

FENDER ARTIST SERIES BILLY CORGAN STRATOCASTER £839  
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE CAUDERY



## Fender Artist Series Billy Corgan Stratocaster £839

Another new Artist Series Stratocaster, but will this one be a smashing success or play like a pumpkin? *by Dave Durban*

If you didn't know, Billy Corgan is the frontman and guitar player of one of the biggest alternative American rock bands of the nineties, The Smashing Pumpkins. The Pumpkins first achieved major mainstream success with 1993's *Siamese Dream* and it's no coincidence that this album was when Corgan really started to home in on his sound. Songs like *Cherub Rock* used an array of gear, such as a modded Marshall JCM800, a plethora of Big Muff pedals, a rare original Fender Blender pedal and a seventies Strat loaded with Lace Sensor pickups (bought from Pumpkins drummer Jimmy Chamberlain in 1989). This new guitar is a long-awaited replacement for that "1973-ish-era" Strat to which Corgan was so attached. It was stolen from a gig in 1991 and ever since he's struggled to find a guitar he feels truly comfortable using every day.

Fender's new interpretation seems a mixed bag of old looks, modern finishes and modern high-output electronics. On first inspection the overall fit and finish of the guitar is excellent – like the John Mayer guitar on p48, Fender is doing a fab job with its Artist Series instruments of late. The guitar borrows heavily from the well-regarded, USA-made Highway One series, with the same thinly applied satin nitrocellulose finish. This not only

has a nice haze, giving the blonde finish a pearl-like effect, it also feels great and smells fantastic, honestly! It also follows the Highway One with the same seventies headstock complete with large Fender and bold Stratocaster logos. The contrasting black-faced scratchplate is a well executed and distinctive look, although the white plastic knobs and pickup covers may divide opinion.

Electronically we're dealing with familiar Fender principles: three pickups – albeit single-coil-sized humbuckers – a five-way selector switch, a volume and two tones. One of these tone pots

affects the bridge pickup, and the other controls the neck.

DiMarzio came up with this pickup combination after much testing. "I've been very satisfied with the low noise floor of the DiMarzio pickups. The high-gain application and the versatility," Corgan explains. The bridge and neck 'buckers are wound to Billy's specification, while the centre unit is a standard Chopper model.

The maple neck is slick and smooth-feeling, which you don't always get with this kind of guitar. And to cap it off, the jumbo frets are a great addition for playability and serve to make this guitar almost effortless to play.

### Sounds

Partly due to its thin finish and string-through, hard-tail bridge, the Billy Corgan Stratocaster provides masses of high-end zing and crispiness when not plugged in. The alder body also serves to provide a well-rounded low-end so there's certainly little danger of this sounding too bright. Loaded with the three DiMarzio

### The Rivals

A good alternative is the new 2008 **American Standard Stratocaster** (£879) although you don't get satin nitro finishing or the DiMarzio pickups. **Blade's California Climax** (£649) is also a hard-tail, offers a Fender-y feel and loads of tonal options using its special VSC active tone circuit. Leo's other company, G&L, makes the **Comanche Standard** (£1,405) a well made guitar that takes the USA Standard on at its own game.



The DiMarzio single-coil sized humbuckers are wound to Corgan's exacting specifications



The oversized seventies headstock sports cast sealed tuners and the Corgan signature

What is surprising is that the guitar's famous character is retained overall.

humbuckers this was never going to be your typical vintage Strat sound, and this becomes evident upon striking the first chord. Through a clean Marshall amp and switching to the first-position, the bridge pickup gives you a real sensation of push. This means that chords and individual notes fall from the guitar with consummate ease, while big, glassy rhythm tones really soar when you let loose. But as with its acoustic tone, the guitar has plenty of low-end resonance to mellow out the brightness.

What is quite surprising is that the guitar's famous character is retained overall. You know instinctively that this is a Strat you're playing, a hot-rodged one, maybe, but definitely a characterful instrument.

Utilizing the tone control on the bridge-pickup works well for bringing the whole thing down, making it less edgy-sounding. This means that recreating some of the more mellow clean parts from famous Smashing Pumpkins songs is no problem. For instance, when we tried playing 1979, it sounded dead-on with the tone rolled down to around seven.

With some heavier gain, the bridge pickup starts to reveal an interesting versatility, producing a mid-gain grunge to indie-rock tone. Here it delivers clarity and punch exceptionally well while always sounding edgy. It's almost like you can't trust it not to fully rock-out, which we hasten to add is massively rewarding. Push the preamp gain up to max and smooth out the mids and this guitar could be on stage with the likes of Iron Maiden. Easily producing piercing lead tones and rumbling high-gain rhythms.

Subtracting a little gain and switching to the second or third positions activates DiMarzio's Chopper pickup, which on the whole is voiced slightly differently to the Billy Corgan customs. It has

more snap and is much more direct from a 'feel' point of view, great for funky rhythms and biting lead playing. With lots of fuzzy distortion it's also great for grunge chugging.

Finally the neck position; normally an old-school Strat tone would be right on the money, but this can in some circumstances be restrictive. The power, clarity and honky-ness that the neck DiMarzio delivers is highly enjoyable and you can adapt the sound to almost any style of music. Stevie Ray Vaughan, classic David Gilmour and Hendrix can all be found with a bit of experimentation, along with its staple diet of American grunge-rock and indie rhythms that make up a large part of the Smashing Pumpkins' sound.

### Verdict

A very good guitar! The finish is great and the playability excellent. It feels well balanced and can cover such a wide range of musical styles that it had this reviewer wondering what it could pull off next. An American Standard Stratocaster comes in at £879, but this is slightly under that price, which frankly is great value for money, even taking into consideration that it doesn't have a vibrato. For anyone looking for a 'higher-gain' Strat this is one of the best sub-£1,000 modern-style Stratocasters that we've played. **G**

### The bottom line

**We like:** The finish, playability, lightweight body and of course the price. Oh, did we mention it comes with a vintage Fender tweed case? Nice

**We dislike:** Lack of vibrato may not suit everyone

**Guitarist says:** Distinct looks combine with great tone to offer a seriously versatile package for this price.



There's no vibrato here, so you have ferrules on the back for through-body stringing



### Fender Artist Series Billy Corgan Stratocaster

**PRICE:** £839.99 (inc case)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Offset double-cutaway, solid-body electric

**BODY:** Alder

**NECK:** Maple, modern 'C' shape, satin polyurethane finish

**SCALE LENGTH:** 648 mm (25.5-inch)

**NUT/WIDTH:** White synthetic/43mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Maple, black plastic dot inlays, 241mm 9.5-inch radius

**FRETS:** 22, jumbo

**HARDWARE:** Through-body hard-tail bridge with stainless steel saddles, Fender-logoed standard cast/sealed tuners – all chrome-plated

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 55mm

**ELECTRICS:** Special design DiMarzio Billy Corgan single-coil sized humbuckers (bridge and neck) and Chopper (middle), five-position pickup selector, master volume, tone one (neck pickup), tone two (bridge pickup)

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The Robert Cray Strat (£2,200.99) is the only other hard-tail in the Artist range but vibrato equipped models include the Eric Clapton (£1,299.99), Eric Johnson (£1,589.99), Jeff Beck (£1,299.99) and SRV (£1,299.99)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.34/7.6

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISHES:** Olympic White and Flat Black

**Fender GBI 01342 331700**

[www.fender.com](http://www.fender.com)

### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★