

FENDER ROAD WORN '50S PRECISION & '60S JAZZ BASSES

BASS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVE CAUDERY



Fender Road Worn '50s Precision & '60s Jazz Basses £1,049 & £1,119

Battle-scarred they might appear, but these basses are straight off the production line *by Roger Newell*

The care and attention paid to the recently reviewed Road Worn guitars from Fender was mightily impressive, and left bassists keen to see how Precision and Jazz versions might turn out. Our wait is over.

The Road Worn series basses are not presented as faithful reproductions of classic models, more a combination of some of the favoured elements that were around during their specified production eras. Just four models are available: two Precisions and two Jazz basses in two colours apiece. Nitro-cellulose 'lacquer' is used on both bodies and necks, but it's interesting that Fender has chosen a fairly matt body finish – most of the genuinely old and bruised basses that we've seen (and owned) still retain a gloss to the remaining finish. Mind you, as our reviews editor Dave Burrluck has shown with his long term test of the '60s Road Worn Strat, this finish will burnish up to a soft gloss. That aside, these are cleverly aged and even with close scrutiny the effect is very convincing.

Fender has accentuated the differences between these two classics, beyond the body shape and pickup configuration. The Precision features an anodised

scratchplate, a one-piece maple neck and a two-tone sunburst finish. The Jazz has a three-ply tortoiseshell plate, rosewood fingerboard and a Fiesta red finish. There's also a three-colour sunburst option for the Jazz and Fiesta red as the solid colour option for the P-bass.

What's most noticeable when swapping between these lovely instruments (apart from the difference in sound) is the neck size. The Jazz has always been slimmer than the Precision, of

course, but the nut width differences here are substantial with a variation of over 6mm.

'50s Precision

The Precision was originally built for accurate intonation,

good balance, great sound delivery and the ability to withstand the punishment of touring. That's still true today and you can now own a bass that looks and feels like it was built half a century ago. Our two-tone sunburst review model is a particularly elegant beast, and it's ready to take whatever you throw at it. With the one-piece maple neck and skunk stripe, reverse-action tuners and aged parts it smells of the fifties' models. It feels comfortable, but even hardened players will notice the amount of wood in the neck. The mass is good for sustain, of course.

Sounds

While Road Worn is primarily about the look and feel, Fender

There's nothing subtle about the circuitry, of course, but for sheer power and full-on delivery it's hard to beat a Precision

The Rivals

Precision

For the same but without the wear, try **Fender's Classic '50s Precision** (£640) with a gloss polyurethane finish and black as a third colour option.

Lakland's Skyline Duck Dunn (£949) amalgamates a P- and J-style, with bound neck and pearl block inlays, a Fralin split-coil humbucker, ash body and a candy apple red finish to both body and headstock face. **Sandberg's California PM4 Relic** (£1,099) is aged, with a Delano split single-coil pickup and an extra tone control.



The vintage-style reverse-action tuners are aged to complement the relic'd body



The Jazz has a much wider tonal spread than its older sibling, just by using one pickup, or the other, or both full-on together. But there's a lot more to discover

has definitely not skimped on the electronics for these guitars either – the Precision is well-equipped with quality components. There's nothing subtle about the circuitry, of course, but for sheer power and full-on delivery it's hard to beat a P-bass. The split-coil pickup is the heart of the sound, and being made in two halves it gives you the ability to finely adjust the proximity of the dual polepieces to each string for both even string output and maximum performance.

Circuit-wise it couldn't be much simpler, with just volume and tone controls. But it's precisely this that allows the full potential of the pickup to be unleashed without inhibition. The tone control offers just enough variation to add warmth or note clarity, but it totally lacks any extremes at either end so the sound can never become booming or brittle. The fact that it's a passive circuit means there's also a degree of interaction between the controls, so fussier players will be able to delicately adjust the volume to squeeze a little more tonal variety out of it. But basically this is as pure as you can get and offers as full-on a delivery as any passive bass in the market. It's loud, it's proud and has the benefit of a superb woody quality. No wonder the Precision is the benchmark bass from which all others are measured – this is a particularly

fine example of just how good that sound can be.

