

# Studio Returns

It's the second return to the PRS Core line for the Studio. So, what's new and what's changed since it was last introduced 10 years ago?

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## PRs STUDIO FROM £3,885

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### What You Need To Know

- 1 We've seen this before, correct?**  
Indeed. The Studio first appeared way back in 1988 as an all-mahogany Standard but with a humbucker at the bridge and two conventional single coils – the first production PRS guitar to feature true single coils. A maple-top version was added the following year, but the model left the line in 1990 (although the Studio's pickup configuration was offered as an option until 1996).
- 2 Wasn't there a later version?**  
Yes, in 2011 it reappeared sporting the then new 57/08 full-size humbucker in the bridge position and two 57/08 Narrowfield humbuckers – the original version of the two narrow aperture pickups we see today.
- 3 Seems like lot of guitar, but it's a heck of a lot of money...**  
The base price is £3,885 (no doubt less in-store), which means it's risen £886 in the past 10 years, around a 29.5 per cent increase. We do get fewer options, though, just the 10-grade maple top that comes with hybrid hardware (and adds £615), neither of which are going to affect what you hear and feel. Back in 2011 we had a choice of vibrato or Stoptail, Pattern or Pattern Thin neck profiles, flame or quilted maple top, 10-Top flame or quilted maple top, gold hardware and special-order finishes.

There's little doubt that Paul Reed Smith has got considerable mileage from a guitar he designed back in the early 80s. Having a quick tot-up of the flagship Core USA model range for 2021, there are 17 guitars, 14 of which use this shape, one earlier design (the Santana Retro) and two later Singlecuts. Surely, this reliance on one outline has to be unique in the history of the instrument, doesn't it?

This design polarity is often cited by those who don't 'get' PRS: 'They're all the same!' The thing is, they're not. The differences lie in a host of features, even though that outline remains constant and has done over 36 years of production guitar making. Yet many invisible changes – often unannounced – continually push PRS forwards. Is there a better way, a better

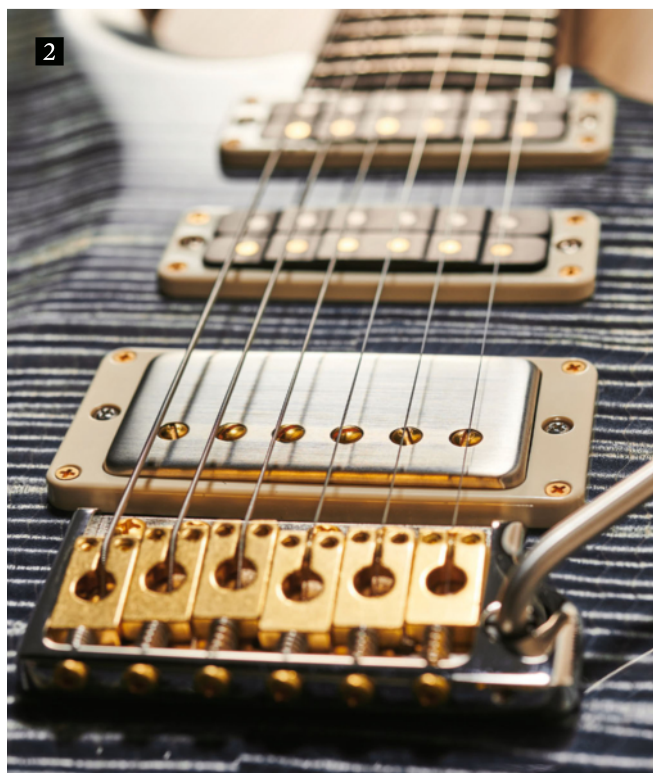
sound? Few open-minded players would say "the old ones are better" and PRS can't be accused of sitting on its well-earned laurels. In fact, it's not always easy to keep up.

As we say in our intro, the Studio isn't new to the PRS range, although our new-for-2021 example references the previous 2011 model in that we have a pair of the unique Narrowfield narrow aperture humbuckers instead of the dual single coils of the original 80s guitar.

