





FENDER VG STRATOCASTER £1,539

ELECTRICS  ON THE DVD

THIS YEAR'S MODELS

Now into its early fifties, the Fender Stratocaster is unquestionably the world's most popular electric guitar. And it's one dog that's still learning new tricks...

Words Dave Burrluck and Mick Taylor

This year Fender has chosen the Stratocaster to feature its most advanced technology yet in the form of the VG Stratocaster: Fender's first electric guitar to feature digital modelling. Yet Fender is also celebrating an older technology. Back in the seventies guitarists were dissatisfied with the Strats on offer and started customising, adding hotter pickups and bigger frets. But with the new Vintage Hot Rod Strats, Fender has done it for us. In this special review feature we look at 'customised' Strats – old-style and very new. →

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PHOTOGRAPHY NEIL GODWIN



Fender VG Stratocaster £1,539



The first digital Stratocaster rolls off the production line. Does it herald a new future or another technology cul-de-sac? by Dave Burrluck

The VG is unquestionably the most forward-looking Stratocaster since Fender first launched the model 53 years ago. Yet such is our industry, that aside from one extra knob and a sliver of discrete electronic augmentation in front of the bridge, it could be the same guitar that first appeared all those years ago. Fender – perhaps more than any other musical instrument company – knows that we guitar players tend to like things just as they were.

The Japanese electronics giant Roland – who is partnering Fender in this project – couldn't be more different. Ever forward-looking, it has defined the modern stompbox, multi-FX, guitar synthesis and the digital recreation of past analogue sounds: digital modelling. This latter development first caught our eye with the VG-8 back in 1995. But, typically, this innovative technology was buried within a complex and expensive piece of kit that put off more players than it attracted. It was new technology and, like MIDI, something that us guitarists were wary of.

Indeed, digital modelling could have remained in the techno realm until Line 6 started releasing amps that digitally recreated analogue sounds. Slowly the company found its mark and

FENDER VG STRAT	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED Simple to use digital modelling guitar with magnetic 'back-up'; excellent tuning modes; looks just like a classic Strat!</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED No phantom powering and short battery life; no custom setting</p>	

POD – the world's first 'desktop modeller' – revolutionised the way we recorded guitars. Line 6 went further in 2002 and unveiled Variax: the world's first digital modelling guitar that recreated the sounds of numerous electric and acoustic instruments. But rather than signal a revolution, no other company joined the digital march (Gibson's digital guitar still remains a slight enigma and is not the same concept at all) until earlier this year when the VG Stratocaster appeared. So what do we get?

The VG is essentially an American Series Strat. If you've not played one, where have you been? Updated from the previous American Standard Series, the American Series employs an alder body, which looks like it's a two-piece but not centre joined, with maple neck and either rosewood or maple 'board. The satin polyurethane finish to

the neck's back is kept natural and looks a little anaemic, but the three-tone burst to the face of the guitar is rich and flawless, even if the back and sides here are all black. We get pretty big frets, dual-height enclosed tuners and the two-post vibrato is distinctive with its large, rectangular, powdered stainless steel saddles.

It's a good yet substantial weight, the set-up is immaculate, and small details like the rolled fingerboard edges just prove that Fender takes great care with its instruments these days.

But moving swiftly on, let's look at the VG's additional features. Along with the three 'American Strat' single-coils we get a Roland 'VG pickup' (basically Roland's GK divided pickup) close to the bridge. It's these two systems that are the heart of the guitar: the standard magnetic pickups allow the guitar to function as a normal 'analogue' Strat; the VG pickup opens up the world of digital modelling.

Instead of the second tone control, we get two smaller Strat-like knobs for mode and tuning control. The mode control starts with normal mode (indicated by N on the knob) – the magnetic pickups are selected and the five-way selector switch, volume and tone controls work as normal. This 'passive' mode functions even when



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the batteries – necessary for the VG's electronics – are spent.

The other four positions on the mode control are fed from the VG pickup and all are modelled sounds. The first position is modelled Stratocaster (S) and the five-way selects the normal array. Next is modelled Telecaster (T), the fourth position is humbucking pickups (H) – on these two settings the five-way acts like a three-way pickup selector switch so we get three sounds (bridge, both, neck). Finally we get acoustic (A) with five sounds simply referred to as Acoustic 1-5, and in this setting the master tone control acts as a reverb control.

