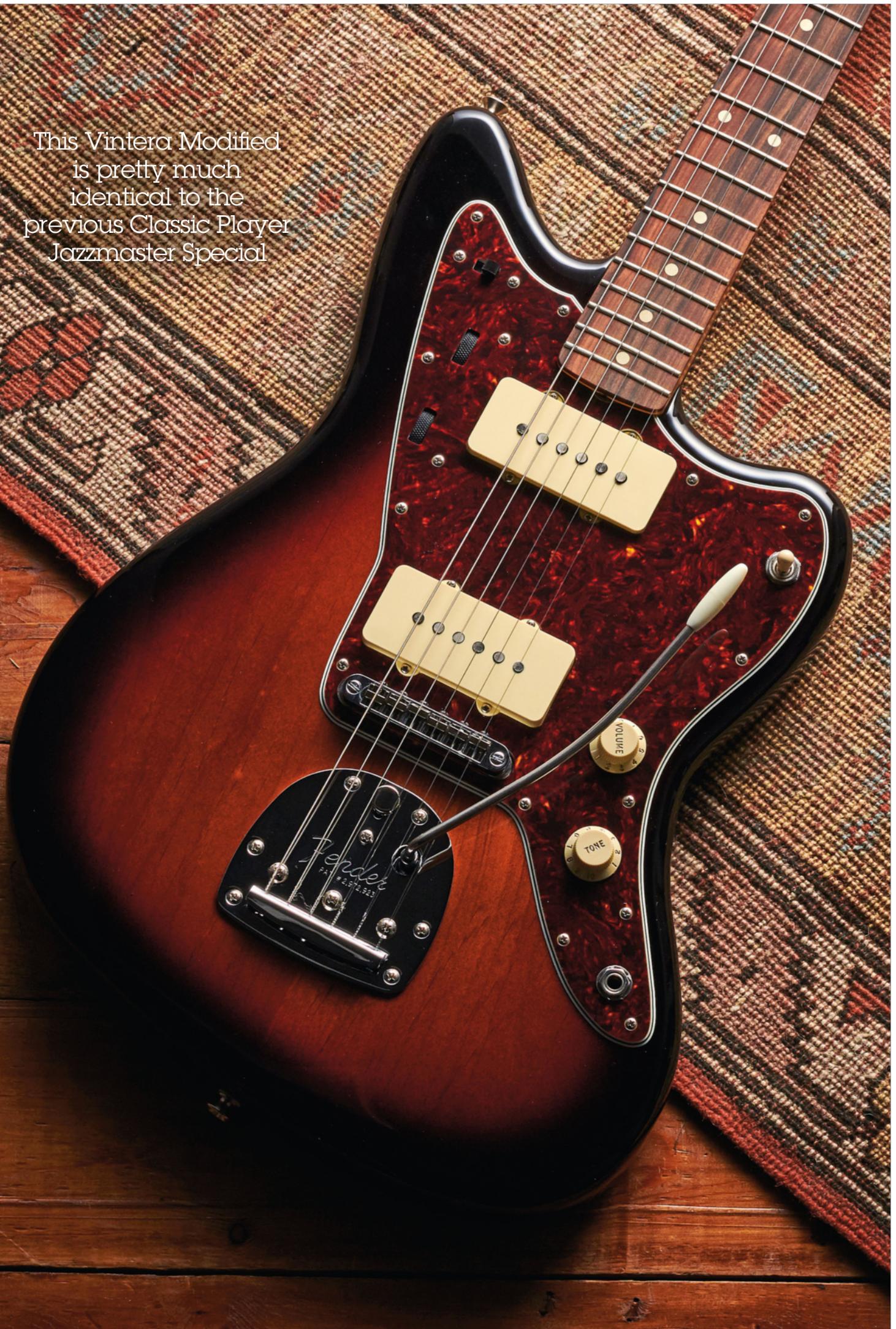
As we begin running through the sounds, there really aren't any surprises – or any sounds we haven't heard dozens of times before. That said, the Tele comes across in terms of its circuit as the most 'modded' guitar here. With the selector in position 4