So, the 2011 and the 2021 versions share plenty. Both are based around the original 635mm (25-inch) scale length that PRS has used since 1985. Both are 22-fret guitars, not 24 like that initial late-80s Studio, and use the 'Pattern' neck profile, originally the Wide-Fat (the 2011 model had the option of a Pattern Thin neck, aka the Wide-



The Studio centres on a traditional five-way lever pickup selector switch to voice the three pickups in standard Strat style



The Narrowfields here have their own voice and it's one that's worth getting to know

1. East Indian Rosewood is used for the headstock facing, while the brand logo is inlaid with vintage ivory acrylic
2. The gold/nickel 'hybrid' hardware and the 10-top grade maple top are the only options on this model
3. The very standard PRS circuit of the new Studio. Note the large resistor on the pull-switch

Thin, something we don't get today). The body thickness is slightly deeper than the Custom, McCarty-style, at 52mm. But that's about it. Virtually every other detail has been tweaked: both the locking tuners and vibrato are now in their Gen III progression; the bird inlays use different materials; the finish, as with all the current Core models, is now 'NOC', which stands for nitro sprayed over what is effectively a cellulose/acrylic basecoat; and, most profoundly, we now have different pickups. This model is loaded with a 58/15 LT at the bridge (LT standing for 'low turn' – the bridge pickup is the same in terms of output as a 58/15 neck pickup, instead of typically being slightly hotter) and slightly reworked Narrowfield small aperture humbuckers. So, as we say, while outwardly things looks the same, so many of the details have been improved.

As ever, the detailed construction is faultless. PRS set the bar high back in 1985 and has continued to raise it. But rarely has it been style over substance, not where the Core USA range guitars are concerned anyway. We probably take for granted the ergonomics of that shape: always the right weight, beautifully balanced played seated or strapped on. Then there's the Pattern neck shape (which was never particularly wide nor fat), the 'halfway' scale length and the fingerboard radius that sits between the original Fender and Gibson curves. PRS was probably the first to pre-wear its guitars with a subtle rounding of the fingerboard edge, something that's now common across the industry. You don't necessarily notice these small details, but they're all a part of making the guitar disappear in your hands.



## UNDER THE HOOD

What trickery lies inside the Studio? Very little...

**Y**ou might think that a guitar called a Studio would be crammed with switches and knobs to create a wide palette of sounds.

But no, this is a very simple setup and a regular PRS: a 500k volume pot with 181J (180 picofarads) treble bleed capacitor wired modern-style with the 500k tone control that uses a .033 microfarads capacitor. Only one side of the tone control's pull switch is used, which takes the coil junction of the bridge humbucker to ground via a 2.2kohms

resistor, a partial split as opposed to just dumping one full coil, and it voices primarily the neck-facing coil. As ever, there's no shielding in the cavity.

PRS doesn't like to spill too many beans about its pickup designs, but the 'low turns' suffix of the 58/15 LT humbucker is backed up by a measured DCR of 7.41kohms, which drops to 5.07k when split. Both Narrowfield designs have the same readings of 6.88k – and for once these DCRs do reflect the outputs we hear.





## THE RIVALS

Before you look elsewhere, PRS itself provides plenty of rivals. The new PRS Fiore (£2,599), Mark Lettieri's new signature model, looks and sounds more like a classic HSS Superstrat with its swamp ash body, 22-fret maple neck and a two-post vibrato with special pickups and tricky wiring. Yup, a hot-rod!

The new Narrowfield mini-humbucker is also used on the Special Semi Hollow (from £4,055) paired with a pair of 58/15 LTs. It uses the 24-08-style pickup switching via two mini-toggle switches providing nine sounds in total.

PRS is not just about offering humbucker and single coils; the piezo-loaded guitars have long been part of the range. The Core Custom 24 Piezo (from £4,195) and the Hollowbody II Piezo (from £4,939) are stellar examples. On a tighter budget, the Chinese-made SE Hollowbody II Piezo (£1,349) uses 58/15 'S' humbuckers and a new piezo system designed with LR Baggs.

Of course, that headstock – now a real classic, like the body shape – does hint back to its 80s origins, but the near-straight string pull over the nut to the tuners is one reason PRS guitars stay in tune while us Les Paul owners can still struggle. But function is only one part of this equation. Plating is removed on any parts of the guitar that may affect or dissipate the strings' vibrations, along with any plastic washers and the like. Squeezing every last drop of energy is central to the design, and while the construction, the neck's stiffness, the wood drying and so on had all been sorted by the early 90s, the fact that PRS – primarily driven by Paul himself – is still finding ways to improve, to maximise that string energy, is quite frankly remarkable. Off-the-shelf is no longer good enough: virtually every part here is proprietary.

## Feel & Sounds

The Pattern neck profile here combines sensible depth (22.2mm at the 1st fret filling out to 24.5mm by the 12th) with slightly tapered shoulders in lower positions and is certainly one of our favourite neck shapes. The setup is perfectly dialled in, as it should be, and the vibrato needs no introduction. It's all very stable tuning-wise and perfectly intonated with a beautiful ring and resonance to its unplugged voice.