Above this mode control is the tuning control. This is a six-position rotary selector that starts with normal (again N on the control legend) and doesn't affect the guitar. Then we get five selections that will alter the outputted tuning you hear when you're plugged in – obviously, because this is generated electronically, they don't work with the un-modelled Strat sounds. So we get dropped D (DADGBE), open G (DGDGBE), D modal (DADGAD), Baritone B (BEADF#B) and 12-string.

Along with the usual vibrato backplate we have a larger coverplate on the back to hide the electronics and a flip-top battery compartment that takes four AA size cells. With NiMH rechargeable batteries the life is quoted as 10 hours, and less with non-rechargeable batteries as supplied. It's not long and there's no provision for phantom (mains adapted) powering. A bright blue LED lights when you insert your jack lead and this flashes when power gets dangerously low

before going out when you've run out of juice – no more VG, but the standard magnetic pickups will still work. Cosmetically none of these back coverplates, nor the battery compartment, are flush mounted. They all sit above the face of the guitar, which isn't particularly elegant.

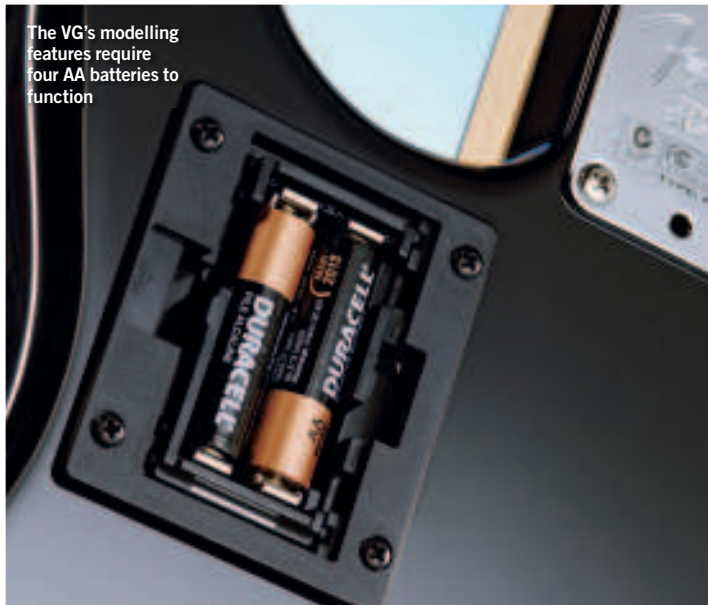
There's just one output, so if you want to use both an electric and acoustic amp you'll need an additional 'Y' switcher box.

SOUNDS: The inclusion of the standard magnetic pickups is both a plus and minus. We have not yet heard a digitally modelled sound that, when compared to a quality analogue source, is better. Very close, for sure, especially recorded and mixed into a track, but standing in front of your amp, at volume, is a different matter. The American Series Strat sound veers towards a modern, bright and snappy tone but it's wonderfully dynamic and musical with that elusive funk and elasticity that makes the Stratocaster so alluring. Switching to the modelled Strat sounds they simply lack a little sparkle, and importantly dynamics. The sound is certainly admirably Strat-like, but a little darker and you can easily perceive a difference.

The Tele sounds are well matched, and although we only have three, few would argue that these weren't pretty definitive. The humbucking trio sound, as intended, more like a humbucker-equipped bolt-on than a classic Les Paul but the darker, fuller grunt easily achieves fatter distortion or smoother jazzier tones.

We'd describe the first three acoustic →

The VG's modelling features require four AA batteries to function



Instead of the second tone control, there are two smaller knobs for mode and tuning adjustment





This is the pickup that gives access to the modelled sound banks: Strat, Tele, Humbucking & Acoustic

→ models as modern acoustic simulations; bright, thin-ish but with enough acoustic-ness to provide a convincing acoustic bed live, or a rather synthetic modern part for a home recording. Vintage Martin they're not. We're unsure what the fourth sound is, a dark and solid 'acoustic' sound that has a little archtop-like character. The fifth sound is a resonator, and is a little plunky and banjo-like.

