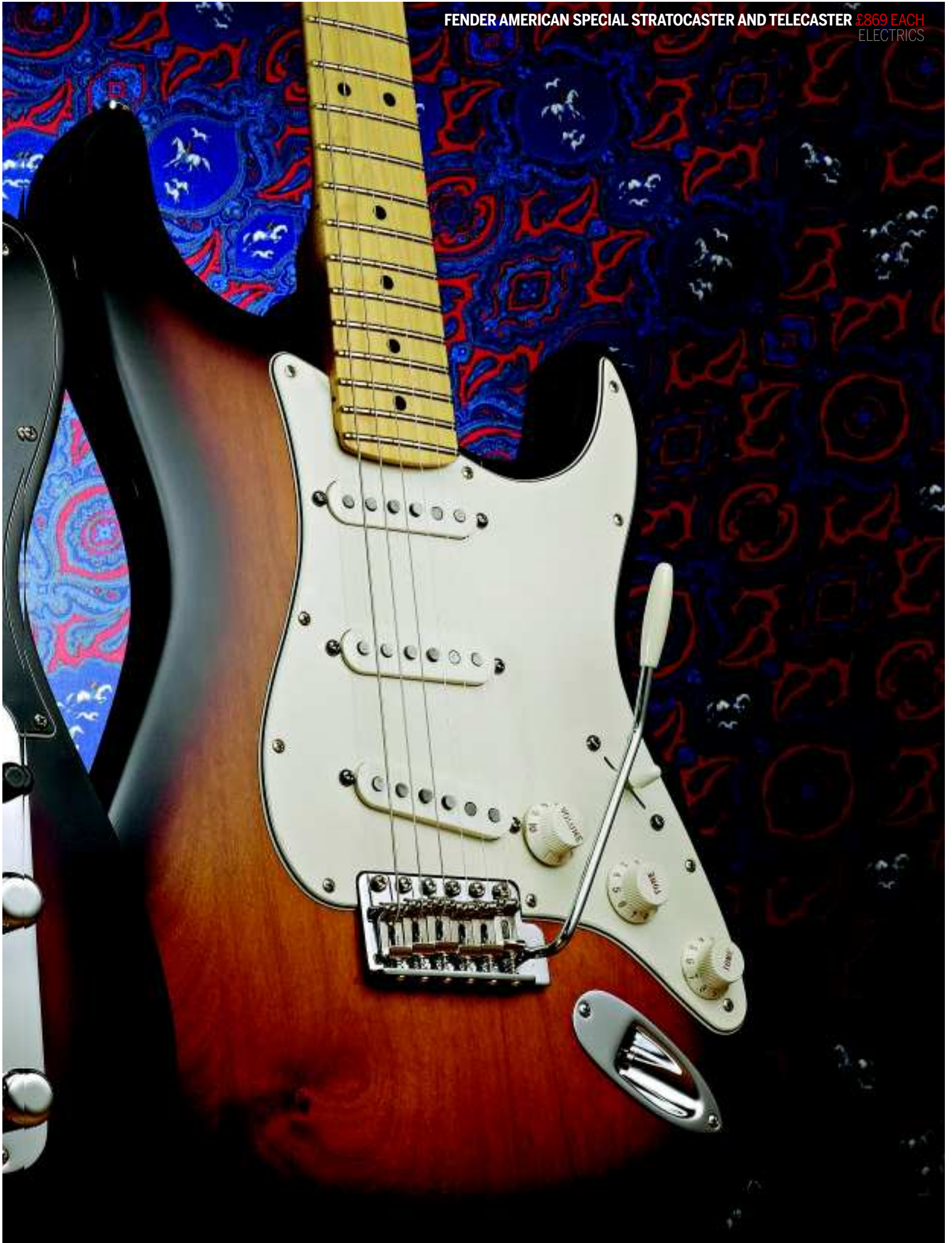


FENDER AMERICAN SPECIAL STRATOCASTER AND TELECASTER £869 EACH  
ELECTRICS

# Special delivery

Continuing a commitment to offer its classic models for all budgets, Fender releases the 'Highway One meets American Standard' Stratocaster and Telecaster - the American Special series **by Neville Marten**

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# Fender American Special Stratocaster & Telecaster

£869 each

## What we want to know

- 1 How many more Strat and Tele models can Fender come up with?**

When you have the most successful electric guitar designs of all time in your catalogue, it makes sense to offer them in as many guises as possible, so that every player has the chance to own one.
- 2 And what's so Special about them?**

The American Specials are the lowest priced gloss-finished American-made Fenders, sitting above the Highway One series and below American Standard. You get all the classic Strat appointments, plus Texas Special pickups, bigger frets and a 9.5-inch radius fretboard.
- 3 Who's gonna play 'em?**

Any of us who demand a pro-level instrument, but who also need it to come in well under a grand. These guitars will suit anybody who simply wants to get on with the job with a purposeful, US-made instrument.

