

CHARVEL DESOLATION SKATECASTER SK-1 FR, DS-1 FR & DC-1 ST £742, £682 & £634
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOBY SESSIONS



Charvel Desolation Skatecaster SK-1 FR, DS-1 FR & DC-1 FR

£742, £682 & £634

The original Californian hot-rod brand takes a sharp left-turn with three new designs that sport all manner of modern accoutrements *by Simon Bradley*

Since Fender's acquisition of the Charvel brand in 2002, the parent company has remained pretty true to the original tearaway teen's mantra of producing hot-rodded rock guitars. After the Art Series and its association with Edward Van Halen (surely the most famous of the original Charvel users from the late seventies) piqued interest, along came the truly awesome San Dimas range, which stayed even closer to the original West Coast vibe.

Today, with a San Dimas Style 1 costing a mere £619 and selling very nicely, we'd assumed that Charvel would consider continuing along these 'heritage' lines. However, in the spirit of evolution comes the new Desolation range, which includes a number of versions, also at various price points, of three designs that Charvel has not previously utilised.

Desolation Skatecaster SK-1 FR

That said, the inspiration behind the SK-1 is one that Charvel has used before. The Surfcaster, one of the first new 'retro' guitars when released in 1991, boasted two Danelectro-

style lipstick pickups along with a Rickenbacker-esque cat's-eye soundhole – quite a serious style change for Charvel.

Many of the construction features we'll describe here are pertinent to all three guitars we

have on test. Each of the three designs has the option of either a Floyd Rose locking vibrato or hardtail bridge. Either way, they're mated to a through-body neck made from a three-piece mahogany laminate. It

The SK-1 gives a great Kirk Hammett-style scorching lead tone, while the DS-1 is closer to Tremonti's roar



This certainly ain't your daddy's Charvel...

sports a rosewood fingerboard adorned with 24 jumbo frets and abalone 'keystone' inlays, and has been left unfinished save for a lick of gunstock oil. It's beautifully smooth and Charvel's name for its slim profile – Fast Neck – says it all, with the 305-406mm (12-16-inch) compound fingerboard radius adding to the sleek feel.

Unfortunately, the neck is let down by a clumsy masking boundary between the natural neck mahogany and the thick body finish. It's far too proud and is certainly noticeable to the touch. Considering the price it should be neater.

The body and headstock are bound in abalone, which we can't help feeling is gilding the lily somewhat, and our example features a body composed of mahogany wings topped with a flame maple veneer finished in trans black. Should you prefer the flat black options, the body is relieved of its sliver of maple.

Electrics comprise an 81/85 EMG set of active pickups controlled by a single volume

The Rivals

Schecter's Hellraiser range, which features EMG pickups and flamed maple tops within the spec, includes models as diverse as the C-1 double-cut (£599) and an eight-string, the V-8 (£899). The PRS SE Torero (£899) features a maple through-neck, a mahogany body and dual-EMG pickups. ESP's LTD MH-330FR (£649) combines a Floyd with its own ALH active pickups, and the flat black Fender Jim Root Telecaster (£765) mixes new features with an established design.



pot and a standard three-way toggle selector. The double-locking Floyd Rose vibrato is the FRT-O2000, an OEM-version of the German-made Floyd Rose Original, manufactured in the Far East.

Desolation DS-1 FR

While Charvel has a history of producing genuine 'shape' guitars, such as the Hydra and the Star, the brand never turned its building skills to the humble single-cutaway, save for the

much-missed and wonderfully over-the-top Model 7 T-type.

The body here, constructed in the same way as the SK-1, is closer in vibe to established models such as the ESP Eclipse than anything bearing the Gibson logo and is without doubt a very modern guitar – even the Les Paul Access doesn't offer as much body contouring as we see here.

The flat black finish of our example looks good with the black nickel-plated hardware,

All three guitars play extremely well and offer satisfying heavy rock and metal tones, thanks no doubt to the through-necks and active pickups from both EMG and Seymour Duncan

although the aforementioned abalone binding looks even more out of place here. A minor change is the choice of Grover rather than Charvel tuners, presumably to echo the associated Nashville vibe.

The pickups comprise a set of Seymour Duncan's underrated Blackout active humbuckers, which are controlled by individual volume and tone pots plus a standard three-way toggle. The choice between the Duncans and the more ubiquitous EMG set throughout

the Desolation range is one we're sure that players will appreciate. What's more, the layout of the four control pots has the bridge pickup's volume control set closest to the picking hand – attention to detail that we heartily applaud.

The DS-1's neck is slightly thicker in depth and it does offer a slightly more rounded feel compared to the flatter-backed profile of the other two guitars here, although it's difficult to ascertain whether this is just an anomaly or what's likely to be a standardised production process.

Charvel Desolation DC-1 ST

The final new design is this double-cut, and it's arguably the one that has fewest ties to Charvels of the past. With its slight carving within the lower cutaway and the asymmetrical shape, the guitar is a mix between the PRS SE double-cuts and ESP LTD Viper ranges; thanks in part to its hardtail denomination, it's also the lightest in weight of our trio.

To keep tuning stable, all ST guitars are loaded with locking Charvel tuners and, at 52mm width, the tune-o-matic bridge is a full two millimetres narrower than the Floyd Rose's saddle spacing. As with the Skatecaster and DS-1, the binding's masking lip by the



The DS-1's four-control layout hints at its LP inspiration



Locking nuts keep things stable on all three models





heel is disappointing and this writer at least prefers the flat black finish to that of the trans-flame maple option, in this scenario anyway.

