

FENDER '57 & 1960 HEAVY RELIC STRATOCASTERS £3,149 & £2,939
ELECTRICS

Beaten-up beauties

Fender's fourth tier of ageing is here. Do we bow down before the Heavy Relic or reach for the touch-up paint? *by Dave Burluck*

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS





Fender '57 & 1960 Heavy Relic Stratocasters

£3,149 & £2,939

What we want to know

- 1 What is a Heavy Relic?**

The term has nothing to do with heavy metal or rock, just the amount of ageing. Currently, it's only available in Fender's 'Limited' series, and is not part of the Time Machine programme. It makes an ordinary Relic look brand new!
- 2 No original Fender Strats came in these colours – shouldn't aged guitars be vintage accurate?**

Correct on the first count, but can't the guys and gals at Fender have a bit of fun? Many more vintage accurate colours are offered and the Seminole red Strat is limited to just 10 pieces for the UK (50 worldwide). How rare is that?
- 3 Who are they for?**

Irrelevant of the love it/loathe it ageing debate, these Strats are for anyone who wants the feel and sound of a vintage piece but with hot rod updates in terms of the fingerboard radius, frets and pickups. The trouble is they might be a 10th of the price of the real vintage piece but they're still hardly cheap.

Now into its 12th year, Fender has more than got the hang of 'relicing' its guitars. Not only do we have the standard Time Machine range with its three levels of ageing – NOS, Closet Classic and Relic – but along with a continuing line of Tribute guitars like the SRV and Rory Gallagher Strats and Jeff Beck and Andy Summers Teles, we now have to grapple with the concept of the Heavy Relic – not so much bashed up as knackered. Indeed, if the whole ageing or relicing concept makes you see red, please turn the page: these Heavy Relics might even be too far for those who like a few nicks and bashes on their brand new guitar.

Currently only offered in the Custom Shop's 'Limited' lines, the Heavy Relic is not (yet) a part of the Time Machine series. In the Limited Release series (limited to the number of orders taken during 2007) we have the '57 (as reviewed) and '62 Stratocaster while as part of the Limited Edition series (a pre-determined set number) comes this 1960 Stratocaster in Seminole red, limited to just 10 pieces in the UK and 50 worldwide.

The concept

If the Relic, according to Fender, "shows natural wear and tear of years of heavy use – nicks, scratches, worn finish, rusty hardware and aged plastic parts", the Heavy Relic, "features the realistic look and feel of a Strat that was played vigorously on a nightly

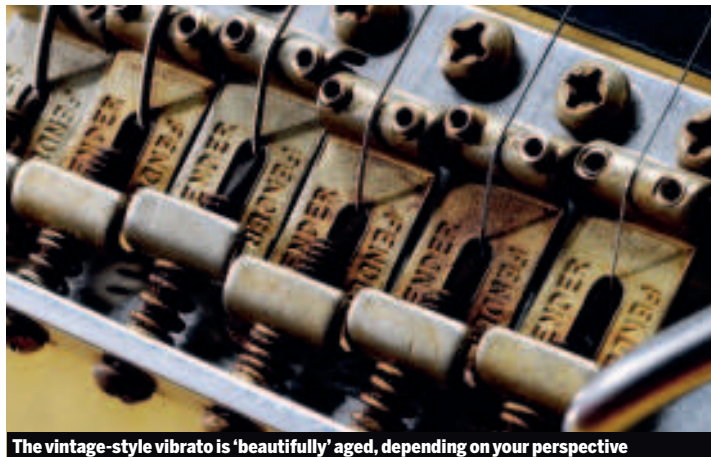
basis, while incorporating some of the most requested modern upgrades." In short the wear is greater – most noticeably there's wear through to the bare wood on the forearm contour and the body back while the neck is worn through to the bare wood in the main playing area. The '57's nitro-cellulose finished fingerboard is worn through to bare wood in numerous places too and we get a cigarette burn on the headstock, although our 1960's 'owner' was a non-smoker. What neck finish there is is perfectly tinted: no Dale Winton tan here, just a wonderfully aged-looking nicotine stain amber.

Cleverly, from the front of the guitar you'd be hard-pushed to tell it wasn't a real middle-aged vintage axe. But flip it over and we have the Custom Shop Limited Edition logo stamped into the headstock; the neck plate again bears the Custom

Shop logo, the serial number, and Limited Edition – the '57 adds 'NAMM 2007', presumably made for this year's trade show.