Fender's own take on this new line-up is that they are "value-conscious guitars for the times... designed specifically to bring the full Fender experience of a terrific-sounding, smooth-playing, rock-solid-built US-made guitar to the working man, without emptying his bank account." Well, if anyone can fulfil that promise, it's Fender.

The American Specials' colour range is very limited albeit tasteful, with the Tele available only in three-tone sunburst and Olympic white, and the Strat coming in two-tone burst and Candy Apple red. Our guitars are both sunburst and feature the thin polyurethane finish that, unlike the matt look of the Highway One models, emanates a classy and upmarket vibe. In fact at first it's not easy to see where – and indeed if – any corners may have been cut.

### American Special Stratocaster

Billing guitars as 'cost conscious' isn't always the best way to engender excitement in a player's mind. Yet opening the padded gigbag and dragging the spoils from their slumbers, you're hit with a far more auspicious prospect; something potentially matter-of-fact

becomes something altogether more enjoyable.

The American Special Strat is light in weight; the finish looks flawless and rich, while the body contours are vintage correct and lusciously curvy. A quick scan over the whole guitar reveals the type of build quality, fit and finish that has put Fender back in front of late. Everything says 'precision' – from the unfeasibly close neck-to-body joint and perfectly adjusted action, right down to the way each pickguard screw sits identically flush in its hole (as it should, of course).

Urethane finishes are easier to apply and a lot less labour intensive to complete than the nitro-cellulose of higher end instruments, which requires more coats, more sanding between applications and is generally trickier overall. But this medium gives just the right level of lustre and can be sprayed thinly enough so as not to stifle the wood, as gloopy coatings of seventies-style polyester were said to do. This and the Strat's inherent sensuality make playing or even just holding the guitar a most tactile experience.

Our Strat's body is a three-piece affair, but Fender's done a good job of matching these 'sets' so that the join doesn't scream at you from several feet

away. And remember, most original sixties Fenders were made this way – and few complained about it then.

The Special Strat comes with a satin-finished, all-maple neck and late sixties-style large headstock. Adjustment for the two-way Bi-Flex truss rod is from the headstock end, which is much easier than the vintage-style body end location. The headstock face might have looked a little more special had it been buffed to a gloss, but that's a minor detail and a matter for personal taste.

One gets the feeling that Fender has a room full of the screwless Schaller-style tuners and Free-Flyte string trees that have appeared on various models since the mid-eighties, and every so often it brings out a new model just to get rid of a few more. That's a fatuous remark, of course, but we wonder why use these and not the more traditional 'butterfly' string tree and 'F' stamped Kluson-type tuners that would be more appropriate to this headstock style? Again, it's a minor point that's more to do with dyed-in-the-wool preconceptions than anything else – indeed both work exceptionally well, so perhaps we should just get over it! The bridge is Fender's 56-year-old vibrato design, which still looks great, is practical and stable and, well, a Strat really doesn't look right without one.

Chrome hardware and a three-ply white plastic scratchplate with matching knobs and switches look great against the glossy sunburst body. In fact, this is in direct contrast to last year's similarly priced Road Worn – have we



become bored so quickly with faded green, rusty nickel and distressing? Round the back the vibrato cavity cover is the easy-access type, with one large slit instead of six oblong holes.

Fender has provided the Special Strat with a wonderful neck. Shaped into a slinky shallow 'C'-section, with lightly rolled edges to the integral maple 'board, it boasts 22 jumbo frets and the eminently bendable 9.5-inch radius that's found on Custom Shop models costing several times more.

It's an addictive playing experience, as the silky smooth satin finish glides through your hand while the strings seem to give way to the lightest touch, bending to their target notes with ease and inviting the tasty 'squeezed' vibrato at which big frets excel. The action is set low enough for speed, but with enough clearance to keep rattle to a minimum. All who played it – and everyone wanted a go – exclaimed that this was an exceptional piece of work on Fender's part and that they would all happily gig it straight out of the bag.

### Sounds

Over the years Fender's Texas Special pickups have received mixed reaction from Guitarist's team of reviewers. Some love their spanky, high treble content, while others have found them rather harsh and unsophisticated. Indeed, this reviewer has seldom warmed to a guitar that carried them.

