



Fender American Special Jazz Bass & Mark Hoppus Signature £1,042 & £766

The Precision's 60th birthday doesn't mean Fender has forgotten about Jazz fans... *by Roger Newell*

Although the Precision was the first electric bass guitar designed by Leo Fender, for many it was his second bass design that fully captured the imagination. Originally publicised as the 'two-pickup Precision' it was in fact everything but. Compared to the Precision's split-coil pickup, the matched pair of single-coils on the Jazz seemed rather narrow and, with an offset body and an ultra-slim neck (that was supposed to appeal to guitarists), the Jazz looked and felt entirely different to its predecessor. And just as importantly, it sounded very different too.

Few players today are unaware of the magical properties that two identical pickups produce on a bass as they are gradually blended together, and that has become the main attraction of the Jazz for many a bassist. But there is also something special about the overall proportions of the instrument that give it a highly specialised feel, and it's important that this element is maintained in all variations of this model.

It's this feel that's apparent in the single-pickup Hoppus bass too, as the offset Jazz body presents the instrument to the

player in a subtly different way than the Precision. But this is still a highly individualistic instrument with hybrid ambitions and simplistic circuitry. The bass also employs through-body stringing. Now, as many players prefer this (and bearing in mind that the associated bridge allows for both this method and top-mounted stringing), we're curious as to why Fender bothers to still produce top-mount designs on new or upgraded models? Anyway...

American Special Jazz Bass

Let's be honest, there was precious little wrong with the Jazz Bass from its inception, and with that in mind we really don't want anything too radically different here (we'll leave that to the Hoppus bass). That said, over 50 years the odd tweak, a little tampering and a touch of fine-tuning doesn't go amiss, and Fender is expert at this sort of thing.

First impressions are certainly good. The classic

The Rivals

For a direct rival to the Jazz Bass try Fender's **Marcus Miller** variant (£1,367) with bound maple 'board and block inlays, a pair of single-coils with active/passive circuitry and a Badass Bass II bridge – it's very different. There are plenty of 'Super-J' basses with exotic woods and active circuitry out there – the **Status T-Bass 4** (£1,975) has a woven graphite neck and phenolic fingerboard, plus classic styling, a pair of custom-wound Status J pickups and a sophisticated active EQ. As for single-pickup basses with a famous player connection, try the **Fleabass Street Bass** (£249), which has a look and sound all of its own. The **Lakland Skyline Duck Dunn** (around £1,200) has a bound Jazz-style neck, Hipshot tuners, Fralin split-coil humbucker and ash body.



The American Special has been gently tweaked to refine the Jazz formula



The American Special Jazz Bass's warm and rich bottom end is supplemented by clear overtones that ensure excellent note definition

looks are intact and you're presented with an instrument of good weight, balance and a comfy fit to the body. It features a white scratchplate on a black body with an all-maple neck, so it's certainly striking to look at. It also boasts a slimmer-than-Precision neck profile, but to our hands, it just feels particularly well-proportioned and nicely finished as opposed to anything radically different.

Sounds

The beauty of the Jazz design is its highly versatile range of sounds, which can suit, shape or define a multitude of musical genres. Now fitted with Fender's Greasebucket tone circuit, which rolls off the high end while maintaining low end definition – the range and delivery should be even more dynamic than usual – and in practice it is.

To our ears, this latest Jazz offers a generally cleaner and more defined sound. The warm and rich bottom end is supplemented by clear overtones that ensure excellent note definition – it really sings as you work your way up the neck, particularly on those upper strings. Blending the individual pickup sounds with the independent volume controls still offers the best way to mix them, and as with all passive circuitry the volume control itself plays a part in the tone. It's subtle, but then finding those sweet spots is always the fun part of getting to know a Jazz. That said, back off

the tone, focus on either pickup and dig in, and there's grunt and rasp aplenty on the lower strings – a great sound that the Greasebucket really exploits to the max.

Mark Hoppus Signature

Mark Hoppus made his name with Blink-182 and inspired many a teenager to pick up a bass during the pop-punk heyday of the early 2000s. This hybrid Jazz/Precision – which has seen several different iterations now – reflects that freshness, although it's quite a curious piece. Is it a retro Jazz design, or a Precision with a Jazz body? It was originally introduced in 2002 as a Jazz Bass, but checking the designation on this headstock Fender now regards this upgraded version as a Precision – and in reality it has far more in common with that design. It still retains a stripped-down vibe, however, as the single split-coil pickup has just a volume and no tone.