All the screws are heavily rusted, one tuner button on the 1960 is bent; the tuners themselves feel like they need a damn good clean and the vibrato looks in dire need of some WD40. But whatever you think about this whole concept, these are real players' guitars – even more so than the standard Time Machine Relic that sticks very closely to period-correct features like fretwire and fingerboard radius. These HR's have flatter 9.5-inch radius boards and 'narrow jumbo' wire – Dunlop's 6105 – that doesn't feel massive but has a modern height for easier playability.

Interestingly, neither example is a replica of a guitar that Fender ever made in terms of its colour. The '57 does a cheeky turnaround by using



The vintage-style vibrato is 'beautifully' aged, depending on your perspective



Bare wood breaks through in several places on these Heavy Relic guitars

You'd be hard-pushed to tell it wasn't a real middle-aged vintage axe

a Tele Nocaster's buttery blonde, slightly translucent finish over a light ash body with a black single-ply scratchplate. The 1960's alder body is finished in Seminole red (named, we presume, after the native American Indians originally from Florida). "Seminole Red was a shade of red that Fender 'may' have used to paint very few guitars," explains Fender's Mike Eldred (see boxout). "The only reason that it gets brought up is because of a picture of the inside of a Strat with a piece of tape saying 'Seminole Red' in the Galaxy Of Strats book. It's not in any colour charts... snake oil!" Sensing we may have touched a nerve we move on but whatever its true history (or not!) it's a great colour, a sort of muted postbox red.

Both body finishes are classed as 'thin skin' nitro-cellulose. "It's very much how it was done at Fender in the fifties and the sixties: they would put very little finish on the guitars," explains Eldred. "With the Heavy Relic you've got a guitar you have to paint but then you're gonna be taking a lot of it off! So you

wanna keep it thin, it's easier when you're relicing it and it looks more natural. There's a special sanding sealer, then the basecoat which is white. The basecoat changed through Fender's history, sometimes it was grey sometimes it was white. It helps you to see any imperfections in the sanding before the colour coat is applied, it's also a neutral base colour."

Necks apart

The two necks couldn't be more different. Typically, Fender uses slab-sawn maple for its necks. What we mean is that the grain, when viewed at the end of the headstock, lies parallel with the face of the headstock. The '57, however, uses quarter-sawn – when viewed in the same circumstance the grain would be visible running at right angles to the headstock face. This is the stiffest cut, preferred certainly for mahogany necks by the majority of stringed instrument makers; less so with maple due to its resilience (although PRS, for example, has

The Rivals Six competitors to Fender's Heavy Relics...



Classic Player '50s Stratocaster £499

Mexican-made, Custom Shop-designed update on the £449 Classic Series. 9.5-inch radius 'board and 21 medium jumbo frets, plus a two-pivot vibrato. They're un-aged and have polyester finished bodies. Also a '60s model with a rosewood 'board.



Highway One Stratocaster £599

More of a seventies-style hot-rod, the Highway One Strat was upgraded in 2006 where it got a bigger headstock and 22 jumbo frets (on a flatter 9.5-inch radius rosewood 'board) plus new Alnico pickups. It's a USA-made guitar with a satin nitro-cellulose finish.



American Vintage '57 & '62 Strats both from £1,299

These are USA production vintage replicas: 21 small frets and smaller 7.25-inch fingerboard radius, all maple 'V'-shape neck on the '57 and maple/rosewood 'C'-shape on the '62. Each comes with three-position pickup selector switch.



Even the fingerboard bears the scars of 'decades of hard-gigging'...



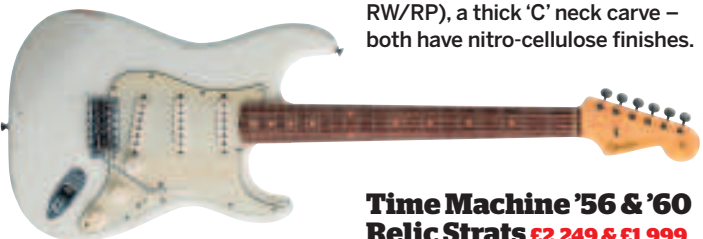
...although the logo on the reverse of the headstock gives the game away

The Rivals continued...



Vintage Hot Rod '57 & '62 Strats £1,399 each

Released in 2007 these Vintage Hot Rods are aptly named. The '57 has an alder body with all maple neck, 21 medium jumbo frets on a 9.5-inch 'board. The '62 goes for a rosewood 'board, three American Vintage single-coils (the middle is RW/RP), a thick 'C' neck carve – both have nitro-cellulose finishes.