Well, how about this for a turn up for the books? Through a Carvin Vintage 16 amp – and matched against a Masterbuilt Custom Shop monster of a guitar – the American Special

is a pure delight. Whether the three-piece body and urethane finish is somehow tempering the pickups' inherent brashness we don't know, but each of the five-way selector's settings proves magnificent.

We at Guitarist feel that every Strat made should have a tone control on the bridge pickup – and thankfully this one does. Just knocking it back to around six on the pot transforms an otherwise potentially ear-slicing machine into something of sonic beauty. Indeed, turn it down to three or four, pile on the amp drive and SG/335 impressions abound (this is the Greasebucket tone circuit, named by Billy Gibbons, that reduces treble without adding mush). Turn it back up to full for chorused and delayed chords and the sheer versatility

The [Special Strat] is so willing and versatile that it would be at home in even the most professional situation



The three-piece body is a handsome beast and is matched well

### The rivals

#### Stratocaster

The **Blade Texas Standard Pro** (£459) offers a twist on the Strat theme with an American alder body, a trio of VS-1 single-coils and VSC-3 bass, treble and mid boost. A clever string tree design and easy truss rod access make it a good working package. At a similar price comes **Fender's Mexican-made Road Worn '50s Strat** (£889) with heavy ageing and Alnico Tex Mex pickups. On a tighter budget **Vintage's AV6S** (£386) is a well-appointed Strat-alike with alder body and quality Wilkinson hardware, bone or graphite nut and great single-coil pickups.

## The rivals

### Telecaster

**Fret-King's Country Squire Super T** (£649) adds its own twist with original-style pickguard, Wilkinson WT3 bridge and a body that's contoured for comfort.

**Fender's Road Worn '50s Telecaster** (£859) comes with aged neck, body and hardware. A cool-as-you-like vibe, it's a real hit. More sophisticated is **Blade's Sen ash-bodied T2-RG Delta Classic** (£699) with Variable Spectrum Control for broad tonality, gold hardware and smart finish colours.



Texas Specials are the choice of pickup in both American Special guitars

The bridge pickup is as bright as you'd expect when played clean, but as with all good Teles seems to darken as the gain increases

of this one little pickup will amaze you.

Flip across to the neck and it's instant Gilmour: dynamic and springy when clean, but languid and flutey with more gain added. There's a lovely top-end here, too, that would make Nile Rodgers impersonations sound very convincing indeed. The middle pickup has no tone control, so it's wide open all the time for funky riffs, pseudo Tele (think Stairway) tone and hot country twang. Positions two and four seem more defined than ever; each speaking with its own particular 'vowel' sound and both loving it either clean or messed up with a quality distortion pedal in the chain.

We love it when preconceptions are busted and in this case they've been blown wide open. This guitar is so willing and versatile that it would be at home in even the most professional situation. What's more it plays like a dream and literally stunned us with its musicality.

### American Special Telecaster

Take a straw poll around the Guitarist office about which classic electric guitar each

player really likes best and it might surprise you to learn how many cast their vote in favour of Fender's original and most basic design. Leo Fender really did get it right first time; so much so that the humble Tele has probably had more versions built around it than any other guitar alive. So what, if anything, is so 'special' about this Special?

Build-wise the American Special Tele apes its younger sister in all the essentials. So again it's made from three-piece alder, perfectly coated in three-tone sunburst urethane and with an attractive light maple neck that's been treated with a slinky satin finish. The same set of 22 jumbo frets sit on a 9.5-inch radius 'board and tuners are the identical Schaller type as before, but this time – due to the smaller headstock – only a single string tree is used.

A tad weightier than the Strat – possibly due to that guitar's radiused edges, belly scoop and forearm contour – our Tele is certainly not an unwieldy beast. It's put together with similar attention to detail in that it's impossible (discounting the three-piece body, which might bother some) to find a flaw in either construction or finish.

Apart from their now classic shapes, the obvious difference between the two guitars is the Tele's lack of vibrato – not surprisingly, we find a traditional bridge with three brass saddles instead – and the use of a twin-pickup layout. Again Texas Specials are the choice, the rear coil retaining the black 'open' bobbin look and the neck single-coil with a shiny chrome cover for a look that's marked out this model for an astonishing 60 years. What's slightly different to many Teles is that our neck pickup has two

adjustment screws that allow you set its height with much less fuss than on Teles of yore; and Fender has also chosen a black laminated scratchplate that goes rather well against the body's three-tone glow.