The rosewood fingerboard and tortoiseshell all-in-one scratchplate is a cool combination and definitely adds to the distinctive look of this upgraded design. The body is ash, while the neck is the same as a standard P-Bass neck, which is somewhat keener in the key dimensions than earlier Precisions. More importantly the split-coil pickup is reversed, which makes a bigger difference than you might expect...



The Mark Hoppus signature keeps things simple

Sounds

This is a curious beast indeed. It sits very much in its own little parallel universe where everything looks normal, but in fact is slightly out of phase with what we've come to expect.

So, with just this single volume control on board, what you're really getting is a P-Bass with the tone set on full treble plus a tad more, as there's none of the resistance caused by the tone control itself! Being a passive circuit, there is a very

slight mellowing of the tone when you reduce the volume, but you need a pretty keen ear to be truly aware of it. The through-body stringing also serves to absorb some of the warmth of the ash body and enhance sustain and resonance.

So what are the benefits of reversing the pickup? Well, originally it was designed to deliver even output across all four strings and so had a degree of compensation built in. Placed this way round it accentuates



The custom neckplate is as utilitarian as the rest of the bass

the strings differently, so expect to hear more thump from the top strings and a harder attack from the lower. Also the strings really sing out and shimmer with clarity, and without a tone control the delivery takes no prisoners. It's a little edgier than the sounds you would normally associate with this classic pickup. If you happen to play slap bass style then you definitely get more bang for your buck.

Given the tonal versatility of the American Special Jazz, we wondered if it could reproduce the distinctive sound of the Hoppus? The simple answer is almost. Wind the bridge pickup and the tone control right up and back off the neck pickup completely and it's close, but lacks the output and more importantly the 'singing' quality of the Hoppus. This is less noticeable in the studio, perhaps, but on stage it's a very different story. The Hoppus essentially has just one sound, but it's a cracker – think John Entwistle, Chris Squire and and Hoppus/Blink 182 of course!

Verdict

These are two fine Fender basses, each with its own identity and sound – one following tradition, one not. The Jazz proves to be a fine

example of its pedigree, while the Hoppus, by comparison, is an unruly, punky brat that stamps its foot and demands its own way. Yet you can't help but love the little chap and its big, alternative sound that, while lacking in tonal variety, does what it says on the tin without fuss. Both are great choices, the rest is up to you. **G**

The Bottom Line

Fender American Special Jazz Bass

We like: Clarity of sound; distinctive tones

We dislike: Nothing

Guitarist says: A very good USA-made Jazz Bass with subtle upgrades and clear, clean delivery

Fender Mark Hoppus Signature

We like: Retro hybrid style; very competent build; affordability; powerful voice

We dislike: No real tonal versatility on tap

Guitarist says: A breath of fresh air for rock bassists, the Hoppus has retro style and a thumpingly strong sound. Play it loud



Fender American Special Jazz Bass

PRICE: £1,042 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Twin-cutaway, passive four-string
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 864mm (34-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/38.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple with dot inlays
FRETS: 20, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome-plated American vintage-style raised-tail bridge, open-gear 'shamrock' tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 19mm average (centres)
ELECTRICS: Two single-coil Alnico Jazz Bass pickups, Fender Greasebucket tone circuit with individual volumes and a master tone control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4/8.8
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: High-gloss Olympic white, black (as reviewed), Candy Apple red and sunburst (adds £48)
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.fender.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender Mark Hoppus Signature

PRICE: £766 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Twin-cutaway, passive four-string
BODY: Ash
NECK: Maple with modern 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 864mm (34-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone 41.3mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with 'clay' dots
FRETS: 20, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome-plated, combination string-through-body bridge with standard series saddles and screws, open-gear 'shamrock' tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 19mm average (centres)
ELECTRICS: Reversed Seymour Duncan Basslines SPB-3 Quarter Pound split-coil Precision pickup, master volume control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.5/9.9
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: White blonde (as reviewed), surf green transparent

Test results

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

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