(both pickups in series), we have a wider humbucking-like voice – considerably bigger than the neck pickup alone – which has a little more Strat attack to it than a vintage-spec, but retains some bite from the bridge. It doesn't turn your Tele into a Les Paul, but does fill out your sound and drive your amp slightly harder. The bridge certainly captures a good Tele's bite with some kick, too, and shifts effortlessly from country clean through gnarlier roots-rock, sounding vicious with the tone fully open or surprisingly low-output-humbucker-like with the tone pulled back. The combination of the neck shape and what seems like a nicely resonant body gets to the heart of what makes a good Telecaster. We've certainly played a lot worse than this. But there's more...



The main mod here is the tune-o-matic-style bridge with deeply notched saddles. The vibrato is moved slightly closer to the bridge than vintage spec

This Vintera Modified
is pretty much
identical to the
previous Classic Player
Jazzmaster Special





This 'modern' two-post vibrato uses a die-cast block and has narrower-than-vintage string spacing. Certainly not a deal-breaker, just different

Select both pickups in parallel and push down that S-1 switch and it's far from the thin 'strangled' out-of-phase sound we expect: it's less nasal and adds more bass back to create a very usable alternate mix (see 'Under The Hood' below). But select the series mix and hit the S-1 switch and it really is a strangled thin tone, which might work in a psychedelic funk-ed-out and effected setting, but we'd suspect many might find it unusable.

Our Strat is perhaps slightly stiffer sounding, slightly brighter than any of our references and a little bass-light in comparison. It's not hotter than the Tele or Jazzmaster and typically sounds very cultured and refined. While we lack a little woody depth from the neck, both mixes excel: crisp, textured and bouncy, while the solo bridge pickup is slightly smoother in the high-end, probably because of its dedicated tone control. But tonal shade aside, it sounds like a Strat and as we get used to its mettle, it does the job and proves quite the all-rounder. The S-1 switch performs the 'seven sound' mod by adding

As your gateway to the world of vintage (and modified vintage) Fender, these are hugely valid

the neck to the bridge pickup for, firstly, a wider Tele-like mix and then all three pickups together. No surprises, but we're far from disappointed.

There's a noticeable earth hum with the Jazzmaster on top of the usual hum pick-up that will need some investigating, and the combination of the different vibrato and bridge – not to mention the wider flatter single coils – gives a third and very distinct voice that has more in common with a two-pickup Telecaster in terms of the bridge and mix voices, with more attack and depth to the neck. The bridge pickup is pretty much the brightest here, a real toupee-lifter without the tone pulled back a little that's not quite as smooth as the

UNDER THE HOOD A look at the circuits of the Modified models

Removing the Strat's scratchplate displays a sticker on the underside that reads "Baja 60s Strat". According to Fender's Tim Shaw, the term Baja – originating from the location of Fender's factory in Ensenada on Mexico's Baja California peninsula – "has been a term used for some time on Ensenada models with hotter pickups or more modern specs. So what was 'Baja' in concept, and with varying specs on the Classic Players, became 'Modified' in the Vintera universe."

You also see that the pickup and control routes are cut after the guitar has been finished, leaving the wood bare: an attempt to let the wood breathe, perhaps? The circuit typically uses a trio of 250k pots (the volume being the S-1 four-pole push-push switched type), a single .01 microfarad (104k) tone cap and five-way pickup selector. The tone controls are assigned, so tone 1 operates on both the neck and middle pickups; tone 2 on the bridge. The pickups have grey fibre bottoms with quite a pronounced vintage stagger, and with both the four-pole S-1 switch and a four-pole five-way selector switch, it's switch potential overkill: the

so-called 'seven sound' mod actually needs just a single-pole two-way switch.