Like a Strat, we find ourselves listening to the neck pickup first, and while the Narrowfield might have been tweaked for this year we still hear a voice that very much blurs the lines between humbucker and



single coil. To our ears, it certainly doesn't approach the crisp attack of a Fender single coil – the sound is deeper, rounded with soft-toned clarity. Pull the volume back and it's a little more 'single coil', but it sounds expensive and really chameleon-like. The middle Narrowfield has more bite, as you'd expect, but those parallel mixes – the misnamed 'out-of-phase' sounds – are really stellar here, unmistakable Fender-like funk and bounce yet with this beautiful depth. Again, pulling the volume back we're hearing more single-coil-like tonality.

The full-coil 58/15 LT bridge pickup in this environment is certainly in the PAF style. When split, it is thinner, but it's no

4. These 2021 Narrowfield mini-humbuckers look like the originals but have been subtly revoiced via PRS's TCI process

5. Under the black finish of the back PRS uses African mahogany (*Khaya ivorensis*) for the body and genuine mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) for the neck – both one-piece – as the company does on virtually all of its Core models





As distinctive as the figured 'curly' maple top, PRS's bird inlays use various materials. Here, they're inlaid with vintage ivory acrylic outlines and green standard abalone centres



## PRS STUDIO 2021

**PRICE:** From £3,885 (inc case)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric

**BODY:** 1-piece mahogany back with carved flamed maple top

**NECK:** 1-piece mahogany, Pattern profile, glued-in

**SCALE LENGTH:** 635mm (25")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic friction reducing/43.25mm

**FINGERBOARD:** East Indian rosewood, bird inlays (green abalone centre/vintage ivory outline), 254mm (10") radius

**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo

**HARDWARE:** PRS Gen III vibrato, PRS Phase III locking tuners

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm

**ELECTRICS:** PRS 58/15 LT full-size humbucker at bridge; PRS Narrowfield humbucker at neck and middle positions. 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and master tone (with pull-push switch to split the bridge humbucker)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.62/7.96

**OPTIONS:** The base price of the Studio is £3,885. The only option is the 10-Top w/ hybrid hardware (as reviewed), which adds £615

**RANGE OPTIONS:** See Rivals. The Custom 24-08 (£3,799) offers simple humbucker/true single-coil switching

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISHES:** Faded Whale Blue (as reviewed), one of 20 standard finishes available – all gloss 'NOC' (nitro over cellulose)



**PROS** Design, build, proprietary hardware and pickups all elevate this way above the standard; fully hum-cancelling performance

**CONS** It's not cheap; minimal options aside from colour; no lefties; not everyone gets the flame 'n' birds aesthetic

wig-lifter, typically a partial split leaving some of the usually fully dumped coil in circuit. This writer would happily suggest that it could be the default voice – and if you want a tad more power then you pull the switch up. It's a superb clean Peter Green-y voice and hugely expressive. It mixes very well with the middle, in both full and split modes, and keeps things clear with crunch and gain but with no sharpness to the attack.

Hey, it's not a cheap guitar and you'd expect a wide dynamic range – which you get in spades. As ever, use the well-tapered volume and tone. Can you get a bad sound of this guitar? Well, we tried... But it is worth pointing out it's not that hot-rod Superstrat style of a beefy bridge humbucker mixed with a pair of Fender-like single coils. No, the Narrowfields here definitely have their own voice and it's one that's worth getting to know.

### Verdict

As we discuss, PRS's current USA range is about providing choice. If you want an old-school HSS guitar, the new Fiore would be our first suggestion. This Studio, frankly, sounds more grown up: the neck pickup has a softer, richer voice than a Strat, the middle adding a little edge, while both

## The small details are all a part of making the guitar disappear in your hands

mixes are perhaps the most Strat-y voices here yet, with a depth that you'd struggle to find from a Fender-style bolt-on. The bridge pickup is exceptional, both split and in full coil modes, respectively dipping below and above the Narrowfields in output. It sounds to us less about coping the sound of a 60s Strat with a hot PAF at the bridge, and more about offering a broad spectrum of fully hum-cancelling voices that sound classy and sophisticated played clean and really quite huge but defined with some crunch and gain.

Factor in the feel, the neck shape and the ergonomics and it's like the best vintage guitar you've never owned, certainly not at this price anyway. PRS's S2 models are good. SEs, at the price, are exceptional. But these Cores just rip it up. The last ones we've reviewed – Paul's Guitar, the 2020 McCarty and now this Studio – are all stellar pieces: vintage-informed, exceptional guitars that really do make you consider the guitars you own. **G**