The tuning mode is very good. Unlike Variax, which suffers a slight delay in outputting the detuned note, the VG's delay is unnoticeable. That's not to say it sounds 100 per cent true, it doesn't. The low-tuned baritone is a little unnatural, but select the Tele model, add a little slap-back to a clean Fender amp and it's instant Bakersfield country. The 12-string, like the other tuning modes, sounds at extremes a little synthetic. But use it for chord strumming and arpeggios and, again, it's convincing enough. DADGAD is a difficult tuning to master and perhaps a left-field choice; open G and dropped D

The Tele sounds are well matched, and although we only have three, few would argue that these weren't pretty definitive

are easier and excellent sounding.

Generally the VG seems untroubled by 'digital-ness'. There's a slight warbling when you change pickup selections, but no intrusive hiss or noise, certainly not to our ears in any case. The modelled sounds are thankfully absent from pickup hum – we're sure you've all had problems with your single-coils on stage and in the studio. Indeed the digital models are silent, where the American Series single-coils hum when not combined. Don't forget the master tone acts as a reverb control for the acoustic models. When the tone is full on you have maximum, quite full-sounding reverb which can be muted with the tone fully anticlockwise. Just remember when

you switch back to, say, the Strat models you'll have to pull your tone control back up.

Getting used to the extra knobs takes a little while, so switching sounds and tunings quickly in the heat of a performance requires some focused thought. One great asset of Line 6's Variax in that respect is its Custom banks where you can load up 10 sounds of your choice – two banks of five – and the tuning you want, then just select them via the five-way lever. It's very fast and idiot proof, especially if you've got singing and your stage moves to consider.

Verdict

As a digital modelling guitar for the masses, Fender and Roland have got this pretty much spot on. Using the platform of the American Series Strat really is perfect because it's a professional spec guitar that'll last you a career and then some. The VG side offers just enough of a glimpse of the potential benefits of digital modelling

The rivals

Line 6 Variax 600	£633
Parker NiteFly Alder	£1,199
Taylor T-5	£1,799

The only other guitar to feature digital modelling is Line 6's Variax (see VG vs Variax). The 600 is the most Fender-like in style but, of course, has no magnetic pickups. Parker's NiteFly Alder bring numerous modern features including piezo saddles for both magnetic and acoustic-like sounds (which can be voiced simultaneously, unlike the VG or Variax), stainless steel frets and an otherworldly shape. The T5 is Taylor's first electric guitar, more acoustic-like in its sounds but with magnetic electric tones too that will surprise many – a true hybrid.

FENDER VG STRATOCASTER £1,539

ELECTRICS  ON THE DVD



The new red? The cool blue LED means you're in VG (digital) mode


→ without any of the drawbacks. The expanded sounds – electric and acoustic – and the altered and open tunings are all easily available. There's not a computer in sight, so even if you're a staunch analogue Luddite you'll be able to utilise the benefits.

Currently it sits above the price of its only competitor, Line 6's Variax, but if you like to keep things simple – and don't want to look different – it's an obvious choice. Does it sound better than Variax? No. Some will prefer one, others the other. The de-tunings are a step forward, but that's offset by the VG Strat's relative lack of onboard sounds, no custom banks for easy on-stage use, no tweak-ability, no provision for upgrading and no phantom powering. It's all by design, of course, but that's a lot of 'nos' even so.

Indeed, by striving for simplicity, Fender may have actually underestimated just how technoliterate we've become with our computers, digital cameras, mp3



players and the like. Downloads are fast and most work: you no longer have to be a techno-geek. The VG Stratocaster should also be user-upgradeable; we should have a choice of different modelled sounds and tunings that we could, for example, download and install to the VG.

But are we getting ahead of ourselves? As it stands the VG Stratocaster joins Variax as another example of the technology that is shaping the future of the electric guitar. Bring it on. 

Fender VG Stratocaster

Guitarist RATING



Variax 600: the original digital modelling guitar

VG vs Variax

The Fender VG Strat isn't the world's first digital modelling guitar.