Time Machine '56 & '60 Relic Strats £2,249 & £1,999

The Time Machine Relics are the most aged standard models. Again using the 'thin skin' finishes these are vintage accurate. The '56 boasts a "10/56 boat" shape neck and Custom '50s pickups; the '60 has an early '60s neck carve and Custom '60s single-coils.



ESP GL-56 £1,550

The only non-Fender here, this ESP is a replica of a guitar made for George Lynch. It's a Strat-copy with an ESP headstock but nicely relic'd and affordable. It boasts a covered Seymour Duncan Pearly Gates at bridge with two ESP SS-120 single-coils in neck and middle but, comes in sunburst only.

always used quarter-sawn maple for its bolt-on necks). The 1960's neck is advertised as rift-cut or rift-sawn – a new one on us. It places the grain at a diagonal – midway between slab and quarter-sawn. Aside from any structural concerns, the type of cut will affect the visible figuring on the neck. With a slab-cut neck you'll invariably get a flecking or flaming at the sides of the neck – the back will be plain. With a quarter-sawn, like the '57, you can clearly see figuring to the front fingerboard and the back of the neck, the sides look plain. The rift-cut's diagonal grain placement means we get a small strip of figuring along the bass-side edge – the part of the neck you see when you're playing. The rest of the neck appears to be pretty plain.

"Some builders prefer it," reckons Eldred, "because they've seen it on a lot of vintage instruments. My personal feeling is that there was no rhyme or reason in the fifties – they were just pulling blanks of maple out, they got what they got. Whether that's true I don't know but I can't fathom, back then, somebody sitting there saying this'll be good for this and that piece will be good for that. I think now we pay more attention to that than they did back then – they were just trying to get guitars out of the door."

The two necks have different shapes too. The '57 is slightly wider at the nut and deeper at the 12th with a "soft V" shape that feels very much as its name suggests. The 1960 is slightly narrower at the nut and less deep by the 12th with a more rounded 'C'-style profile – it's the one we prefer, big but not massive, but both have a very raw tactile feel that we're sure not everyone will like. Raw wood will

also need looking after. A sweaty gig, or four, will put dirt into the wood and raise the grain. Periodically you'll need to sand or wire-wool the wood and use a wax polish, but after a little while it should burnish up extremely well.

The fretting on both is excellent, that Dunlop wire (approx 2.25mm x 1.3mm high) is a little bigger than the vintage wire on the standard Time Machines but not really big – it plays very nicely. The frets are well polished, the fingerboard edges slightly rolled, the bone nuts perfectly cut. Okay, you should expect perfection at these prices, but you don't always get it.

Fender picks from its increasingly large own-brand pickups to find three 'hot rod' selections, the same on both instruments: a Custom '69 with grey bobbin ("created, dated, and initialed by Abigail Ybarra," Fender's long-time pickup winding 'guru') at neck, Custom Fat '50s in middle (which is reverse wound with reverse magnetic polarity so that the mixed pickup positions are hum-cancelling) and a Texas Special at bridge. And there's no messing with the silly three-way pickup selector, as with the Time Machines. Here it's a standard five-way lever pickup selector and while the '57 has the standard two-tone layout for neck and middle pickup but not the bridge, the 1960 has one tone for neck pickup, the other for middle and bridge.

Sounds

Few would disagree that the Stratocaster probably has the most recognisable hallmark tone of any electric guitar. So when you plug in, irrelevant of your ability, every lick and riff you play you sort of think you've heard before. It's a bit Stevie, a bit Jimi or a bit Eric... the list goes on and on. Yet there's nowhere to

hide with a Strat and Fender certainly isn't catering for pansies here – both are strung with .010s and a tough action. You have to work hard but that's where so much of the character comes from.

The 1960 Strat feels instantly familiar and gig-ready. Surely any guitar at this price should be gig ready, right? Yes, but it's like this one has already been tweaked and teased to just how you wanted it. The back pickup has added kick and power but retains its grit and twang; the middle pickup is a little brash on first listen and is contrasted by one of the most soulful neck pickups we've heard in a long time. Many would buy the guitar just for that sound. It's got edge, but it's not over bright; it's got depth but it's not dark. With the percussion of the middle pickup the two combine for the drop-dead gorgeous tone number two – seriously, do you need more? Well, you've got it with the bridge and middle mix, a great sound but simply overshadowed by the neck and middle, and the back pickup that loves a little (or quite a lot, actually) gain. There's all the old vintage breath here, that almost metal-on-wood attack if you want it. Warning: do not try this guitar if your credit card is anywhere within swiping distance.