Our Tele achieves its additional series wiring of both pickups (position 4) from the four-way lever pickup selector switch. The S-1 switched volume control uses two of its four poles to flip the phase of the neck pickup, but a third pole adds a .01 microfarads capacitor, wired to ground, that applies a high-frequency roll-off to the neck pickup (in position 2 only). Why? To create a less 'strangled' sound (which we already have in position 4 when the S-1 switch is depressed) to the parallel mix that is similar to an out-of-phase switch on a Les Paul, for example, where, with both pickup volumes up, the sound is very thin, but pull one volume back and the sound becomes fuller with a hint of out-of-phase-ness. Both pots are 250k and the circuit uses a .05 microfarad (503) ceramic disc tone capacitor.

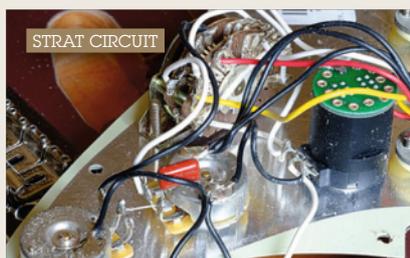
Another nice vintage touch is the angled slot between the pickups (underneath the scratchplate) that channels the neck pickup wires to the control cavity – a Tele feature from early 1951 through to mid-1969.

The Jazzmaster pretty much tears up the rulebook: everything is different. Aside from the pickup design, the Lead circuit uses 1meg-ohm pots to maximise the treble response (the volume unusually has a linear taper; the tone is audio or logarithmic) with a .03 microfarads (303M) tone cap. The Rhythm circuit uses small 'mini' pots, 1meg linear for the volume and an unusual 50k linear tone pot that pulls down the treble response. The tone cap here is .02 microfarad. The pickups look very vintage-y with grey fibre top and bottom plates and, although the scratchplate ID sticker is ripped here, you can clearly see "Baja" and "2019".

Another consideration is hum cancellation. The Jazzmaster's pickups appear hum-cancelling in mixed (both on) position. The Strat is hum-cancelling in its standard mixes (bridge and middle, and middle and neck), but neck and bridge and all-three with the S-1 switch depressed seem to be a little noisier in terms of hum pick-up than the other mixes, but less so than the individual single coils. The Tele is the least quiet and doesn't sound like it has any hum-cancelling, despite the added series link of its two single coils.



TELE CIRCUIT



STRAT CIRCUIT



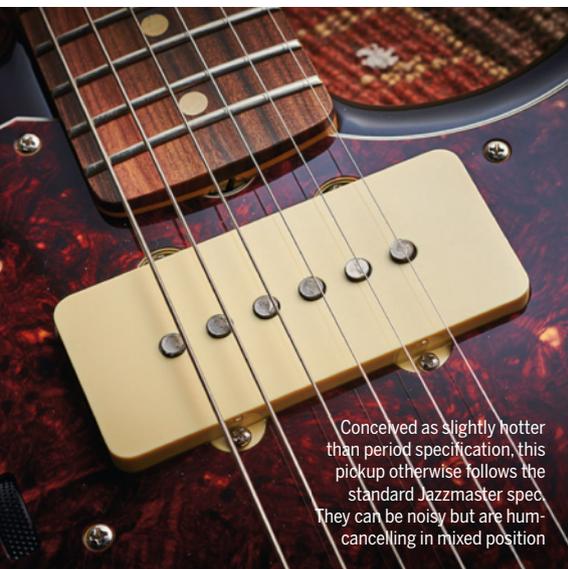
JAZZMASTER RHYTHM CIRCUIT

Strat and lacks just a little power compared with the Tele. The mix is relatively thin and bright, while the fulsome neck retains that almost metallic percussion to the attack with a little more depth than either our Strat or Tele. It's a little plunkier in terms of the note decay yet deceptively versatile and characterful, creating cavernous, clean 60s twang through to defined alt-rock crunchy gain. The rhythm circuit (neck pickup only) sounds like we've simply pulled back the tone control quite a bit and it's the place to start if you have to cover anything that's remotely jazzy. But with a little push from a clean or slightly hairy boost, it's another voice if you need it. Many players, of course, turn the roller volume fully down and use the Rhythm/Lead switch to achieve a kill switch or mute.