The VG is pitched directly against Line 6's Variax. While both use digitally modelled sounds, however, they are very different. Firstly, Variax doesn't have any magnetic pickups, which some would say makes it look odd, like there's something's missing. It does, however, feature both battery power (AA & PP3) and can be phantom powered via an outboard mains-adapted XPS A/B box (included in the price) which also acts as a 'Y' selector so you can switch the output to different amps to utilise the 'electric' (via jack) and 'acoustic' (via XLR) sounds.

Whereas the VG has four modelled tone banks (Strat, Tele, Humbucking and Acoustic), Variax has 10, accessed from the rotary model selector: T-Model (Tele), Spank (Stratocaster), Lester (Les Paul), Special (Specials, etc), R-Billy (Gretsch), Chime (Rickenbacker – inc 12-string),

Semi (ES-335), Jazzbox (ES-175), Acoustic (inc 12-string), and Reso (resonators, banjo and sitar) – each has five sounds selected via the five-way lever switch. Each is modelled from a specific, mainly vintage, instrument. Also Variax has two 'custom' banks where you can load your favourite sounds and select them quickly from the five-way, for example Les Paul P-90 bridge pickup, Strat bridge and neck, Gretsch bridge pickup, acoustic 12-string, Les Paul neck humbucker.

Variax also has a digital I/O jack for connectivity to, for example, PODxt Live and Vetta II. This means as you change amp sounds your pre-selected guitar sounds will change too. Also it enables you to connect to Line 6's Workbench software and USB interface. In short this allows you to retune each string of ANY model down an octave and up a fifth and also allows you to customise the models – like an ES-335 with three single-coils

tuned to low B. It also allows Variax's software to be upgraded, and for modern trends like sound sharing.

The VG Strat's five tuning modes can be applied to any sound – the Variax has only certain 12-string models, and to apply open tunings you have to use Workbench to apply them to a specific sound.

Variax costs considerably less money. The electrics use the same digital 'engine' and the hard-tail 300 costs £386, the 600 is £633 and the 700 starts at £1,091. Both the 600 and 700 have vibratos. There are three Variax Acoustics: the 300, in both nylon- (£445) and steel- string (£386) versions, and the 700 (£997) that allows you to retune its models onboard and also has compression.

In short, the digital-only Variax has many more models than the VG Strat and you can upgrade it. VG is simpler and doesn't suffer latency with its selection of altered tunings. Oh, and it's a pukka American Strat, of course.

FENDER VG STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £1,539 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric with digital modelling technology

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: White synthetic/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white plastic dots, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Fender American '2-Point Synchronized' vibrato, Fender/Schaller Deluxe staggered tuners – all chrome plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm

ELECTRICS: Three American Strat single-coil pickups, one Roland VG Pickup. Five-way lever pickup selector, master volume and master tone (acts as reverb control in acoustic mode). Mode control rotary switch, tuning control rotary switch

ADDITION FEATURES: Mode control offers digital models of a Strat, Tele, Humbucking and five acoustic voices.

Tuning mode has Dropped D, open G, DADGAD, Baritone and 12-string options

POWER REQUIREMENTS: Four AA batteries supplied. No phantom powering

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.97/8.75

OPTIONS: Maple fingerboard (same price)

RANGE OPTIONS: None. The standard non-VG American Series Stratocaster costs £919 in sunburst, £849 in solid colours

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Three-colour sunburst (as reviewed), black

Fender GB
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www.fender.com

VG virtues

We track down Fender's marketing manger for electric guitars, Justin Norvell, to discuss the VG's finer points...

Can you give us no clues as to which specific guitars you've modelled?

"We actually used several reference instruments for each. The goal of the guitar is to achieve the most usable sounds and we purposefully strove to avoid this guitar being chained to specific guitars. That was not the point of the instrument and would possibly lend an air of novelty – people would end up dissecting the minutiae of tonal properties in reference to that guitar, and would miss the point.

"For example, we've been making Telecaster guitars for over 50 years, so which one is the definitive model upon which to hang one's hat? In the end we decided on isolating the inherent tonal characteristics of each pickup or guitar type and building from that.

"So in the end, the VG Tele bridge sound has that dark snap and bite, while the Tele middle pickup position has that woody, chirpy funk sound etc, so that you'd unmistakably think 'Tele' if you were blindfolded. Likewise the other pickup sounds.