The '57 is the specy schoolyard nerd by comparison. Whereas the 1960 just oozes every guitar genre from the fifties to the present day, the '57 reminds us of how it all started, albeit with substantially better playability. But if the 1960 is tough, this one's tougher. The neck feels bigger, less comfortable, and it really makes you fight. There seems to be less power too, enough difference to check your volume is full up and you haven't knocked anything on your amp when you plugged in. It's certainly an edgier sound – less velveteen and closer to its older sibling, the Telecaster. In fact, whether it's the paint job playing tricks, or what we're really hearing, this is very much a Strat for Tele guys. It seems less versatile, less rock, more rootsy in a country twangin' way – more old-style Albert Collins blues, more Jimmy than Stevie – though add in richer chord voicing, add reverb and take down the tempo and it doesn't get much more Riviera Paradise than this. It'd be nice too if this one, the brighter guitar, had the modern tone control wiring for the bridge pickup. Still, it's a dead-easy mod that anyone who is

comfortable with a soldering iron can do in half an hour.

Verdict

There's a lot to consider here but one thing's for sure: these are both effortlessly fine Stratocasters. Both have specific characters, as a good Strat should. The 1960 might be more mainstream and versatile but if you like a little more fifties twang then we strongly suggest the '57 (which is also available in standard Strat colours if you find the Tele-like dress a step too far).

Price? Well, neither is cheap but they are both around a 10th of the price of the real thing – assuming you can find one that hasn't been butchered, re-finished or cynically faked. Both are limited, too, which adds to their collectability (and future value), although it's the 1960 that is more limited yet cheaper – simply due to the '57's expensive figured neck and light ash body.

Finally, there's the Heavy Relic finish. It's going to take a bold player to shell out for something so obviously knackered looking, isn't it? A personal choice, for sure. But the huge 'hidden' benefits of this specification are the 'board radius, frets and 'hot rod' pickups that aren't available as standard on the less broken-looking Relic – a spec we'd wager many would prefer. **G**

The bottom line

Fender Heavy Relic '57 Strat

We like: Fabulous build; modern fretboard; hot rod tones; beat-up vibe

We dislike: Not everyone will enjoy the Tele-like finish... or the extreme ageing

Guitarist says: A 'boutique' collectible that you can happily gig and not worry about getting it ding'd.

Fender Heavy Relic 1960 Strat

We like: All the build and hot rod features of the '57 but with a more versatile sound

We dislike: Again, it'll be too beat-up for some...

Guitarist says: The combination of a very, very good vintage hot rod Strat and a very limited edition means... buy it!



Fender Heavy Relic '57 Stratocaster

PRICE: £3,149 (inc black case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Limited release heavily aged double cutaway solidbody

BODY: Ash

NECK: One-piece maple (quarter sawn) with '57' soft V'-shape, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.2mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple (face of neck), black dots, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius

FRETS: 21, 'narrow jumbo' (Dunlop 6105)

HARDWARE: Vintage-style Fender vibrato bridge, Fender/Gotoh split head tuners – rusty and aged

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm

ELECTRICS: 3 x Fender single-coils: Custom '69 with Grey Bobbin (neck), Custom Fat '50s (middle), Texas Special (bridge), five-way lever pickup selector, master volume, tone 1 (neck pickup), tone 2. (middle pickup)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.4/7.5

RANGE OPTIONS: Other Limited Release Strats include the '60s Closet Classic with competition stripe (£3,139) and the 20th Anniversary Master Built Closet Classic (£3,429)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Nocaster Blonde with black pickguard (as reviewed), white blonde, two-colour sunburst, Olympic white, black, violin burst, Fiesta red, Surf green, Sonic blue, candy tangerine

Fender GBI 01324 331700

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Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Playability ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender Heavy Relic 1960 Stratocaster

PRICE: £2,939 (inc blonde case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Limited release heavily aged double cutaway solidbody

BODY: Alder

NECK: One-piece maple (rift sawn) with medium 'C'-shape, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/41.8mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood (slab), clay dots, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius

FRETS: 21, 'narrow jumbo' (Dunlop 6105)

HARDWARE: Vintage-style Fender vibrato bridge, Fender/Gotoh split head tuners – rusty and aged

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm

ELECTRICS: 3 x Fender single-coils: Custom '69 with grey bobbin (neck), Custom Fat '50s (middle), Texas Special (bridge), five-way lever pickup selector, master volume, tone 1 (neck pickup), tone 2 (middle & bridge pickup)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8

