




Words Stuart Williams Photography Phil Barker

FENDER NOVENTA SERIES

Single coils, hardware and electronic tweaks offer a different take on classic Fender shapes. Time for something a bit different?



The P-90-style pickup is the sometimes-forgotten middle ground between single coil spike and prime beef of a humbucker, joining the likes of the mini-humbucker as the 'in-between' tone. Once Seth Lover came up with his dual-coil design, it reigned supreme as the go-to pickup for electrics made by Gibson. This left the soapbar finding its home in Junior and Special models, at the same time cementing its place as a versatile magnet. One side of this split personality is a snarling, rowdy gobsh*te, prototyping punk with its association with garage rock. The other lends itself to clean and overdriven sounds beautifully too, making it a great choice as an all-rounder for clean to dirty rock sounds.

Why the history lesson, and aren't these Fenders? Take a look at the limited edition Noventa series, and you'll notice a few changes. For 2021, Fender has outfitted its Strat, Tele and Jazzmaster outlines with its Noventa pickups. Noventa means '90' in Spanish, giving us a clue to what this is all about. Throw in some additional tweaks unique to each model, and what we have before us potentially present some reimagined, workhorse rock machines.



WE ARE THE MODS!

First up is the Noventa Stratocaster, which at a glance offers us the familiar shape of a Strat with P-90 pickups. There's the alder body in the classic doublecut silhouette, with a 21-fret maple neck. To traditionalists, that's where the Strat definition will end. It's available in the Daphne Blue of our review model or Surf Green, with both options fitted with a maple fingerboard. However, if Fender's 'classic' colours aren't what you're looking for, it's also available in the more contemporary Crimson Red Transparent, but the fingerboard switches to Pau Ferro – a combination that to us echoes the visuals of Jimmy Eat World's Jim Adkins' signature Telecaster, but in Strat form.

That's not all, though, as there are some pretty major staple spec changes here, too. Gone is the Strat's vibrato, in favour of a six-saddle hardtail bridge, and you'll have already noticed that this Strat only has two pickups. This means that the Strat's traditional five-way selector has been replaced by a three-position blade, and sticking with the stripped-back theme, you get one volume and one tone control.

As with the Strat, the Noventa Telecaster isn't the one your grandad Keef knows and loves. But before you get all sniffy about that lone bridge pickup, let's take a moment to consider that the Telecaster's origins lie in the single-pickup Esquire, making this a more traditional guitar than you might first think! Here though, that revered bridge pickup is swapped for the Noventa model. Fender has

THESE ARE NOT THE STRAT AND TELE YOUR GRANDAD KEEF KNOWS AND LOVES

also trimmed the Tele's scratchplate, and produced a 'cut' telecaster bridge featuring three brass saddles. Once again, there are two maple 'board versions of the Noventa Tele – Fiesta Red and Vintage Blonde, plus an evergreen 2-Color Sunburst with a Pau Ferro fingerboard. With just the one pickup, everything is kept simple with no switch (obviously), and a regular Telecaster volume and tone circuit.

THE SOUNDS

This isn't a comparison between the two guitars, we're not pitting them against each other, but that said there are a number of similarities on offer, most apparent in that

neck. It's clear that Fender has aimed straight down the middle with the Noventas: the C-shape profile isn't likely to offend anyone, nor is it a departure from what you might be expecting from a Fender in 2021. It's Classic Coke and it just works. Throw in the traditional scale length and medium-sized radius and you know exactly what you're getting.

There's no right or wrong when it comes to neck finishes, but if, like us you prefer yours not to be heavily lacquered-up, you'll be glad to hear that all Noventa models are finished in a satin seal, with the gloss applied only to the headstock. This combines with the rest of the neck to keep things smooth and easy, although (possibly just owing to a difference in strings) moving across the neck of the Strat feels a little slinkier than on the Tele.

Weight-wise, it's a similar story with both models coming in at around 7lbs, but the Telecaster feels more 'alive' acoustically when we take it out of the box – the type of string resonance you can feel as well as hear from a quick tap of the neck and a few strums.

This translates with both guitars plugged in, too, with the Tele exhibiting a fuller, almost wider output with more body and greater sustain. But of course, it comes with a catch – whatever the tone, it's coming from the bridge position only. This means that where the Tele is concerned, you'll need to live with a set-and-forget bridge sound, or hover around the volume and tone controls. There's a lot of mileage in the latter, with the Noventa's full-bore punch and bite mellowing to a spongier, rounder tone as you roll-back the controls, but a neck pickup this is not, and there's not really any way around that!

The Strat is voiced very similarly, at least in the bridge – not surprising given that the construction of both guitars is largely identical. Under some medium gain, the bridge position Noventa pickups give you a mid-heavy, slightly spikey-but-not-too-abrasive tone that we can see covering a lot of blues/indie/classic rock ground on their own. Flip to that neck pickup though, and it's begging for a clean setting. Like a traditional neck single coil you get the hollow sound of plenty of bass and treble, but here it's magnified and free of any mud. Spanky, snappy, funky clean tones are where we spent most of our time on the Strat neck pickup, because it makes it so addictive. You can also dirty things up a bit, drop the tone a little and yield yourself some beautiful bluesy lead tones. Then there's the middle position, which offers a good balance between the full-bodied bass of the neck, while blending in some more of that bridge punch. If versatility is what you need, the Strat's got your back.





CONCLUSION

We started this review expecting to see a pair of upper-mid-range workhorse guitars from Fender, and just like the feel of each, we weren't left with any major surprises when we picked them up. Traditionalists will prefer a vibrato and the triple pickup/five-position switching they're used to from a Stratocaster, and the

Telecaster's lack of that famous pickup might be a roadblock from the get-go for those of a similar mindset. But guess what? At the time of writing, Fender produces no fewer than 51 other Strats and 43 Telecaster models to choose from, and that's before we consider Squier. The Noventa range offers some stripped back, slightly different takes on the base

configuration of some classic guitars. The Tele is, to us, approaching LP Jr territory for people who want the same level of simplicity in a Fender format, while the Strat gives you nearly as much versatility as normal, with arguably enhanced tuning stability and a less fussy control circuit. It's meat 'n potatoes, but done nicely, and who doesn't like that?

FENDER NOVENTA STRATOCASTER

£849



AT A GLANCE

- BODY:** Alder
- NECK:** Maple
- SCALE:** 25.5"
- FINGERBOARD:** Maple or Pau Ferro
- FRETS:** 21
- PICKUPS:** 2x Noventa singlecoils
- CONTROLS:** 1x volume, 1x tone
- FINISH:** Daphne Blue (pictured), Surf Green, Crimson Red, Transparent
- CONTACT:** Fender, www.fender.com

FENDER NOVENTA TELECASTER

£799



AT A GLANCE

- BODY:** Alder
- NECK:** Maple
- SCALE:** 25.5"
- FINGERBOARD:** Maple or Pau Ferro
- FRETS:** 21
- PICKUPS:** 1x Noventa singlecoil
- CONTROLS:** 1x volume, 1x tone
- FINISH:** Vintage Blonde, Fiesta Red, 2-Color Sunburst
- CONTACT:** Fender, www.fender.com

SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★