'60s Jazz

With its attractive offset body and sleeker neck, the Jazz Bass obviously evolved from the Precision, but if Leo Fender ever thought it would make the Precision obsolete he was very much mistaken. Although the scale length is the same, the body shape and resulting keener balance makes this a very different player. There's also a sense of sophistication about the Jazz, even unplugged, giving it a different stylistic and sonic intent. We think our Fiesta red example is very cool, but we feel the three-tone 'burst will be the more popular choice.

The Rivals

Jazz Bass

Again, **Fender's** non-aged version of this is the **Classic '60s Jazz Bass** (£720). A modern day take on the Jazz is the **Lakland Darryl Jones Signature** (£1,075), with a choice of rosewood or maple fingerboard, block inlays and an extra fret. Options include active circuitry and a Hipshot D-Tuner. **Sandberg** does the J-style too with the **California JM4 Relic** (£1,149) featuring aged three-tone sunburst. Rather good.

What did come as a surprise to us is that as much as we truly love the Precision, when playing these two particular examples back to back, it's this Jazz that wins in terms of overall feel. From the very moment you pick it up it just feels 'right'. It becomes part of you and, call us deluded if you like, but in this Road Worn presentation it already feels like an old friend.

Sounds

It may lack the overall brute force and thumping delivery of

the P-bass but it scores a winner with its tonal sensitivity and finesse. Leo Fender was smart enough to realise that producing a bass with a pair of P-bass split-coils would not produce the subtlety that a pair of single-coils can. The sheer area effected by a split-coil's magnetic field means it's impossible to truly focus the sound. So in order to maximise the sounds available at the two different pickup positions, simpler single-coil pickups were the obvious – and very successful – choice.



The Jazz's two single-coils offer an impressive level of tonal versatility



The dings and scratches are very convincing, even up close

So, there can be no denying that the Jazz has a much wider tonal spread than its older sibling just by using one pickup, or the other, or both full-on together. But there's a lot more to discover here than just these settings. Slowly rotate first one volume then the other and, as the pickups intermix, you'll discover a series of settings where the sound seems to fold, something like you get with an envelope filter. These are the glorious 'sweet spots' where the sound hollows out and gets funky in distinct contrast to the sound of the Precision. These tonal acrobatics are what attracts players to the Jazz, and once bitten nothing else will do.

Verdict

Both of these fine basses look as if they have a lifetime of stories to tell. They don't – we were the first to play them. And whether it's worth paying nearly twice as much to get a beaten-up-looking nitro-finished instrument, rather than a brand spanking new one, is open to debate. All we can say is despite their infancy the illusion is dramatic and effective – both feel like old trusty partners

after just hours of playing. However, it's a pity that once again Fender doesn't provide the cover plates or thumb-rests that were included with the original designs, even though the screw holes are all here!

But one thing remains certain and that is no matter how good these Road Worn basses are they still won't settle the age-old 'Precision versus Jazz – which is best?' argument. Individual beauty is definitely in the eye of the beholder, but whichever one you choose, both instruments surely represent the ultimate in attainable shabby chic. **G**

The Bottom Line

We liked: The look, feel and sounds of two old friends!