"We did make an effort to voice a warmer, rounder sounding Strat (more like a vintage ash body); just because we felt we might as well give the player 10 unique Strat sounds instead of a redundant set of five."

What about the acoustics, especially position four (neck/middle on the five-way) which sounds quite unusual?

"The first three positions are pretty standard and range from small body to jumbo, but it really affords three EQ options to let you pick which one sounds best for your amp set-up (some brighter, some more scooped). Position four and five are straight-up utility settings that are 'hybridised'. On position four, the one you ask about, we were working on a nylon sound and were unsatisfied. While we were doing this, we voiced it into this in-between sound that was part piezo electric nylon, part archtop with flatwounds. It was interesting and unique and we thought it was a usable sound. Position five is a resonator setting voiced a little towards a banjo, so it can do either well."

The open and 12-string tunings are basically achieved via pitch shifting, not modelling, correct?

"The way the VG achieves a 12-string



Fender's CEO Bill Mendello (left) and Justin Norvell

"The way the VG achieves a 12-string sound (or any of its alternate tunings) is by using six separate digital pitch shifters: one for each string"

sound (or any of its alternate tunings) is by using six separate digital pitch shifters: one for each string. This is one of the primary benefits of the divided pickup: by using a separate one for each string, we can create actual 12-string tuning – unison (slightly detuned, as a 12-string tends to be) on strings one and two, and octaves on the rest."

There's no open D/open E – a key slide tuning – in the selection. How did you decide on the tunings to include?

"I will admit that those were two tunings on the short list to be included, but brevity – or simplicity – is one of the things that makes this instrument great.

"With all of the current downtuning in music, the drop D and Baritone were a given, open G is so inexorably linked to the Fender sound, DADGAD is a great companion for the acoustic realm, and 12-string is a must. For any tunings that were missed, the guitar can still be manually tuned that way."

Is the current Fender VG upgradeable in any way?

"At the current time, any upgrading or updating would be done at the service centre level, not for the user at home. Currently there are no customisation options for the VG."

Can the same sounds/tunings be found on the current Roland VG-99 processor?

"Yes, to a degree. Actually, the VG-99 is voiced a little differently as the VG Strat is voiced to a specific guitar (the Strat). Fender worked closely with Roland to customise the sounds, going through several rounds of tone testing and refinement with a bunch of players and our own experts. The sonic package you have here is tweaked by Fender to sound optimal on its onboard platform of the Strat. We obsessed over the finest details of our namesake pickup sounds, and had several robust debates until we were all happy."



Fender Vintage Hot Rod '57 & '62 Stratocasters both £1,399

Just when you thought Fender had every conceivable Strat variation already in production, this tempting twosome put a new-old spin on the vintage-modern debate by Mick Taylor

FENDER VINTAGE HOT ROD '57 STRATOCASTER
PRICE: £1,399 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: White plastic, 42mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
FRETS: 21, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: American Vintage Synchronized Tremolo bridge, Fender/Gotoh vintage tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 56mm
ELECTRICS: DiMarzio Tone Zone humbucker (bridge), two Fender SCN single-coils, five-way lever pickup selector switch, one volume, two tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.99/6.6
OPTIONS: The American Vintage '57 Stratocaster starts at £1,299 for solid colours
LEFT-HANDERS: American Vintage '57 Stratocaster LH (£1,429)
FINISHES: Candy Apple red (as reviewed), black and three-colour sunburst (£1,449)
Fender GB
01342 331700
www.fender.com

For some players, anything post 1964 or thereabouts just won't do when it comes to Strat aesthetics. Such enthusiasts absolutely insist on the 'right' body curves, nitro-cellulose lacquer, spaghetti peghead logo, vintage-style vibrato and Kluson-esque, slot-head tuners. And if you want all that from Fender's non-Custom Shop line, your only option is the American Vintage series. Those guitars have their drawbacks for modern-minded players, however, notably their thin frets, too-curved-for-big-bends 7.25-inch radius fingerboard, sticky nitro-finished necks and vintage single-coil pickups.