RANGE OPTIONS: The Limited Release '62 Heavy Relic (£3,149) differs with light ash body, '65 'C'-shape quarter-sawn maple neck, round laminate rosewood 'board, '69 Strat pickups, old-style tone network and black case

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Seminole red (as reviewed)



Test results

Build quality ★★★★★
Playability ★★★★★
Sound ★★★★★
Value for money ★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

Heavy Dude

Fender's Mike Eldred explains the history and vibe behind the Heavy Relics... *by Dave Burrluck*

Celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, Fender's Custom Shop has grown from very small beginnings making one-off guitars to a fair-sized guitar company within a massive guitar company. It still produces the one-off specials (the Master Built guitars) but the majority of Custom Shop guitars are the Team Build models, the Custom Shop's 'production' models if you like, and part of that are the Limited Release and Limited Edition guitars we have on review. But it's the Time Machine series that are "a big chunk of our output, a major percentage," says Custom Shop veteran Mike Eldred who now heads up the Custom Division for all of Fender's brands. "Very few people come to the Custom Shop asking for the most modern looking guitar with the modern aesthetic and pickups and stuff. That's not the bulk of our business. We do do that cutting-edge stuff and we push the envelop with the Pro Series and stuff like that but the Time Machine series is the number one thing that people come to the Fender Custom Shop for. If you look at the heritage and legacy of Fender, it's old vintage instruments and people want that whole look, feel and sound. We're

making more Time Machines than we've ever made – it's more popular than it's ever been.

"In the old days," says Eldred, referring to the start of the aged guitars back in the mid-nineties, "we'd just do the Relic and we'd have people coming to us and saying I don't want it so beat up and others saying they want it really beat up. So that's how we settled on doing the same guitar but in the three finishes – the NOS, Closet Classic and Relic. Then we'd get maybe a couple of dealers asking if they could get some guitars that were really beat up. We actually went to a couple of vintage shops up in LA and took pictures of what they'd consider to be really bad condition guitars. On the vintage market a guitar like that would be worth less than a more pristine instrument. So we got to look at quite a few. So we did what we now call the Heavy Relics for a couple of dealers first.

"Then artists came to us... listen, man, I just want it really torn apart, so we did it for them. It really was, Hey, I really want a beat-up old Strat. That's almost an iconic term in itself: 'a beat-up old Strat.' Then it became a small run of Heavy Relics. Right now we're doing a whole lot of

"Then artists came to us... Listen, man, I just want it really torn apart, so we did it for them"



Mike Eldred: as head of the Custom Shop he has seen demand for Relics soar



Relic'd signatures: Jeff Beck's Esquire (top) and the Rory Gallagher Stratocaster



things like a custom colour thing: like a beat-up old Strat that looks like it's been refinished a few times. We were doing them [Heavy Relics] back in 1998/99 to be honest, just one-offs I guess. On the scale we're doing now, it's probably been for the past couple of years.

"I think at some point we might do the Heavy Relics as a limited run in the price list, in a couple of colours, so we can offer it on a larger scale but, as you can imagine, compared to even a Relic, it's a lot more time consuming to produce."

Both of our Heavy Relics have a hot rod vibe as opposed to the standard Relic that comes with the original 7.25-inch fingerboard radius and small frets. "What we found is that a lot of the people asking for the Heavy Relics in the beginning were also asking for the modern 9.5-inch radius and also bigger frets. So what we're trying to do is head that off – that's what the majority of people want. See it's easier for us to produce in batches, not one-offs, it's much easier to run them. See, if I'm gonna run a neck and change to a 9.5-inch radius I have to take a shaper machine apart that has a 7.25-inch cutter on it. I have to put the 9.5-inch cutter on, line up the machine again and run

my neck. Then I stop and do the reverse so the next guy that comes up to run the next 10 or so 7.25-inch necks is okay and can do it right. Obviously, it's more efficient to say I'm gonna run 9.5-inch necks on, say, Tuesday. Every thing comes down to time and money and if it's more efficient we can charge less for the guitar. The Limited Release, like you have there, if you called up to order one of those as a one-off it'd be borderline Master Built and it starts costing a lot more money. If we make 'em in a batch system we can keep the costs down."

Even the pickups reflect a real-world choice. "Yeah, it's a natural evolution of a beat-up old Strat," laughs Mike. "I replaced the back pickup because I wanted it hotter, and the neck pickup because I wanted this sound and maybe you left the middle pickup alone. Hey, I modified the wiring too. It's like Stevie Ray Vaughan's number one Strat, that's been re-fretted so many times the radius was ridiculously flat!"