We dislike: Not every one will be prepared to pay extra for the ageing

Guitarist says: If you lust after a well-used vintage Precision or Jazz bass but simply can't afford it, the Road Worns are the answer. And trust us, they sound just as good as they look



Guitarist
CHOICE

Fender Road Worn '50s Precision Bass

PRICE: £1,049.99 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Twin-cutaway, passive four-string with aged appearance
BODY: Alder
NECK: One-piece maple, 'C'-profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 864mm (34-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/44.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple with black dot inlays
FRETS: 20, small vintage-style
HARDWARE: Aged vintage-style reverse tuners; American vintage-style raised-tail bridge
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 20mm average (centres)
ELECTRICS: Passive split-coil pickup; volume and tone controls on gold anodised aluminium pickguard
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.75/8.3
OPTIONS: Finish only
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Nitro-cellulose two-tone sunburst (as reviewed) and Fiesta red (£1,019.99)
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.fender.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Guitarist
CHOICE

Fender Road Worn '60s Jazz Bass

PRICE: £1,119.99 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Twin-cutaway, passive four-string with aged appearance
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, 'C'-profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 864mm (34-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/38mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, unbound with dot inlays
FRETS: 20, small vintage-style
HARDWARE: Aged vintage-style reverse tuners; American vintage-style raised-tail bridge
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 20mm average (centres)
ELECTRICS: Two Vintage Alnico magnet single-coil pickups; individual volumes and master tone control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.5/7.7
OPTIONS: Finish only
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Nitro-cellulose Fiesta red (as reviewed) and three-tone sunburst (£1,139.99)

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



In the making

How Fender's Precision and Jazz basses evolved...

From being the first viable electric bass guitar, to becoming one of the most popular basses of all time, Fender's Precision has been through a number of changes in its lifetime. However, in spite of major breakthroughs in electronics, materials and ergonomics, the basic concept and sound was so right that today we actually shy away from any major modifications.

Fender has tried quite a few – including the Elite II Precision, the Precision Special, the US Plus, the US Plus Deluxe and the American Hot Rodded – all featuring various pickup configurations and electronic tweaks. But essentially it's the second version – introduced in 1957 – that's become the true classic. This was the point that the Precision gained a contoured body and new

headstock shape (mimicking the Stratocaster guitar) and, most importantly, the brilliant split-coil pickup. With added adjustability and eight pole pieces, this unit allowed maximum sensitivity to string vibration and more consistent output balance from each string. Aesthetically the cover plates adopted a more curvaceous look than the ones on the slab-body original, so now the only thing that could be considered missing was a second pickup.

Introduced in 1960 as the 'two-pickup Precision', the Jazz bass was well researched and, as a result, has been subjected to much less design fiddling during its long career. Coincidentally, it's the second version again that's become the industry standard model. In 1962 the notoriously unreliable

and noisy dual-concentric volume/tone controls were replaced by individual volume controls for each pickup, with a shared tone control.

With its relatively narrow fretboard and the discovery of

the famous 'sweet spot' blending of the pickups, the Jazz became the instrument of choice for many a hardened player. Its offset body shape was an amalgamation of the Jazzmaster and Stratocaster guitars and gave this bass a sleeker and more modern look. Although the bridge cover plate was huge (and sported a stamped F in the surface) the mid-plate was much slimmer than on the Precision for a well-proportioned pairing. **G**

What's the fuss?

To aurally contrast the classic, individual voices of the Precision and Jazz basses, check out these classic examples...

PRECISION BASS The Beach Boys Pet Sounds (1966)

Bassists: Carol Kaye (majority) & Ray Pohlman

For pure fat bass tone without being played hard or overdriven, this classic album reveals the full benefit of that magic split-coil pickup. They're always warm, but the distinct notation provided by the fantastic bass lines written by Brian Wilson allows Carol and Ray to wander all over the fretboard.

JAZZ BASS Jaco Pastorius (1976)

Regarded as the ultimate Jazz bass player. Although Jaco is best remembered for playing a fretless, this debut solo album beautifully reveals the 'sweet spot' sounds of the instrument. There's less use of effects than on the Weather Report albums, so his amazing technique is laid bare to reveal a tightness of tonal delivery, really accentuating each note, making the Jazz ideally suited for what's become a landmark album.

The Jazz bass was well researched and, as a result, has been subjected to much less design fiddling