By and large, these were much the same 'problems' afflicting Strats back in the early/mid-1970s, even though the guitar had changed markedly by then from its 1950s forebear. This drove many players to customise their guitars in line with new playing styles and sounds, and gave rise to a whole heap of aftermarket parts suppliers. It's to this legacy that Fender very gently doffs its cap with these new Vintage Hot Rod Stratocasters. We're not talking out-and-out Floyd-plus-humbucker monsters like Van Halen's Frankenstein or Steve Vai's Green Meanie. We're not even talking two-pivot vibratos and clever switching aka the American Standards. So why do we need these? Well, even the hugely popular American Standard Strat is a whole flight of steps too far for dyed-in-the-wool Strat enthusiasts: they don't want two-pivot vibratos, modern tuners, blocky logos, bi-flex truss rods, poly finishes and, heaven forefend,

FENDER VHR '57 STRAT	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED Excellent improvement to the neck over standard American Vintage spec; ballys enough for hard rock</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED Only the railed pickup's appearance – but that's personal</p>	

flashy modern colours. So let's keep those 'improvements' super subtle shall we?

Vintage Hot Rod '57 Stratocaster

Candy Apple red, sir? With a maple neck, sir? Just pulling the Vintage Hot Rod '57 from its included tweed case attracts oohs and aahs from all and sundry; very few other guitars inspire this kind of instant reaction. It's a nitro-cellulose finish, too, which is the old school, labour-intensive, expensive way of doing things. Cellulose finishes are loved for the way they age (dis)gracefully, hardening and eventually thinning over time to let the guitar breathe – something that's impossible under an impenetrable poly coat, no matter how much you abuse it. It's also interesting to note that the '57's alder body looks and feels very marginally more lovingly contoured under Fender's 'thin-skin' finish than the '62 model also on test; these bodies do receive a fair degree of hand sanding.

In classic fifties Strat tradition, this guitar has a single-piece maple neck with the requisite walnut skunk stripe on the back. It's the neck that earns the

'57 most of its Hot Rod tag, thanks to some welcome changes to the standard American Vintage spec. Firstly, rather than a thick nitro-cellulose finish all over, the back of the neck has a satin finish which helps reduce friction in your palm (missus). And while we're round there, the characteristic 'V'-profile of a fifties Strat is softened somewhat to hold wider general appeal. It's a successful tweak, feeling a little more 'played-in' than a standard 'V'-neck. Subtly rolled fingerboard edges also help nicely in the comfort department, though the satin finish is a more qualified success. There's still some obvious friction compared with more modern finishes; some steel wool and/or a couple years' hard gigging will sort that out.

Crucially, the neck's playing surface is radiused to flatter-than-vintage-spec 9.5 inches, making big bends possible with a low action, aided admirably by 21 well-finished medium jumbo frets. Coupled with a great set-up straight from the case, it makes the '57 a lovely player; everything this reviewer wants from a vintage-style Strat, but with the subtle playability tweaks to make it much less of a fight. Body-end truss rod adjustment is a concession most of us are happy to make for 'correct' aesthetics at the headstock end, topped with a set of chrome Fender/Gotoh slot-head tuners. Stylistically, they won't oxidise and tarnish like nickel variants, but functionally they're still the most effective non-locking machineheads available and they're absolutely right on this guitar. Likewise the vintage-style vibrato; it's not the

most efficient wobbler on the planet – though this one works just fine for fairly wide bends – but you can adjust it flat to the body if you so wish, something that's more of a hassle with a fully floating two-pivot bridge.

The '57 Hot Rod has its most obvious electronics tweak in the form of the railed DiMarzio Tone Zone S humbucker at the bridge. Surely the most common mod to Strats, this kick-in punch and power at the business end – ceramic magnets and 12.39k DC resistance – is what most rockers need. Its partners are a pair of Fender SCN single-coils at the middle and neck positions. These come standard in American Deluxe series Strats, and use an unusual samarium cobalt material for the magnets. They're virtually noiseless too, as we shall hear in due course. Usefully, the furthest tone control is wired to the bridge pickup (unlike vintage-spec Strats) and you of course get the five-way selector for all the standard Stratocaster selections.