The Special adopts the now standard 'post-1967' control configuration of single master volume and tone pots governed by a three-way lever switch. It also features Fender's Greasebucket tone circuit. Everything about the guitar smacks of function over form; indeed it could well adopt Rory



### American Special HSS Stratocaster £839.99 (black), £869.99 (sunburst)

The third guitar in the American Special range

Like the two guitars reviewed, this model offers only two colours: three-tone sunburst and black. But unlike the maple 'board only designation of the Strat and Tele, this 'hot-rod' Strat is available in just rosewood form. With two Texas Special single-coils in the neck and middle positions and Fender's slightly hotter Atomic humbucker at the bridge, it's a great all-rounder for perhaps rockier blues players or the hardworking rock/pop covers band player who wants all bases covered with a single six-string. Also vintage vibrato-equipped, we wonder if its rockier vibe might have better suited Fender's two-point knife-edge vibrato and, with 'rock' very much the trend of 2010, how about a Floyd Rose-equipped version – the ultimate hot-rod, modded Strat?



The Stratocaster peghead has a lot of late-sixties/early seventies vibe about it

Gallagher's mantra of 'let's go to work' as its own.

The Tele's fuss-free nature reveals itself when you pick it up to play. With a very similar neck to that of its Strat sister there's little fight-back from the flatter 'board and big frets. It's a 'buttery' playing experience whether you go for country bends (the Tele's perceived home territory) or bluesy slurs and rock-style finger vibrato. In fact, it's so easy that you simply get on with the job in hand and forget about everything else.

### Sounds

The word that sums up our Tele's overall tone is 'clarity'. Where the Strat seemed quite controlled overall there's a definite 'snarl' here. The bridge pickup is as bright as you'd expect when played clean, but as with all good Teles, seems to darken as the gain increases. Also, the Greasebucket circuit means that turning down the tone smooths things off without turning it into a woolly mess, and when lots of gain is added we definitely enter Gibson's sonic territory.

Switching to the neck pickup, clarity still rules, but obviously with more inherent warmth. It's great for Hendrix-like fills and Gilmour-like leads, while taming the tone slightly makes for some delightfully rich jazzy tones. As you'd expect, middle position is 'twang city', but again, back off some tone, pile on a bit of drive and in effect you have 'Crossroads Light'.

### Verdict

So, the American Special slots in under the long-running American Standard range – for many, Fender's staple Strat and Tele. The more recent, matt-finished Highway One series also fills a spot in the market between the more affordable

Mexican-made guitars and the upmarket American Standard and Vintage series, but lots of people want their guitars shiny, not matt. These American Specials take some of the best features of all the above, add a neat new twist here and there, and come up with a sparsely populated line that should instantly appeal to Fender-heads who don't have bottomless wallets, but who feel they too deserve full-on American quality – and gloss! – at streetwise prices.

If you're in the market for a versatile 'Jack of all trades' guitar then the Strat, with its five fabulous tone choices, easy-to-use contoured body and purposeful vibrato system, has to be the winner. If, on the other hand, you know what you want and it's a Tele, then you'd have to spend an awful lot more money to find something significantly better than this.

Once again Fender has focused its sights, aimed at the target and hit bullseye with its first shot. We'd like to see a more adventurous colour palette and better gig-bag (or form-fit case), but otherwise we can't fault either guitar at this price point. **G**

### The bottom line

**We like:** Wonderful necks; great sounds; perfect price/quality compromise

**We dislike:** Cheapo gigbags; gloss headstock fascias would look classier

**Guitarist says:** Aimed at the gap in the market between the American Standard and the Highway One ranges, these American Specials succeed with value and tone in abundance



### Fender American Special Stratocaster

**PRICE:** £869.99 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Three-piece alder  
**NECK:** One piece maple, medium 'C' shape, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5-inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic/43mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Integral maple, black dots, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome-plated vintage-style vibrato, sealed Schaller tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 56mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Three Fender Texas Special single-coils, five-way lever pickup selector, master volume and two tone controls (neck and bridge pickup), Greasebucket tone circuit  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.5/7.7  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The HSS American Special Strat (see p82)  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not in this range  
**FINISHES:** Two-tone sunburst (as reviewed), Candy Apple red (at £839)  
**Fender GBI**  
**01342 331700**  
**www.fender.com**

### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Fender American Special Telecaster

**PRICE:** £869.99 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Single-cutaway, solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder with thin urethane finish  
**NECK:** One-piece maple, slim 'U' shape, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5-inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic/43mm  
**HARDWARE/PLASTIC:** Chrome-plated traditional Tele bridge with brass saddles (no 'ash tray' cover), sealed Schaller tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 56mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Texas Special Tele single-coils, three-way lever pickup selector, master volume and tone, Greasebucket tone circuit  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.8/8.3  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** None  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not in this range  
**FINISHES:** Three-tone sunburst (as reviewed), Olympic white (at £839)

### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★