Verdict

A 17-strong guitar range that encompasses eight different Fender models spread over three decades is never going to please everyone in terms of colour choices or specification. And if you're a left-hander, unfortunately you'll have been totally ignored here. Although there are some tweaks to the pickup voicings and the look and feel of the toned necks, these are essentially guitars we've all seen, played and probably owned and modded, too, over the past couple of decades.

But as your gateway to the world of vintage (and modified vintage) Fender, these guitars are hugely valid, whatever they're now called. They remain go-to choices for players on a budget and we'd suggest there's enough refinement and a build quality that'll surprise many sniffer punters. As ever, though, deciding which one you might want to add to your own arsenal is probably the biggest question we all have. Three down, 14 to go... **G**



Conceived as slightly hotter than period specification, this pickup otherwise follows the standard Jazzmaster spec. They can be noisy but are hum-cancelling in mixed position



FENDER VINTERA '50S TELECASTER MODIFIED

PRICE: £869 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Ash
NECK: Maple, 'Thick soft V' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT: Synthetic bone
FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: 3-brass-saddle strings-through-body Tele bridge, vintage-style tuners – nickel/chrome plated
ELECTRICS: Fender Custom Shop vintage-style single coil Tele (bridge), Custom Shop 'Twisted' single coil Tele (neck), 4-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone w/ S-1 push-switch to change phase
OPTIONS: The alder-bodied Daphne Blue and Surf Green versions are £849
RANGE OPTIONS: Other Teles include the '50s (£749), '60s Modified (£849), '60s Bigsby (£819), '70s Thinline (£999), '70s Custom (£829) and '70s Deluxe (£829)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently
FINISHES: Butterscotch Blonde, Daphne Blue, Surf Green – gloss polyester (body); satin urethane neck back, gloss to front

Guitarist CHOICE
 9/10

PROS Tidy modified, vintage-inspired build with expanded sounds, a great neck and perfectly weighted ash body

CONS Uncompensated and poorly set up saddles; no lefties



FENDER VINTERA '60S STRATOCASTER MODIFIED

PRICE: £849 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Pau ferro, 'Modern C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT: Synthetic bone
FINGERBOARD: Pau ferro, white dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: 2-Point Synchronized Tremolo with Vintage-Style Stamped Steel Saddles, vintage-style tuners – nickel/chrome plated
ELECTRICS: 3x Fender Vintage-Style '60s Single-Coil Hot Strat, 5-position lever pickup selector switch, Master Volume, Tone 1 (neck/middle pickups), Tone 2 (bridge pickup), S-1 switch adds neck pickup to positions 1 & 2
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: Other Strats include '50s (£749), '50s Modified (£849), '60s (£749), '70s (£769)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently
FINISHES: Burgundy Mist Metallic (as reviewed), Olympic White – gloss polyester (body); satin urethane neck back) gloss to front

Guitarist CHOICE
 9/10

PROS Classy era-specific build modded with two-post vibrato, hotter pickups and the 'seven sound' mod; a real all-rounder

CONS No lefties; only two colours choices



FENDER VINTERA '60S JAZZMASTER MODIFIED

PRICE: £899 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway offset solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Pau ferro, 'Modern C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT: Synthetic bone
FINGERBOARD: Pau ferro, white dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: 2-Point Synchronized Tremolo with Vintage-Style Stamped Steel Saddles, vintage-style tuners – nickel/chrome plated
ELECTRICS: 2x Fender Vintage-Style '60s Single-Coil Hot; Lead circuit: 3-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume Master Tone, 2-position rhythm/lead switch; Rhythm Circuit: Thumbwheel controls for neck pickup Volume and Tone
OPTIONS: Colour only
RANGE OPTIONS: The only other Jazzmaster is the '60s (£799)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently
FINISHES: 3-Colour Sunburst (as reviewed), Surf Green – gloss polyester (body); satin urethane neck back) gloss to front

Guitarist CHOICE
 8/10

PROS A tidy era-specific build with modded bridge and vibrato placement, plus hotter pickups

CONS No lefties; only two colours; a bit noisy; it might be trendy, but has Marmite appeal