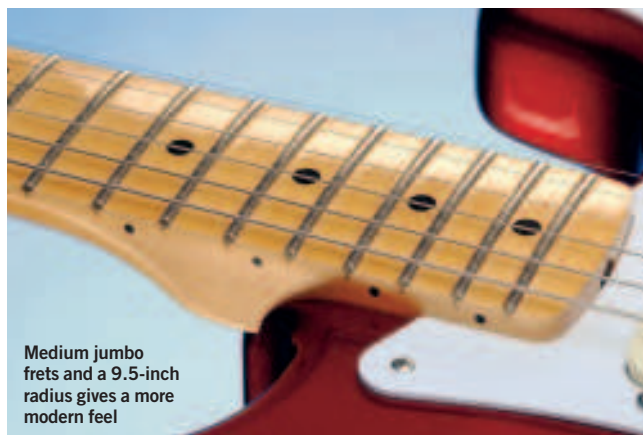
SOUNDS: It's easy to get sucked into the published spec here, but years of playing, modding and eventually ruining all kinds of Strats tells us that a quality, light alder body and a thin nitro-cellulose coat is generally great news for tone. That's certainly the case here, and the difference in depth and overall quality of the tone is immediately obvious when compared with, say, a Standard (Mexican) Strat.

The '57 Hot Rod exudes a good deal of the typical spank and sparkle you only get with a maple-board Strat, but in the bridge position that is

Crucially, the neck's playing surface is radiused to flatter-than-vintage-spec 9.5 inches, making big bends possible with a low action

compromised by the strong mid-range response of the humbucker, meaning that traditional surf-type twang and Hank-isms are best left to the regular American Vintage models. The upshot, of course, is far more meat with overdriven and distorted tones, enabling you to veer into heavy rock territory with no problems at all. The physical size of the pickup makes it sound somewhat different from a full-size 'bucker as well, so you still get some of the upper-end 'hair' you'd associate with a standard single-coil, made less obvious by the powerful mids of the humbucking format. You can also knock the tone control back just a touch to darken it further.

The SCN single-coils are among the most characterful noiseless pickups available in our opinion. They're full of classic Stratocaster bounce and life, yet they have remarkably good resistance to hum: two things that rarely make happy bedfellows. In fact a quick A/B test against the '62 Hot Rod and an American Vintage '62 Strat with Seymour Duncan Antiquities shows just how quiet they are – and indeed how good they sound compared with 'proper' vintage-spec Alnico pickups.



Medium jumbo frets and a 9.5-inch radius gives a more modern feel

Vintage Hot Rod '62 Stratocaster

Despite the ostensibly similar appearance, there's plenty of clear water between the rosewood-board '62 Hot Rod and the '57. Similarities include the alder body and maple neck, tuning machines and bridge, while the most obvious differences are the aforementioned fingerboard and the three-ply, green-tinted pickguard in classic sixties Strat style. While the latter makes no functional difference, the effects of a rosewood board are marked, not least in that many players prefer its 'softer', 'quicker' feel under the fingers compared with cellulose-finished maple. It also benefits from the 9.5-inch radius, medium jumbo frets and rolled edges of the '57, although the action is adjusted a little higher on this particular guitar: very much a matter of taste.

One issue you'll want to be aware of is the weight difference between these →



Above: the Candy Apple red finish will always impress

The rivals

'57 STRAT	
ESP GL-56	£1,550
Suhr Pro Series S2	£1,299
Blade RH4 Classic	£1,225

Launched at NAMM and melding the very hardest of rock with the smoothest of S-type stylings, George Lynch's latest signature model is a pre-distressed mix of ultra-modern feel and tone, with vintage stylings. John Suhr's Pro Series guitars offer a taste of this high-end brand at a relatively affordable price. Conical radius fingerboard, efficient vibrato and a humbucker at the bridge hammers home the old/new vibe. Gary Levinson's greatest creation mixes ultra-modern looks with more tones than you could shake a stick at courtesy of the h/s/s configuration and trademark VSC-3 active preamp.



The DiMarzio Tone Zone delivers a strong mid-range response for some meaty overdrive



FENDER VINTAGE HOT ROD '62 STRATOCASTER

As '57 Strat except...
PRICE: £1,399 (inc case)

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
HARDWARE: Three-ply aged scratchplate
ELECTRICS: Three Fender American Vintage Strat single-coils, middle pickup reverse-wound, reverse polarity

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.17/7
OPTIONS: American Vintage '62 Stratocaster starts at £1,299

LEFT-HANDERS: American Vintage '62 Stratocaster LH (£1,399)
FINISHES: Olympic white (as reviewed), Sherwood green metallic and three-colour sunburst (£1,449)

FENDER VHR '62 STRAT	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** Flatter 'board, bigger frets, less sticky neck; hum-cancelling in-between settings; ace pickups
- **WE DISLIKED** Neck pocket not as perfect as the '57, albeit still fine

→ two guitars; the '57 model is significantly lighter than the '62, suggesting the tolerances for weight are relatively wide for Vintage Hot Rods, so do try before you buy if pounds and ounces are as important to you as pounds and pence: guitars will vary from model to model for sure.

The pickups in this guitar vary only slightly from 'normal' '62 spec in that we have a trio of American Vintage single-coils, but the middle pickup is reverse wound/reverse polarity, meaning that the in-between positions on the five-way selector (two and four) are hum-cancelling: good news for all you Knopfler fans who can't live with the buzz. These Alnico V, staggered magnet pickups also feature Formvar wire and bevelled polepieces, all essential stuff for vintage-aholics. Moving forward a few years, the bridge pickup is then wired to the lower tone control, which is a sensible mod for any Strat as it enables you to smooth out the high-end.

SOUNDS: There's a good deal of hubris – some of which is deserved – when it comes to replacement pickups for guitars. But before you go spending all that cash, just listen to Fender's latest incarnation of its American Vintage single-coils. These are relatively low-power units (Fender claims 5.3k DC resistance) but that's absolutely to their benefit, bringing out shimmering highs and a warm bottom end with that characteristic slight scoop in the middle that's quintessential Strat. You might want to think of it as 'woody', because the pickups are in no way overpowering



The rosewood fretboard adds colour and warmth in the mid-range

The rosewood fingerboard adds colour in the mid-range compared with the maple version, giving the impression of extra warmth

what the body and neck bring to the table. While the bridge pickup in isolation can sound a little spiky played dead clean (also classic Strat), the general feeling is of a full sounding, professional grade guitar that, when played next to a lesser model, makes you realise why you're spending the extra cash.

The rosewood 'board adds colour in the mid-range compared with the maple version, giving the impression of extra warmth, particularly with overdrive, though this is still the more 'vintage' sounding of the two.

The hum-cancelling in-between selections (bridge and middle, middle and neck) can be a Godsend under stage lights and indeed in front of computer screens, assuming you like that kind of 'hollow' Strat tone of course. Rest assured positions two and four on the '62 Hot Rod are as good as you'll hear. All up, if you want to know what a vintage-style rosewood-'board Strat should sound like, listen here.

Verdict

These Vintage Hot Rod Stratocasters are the very antithesis of Fender's revolutionary new VG Stratocaster reviewed on the preceding pages. That's quite a feat given their ostensible similarities, and one that really bears testament to this basic design's timelessness and immense versatility.

Fender itself has gone way beyond the tweaks made here with other Stratocaster variants, however, so you might wonder what appeal these guitars hold to a world that's already moved on? The answer is that the '62 Vintage Hot Rod is without doubt the Strat to buy if you won't compromise on vintage aesthetics and tone, but are crying out for those real-world playability traits. As such we'd recommend it over the regular American Vintage model.

Going further is the maple-necked '57 with its hotter pickups, and as long as you don't need a full-on modern whammy bar, it's a super choice for high-octane classic rock. 🎸

Fender Vintage Hot Rod '57 Strat

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Fender Vintage Hot Rod '62 Strat

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

The rivals

'62 STRAT	
Don Grosh Retro Classic	£2,169
G&L Legacy	£1,140
Fender Classic Player	
60s Strat	£499

With a swamp ash body and three Lindy Fralin Blues Special single-coils, the Grosh marries classic S-type styling with that desirable hand-crafted vibe. An on-board blend pot ups the versatility stakes too. G&L has Leo Fender running straight through it, and the Legacy comes with classic styling, but with modern playability tweaks to the vibrato, and fingerboard. A trio of Alnico V single-coils keeps the tone vintage. The Classic Player '60s Strat is the ultimate choice if a more meagre budget is the driving factor. It's loaded with a trio of Custom '69 single-coils and has a lovely neck: bargain.