But all three do perform very well indeed, offering flawless playing comfort that's designed with hard rock and modern metal techniques in mind. Any players more used to a Gibson-style neck may be deterred by the slinkier feel, but then that's what Charvel has always been about.

Sounds

Through-neck designs are celebrated for their long sustain, and that's certainly evident here. Due to its less-than-totally intimate connection with the body wood, however, a Floyd Rose will take some tone away. Even so, the SK-1 and DS-1 sound monstrous. There is a subtle sonic difference between the EMG and SD Blackout humbuckers loaded into the bridge positions of the guitars, with the Duncan offering a slightly smoother high end: it's quieter too.

Of course, the Skatecaster's sheer mass of mahogany helps round off any inherent abrasion, and we'd suggest that the SK-1 gives a great Kirk Hammett-style scorching lead tone, while the DS-1 is closer to the roar of Mark Tremonti. Both are full of gain when required, but demonstrate that there can be adequate tonal wiggle room within the realm of the active pickup. Both neck units are based around an Alnico V rather than a ceramic bar magnet, and to our ears they sound smoother and bit more subtle.

Played clean, there's some



Real EMGs at around £600? Winner!

lovely woody body to strummed chords and, as the amp gain is raised, so is the trebly edge. Both guitars stay perfectly in tune, play wonderfully and are well balanced when strapped on.

That's also true of the DC-1 and, what's more, in comparison to its two Floyd-loaded compadres it possesses the fattest tone of all – no doubt due to the fact that the stoptail is screwed straight into the through-neck. Also, when using the toggle's central position, the master tone does allow you to tailor any rough edges – great for cleaner passages in the style of Zakk Wylde.

After some time spent with the SK-1, the DC-1's lighter weight takes a little time to get used to but it is great to play nonetheless. And although we're still not sure where the



All three guitars have through-neck construction



DC is aimed in the market, there's not much to complain about as far as its tone and playability are concerned.

Verdict

All three Desolation guitars play extremely well and offer satisfying heavy rock and metal tones, thanks no doubt to the through-necks and active pickups. Nevertheless, for anyone who remembers the late 1970s and 1980s, it feels slightly off-message for the brand to be going after a genre where the likes of ESP, Schecter and indeed fellow Fender-owned brand Jackson are already so well established. Indeed the Desolation series is far removed from the hot-rodded custom S-types for which Charvel is loved historically, though we concede that most metal teenagers won't care too much about that. Try one. **G**

The Bottom Line

Charvel Desolation Skatecaster SK-1 FR

We like: Great feel; big tones
We dislike: Overly fancy binding; clumsy masking boundary
Guitarist says: The Surfcaster's snottier younger brother may not appeal to everyone... but it does sound great

Charvel Desolation DS-1 FR

We like: This example's flat black finish; smooth tones; control layout
We dislike: Abalone binding; knobs very close together
Guitarist says: A decent, metal-ready take on Gibson's seminal single-cut

Charvel Desolation DC-1 ST

We like: Light weight; monster tones
We dislike: Hardly a traditional Charvel design
Guitarist says: A good guitar with solid tones, but has its work cut out against Schecter, ESP and PRS SE



Charvel Desolation Skatecaster SK-1 FR

PRICE: £742.80
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Mahogany with flame maple veneer
NECK: Mahogany, through-neck
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Locking/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 305-406mm (12-16-inch) compound radius
FRETS: 24, jumbo
HARDWARE: Floyd Rose FRT-02000 double-locking vibrato, Charvel-logo tuners, all black nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: EMG active humbuckers: 81 (bridge) and 85 (neck); master volume control, three-way toggle pickup selector switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.31/7.3
OPTIONS: Flat black (£682.80)
RANGE OPTIONS: SK-1 ST with a tune-o-matic-style bridge and stop tail, trans finishes only (£634). The SK-3 ST, with passive Charvel Desolation pickups, pearloid inlays and a bolt-on neck, is available in either a trans red (£346.80) or flat black or grey (£298.80) finishes
FINISHES: Trans black (as reviewed)
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.charvel.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Charvel Desolation DS-1 FR

PRICE: £682
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Mahogany, through-neck
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Locking/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 305-406mm (12-16-inch) compound radius
FRETS: 24, jumbo
HARDWARE: Floyd Rose FRT-02000 double-locking vibrato, Grover tuners, all black nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: Seymour Duncan Blackout active humbuckers: AHB-1B (bridge), AHB-1N (neck); individual pickup volume and tone controls, three-way toggle pickup selector
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.45/7.6
OPTIONS: Trans-black with a flame maple veneer (£742.80)
RANGE OPTIONS: DS-1 ST (as reviewed). The DS-2 ST, with active Charvel Desolation pickups, is available in either flat (£346.80) or trans finishes (£406.80). The DS-3 ST, with passive Charvel Desolation pickups, is available in black (£238.80) or trans red finishes (£274.80)
FINISHES: Flat black (as reviewed)

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Charvel Desolation DC-1 ST

PRICE: £634.80
ORIGIN: China
BODY: Mahogany with flame maple veneer
NECK: Mahogany, through-neck
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Locking/43mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 305-406mm (12-16-inch) compound radius
FRETS: 24, jumbo
HARDWARE: Charvel compensated tune-o-matic-style bridge, stud tailpiece, Charvel locking tuners – all black nickel-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: EMG active humbuckers: 81 (bridge) and 85 (neck); master volume control, three-way toggle pickup selector switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.95/6.5
OPTIONS: Flat black or gloss black option (both £586.80)
RANGE OPTIONS: DC-1 FR (as reviewed). The DC-2 ST, with active Charvel Desolation pickups, pearloid inlays and a bolt-on neck, is available in either a trans (£406.80) or flat black (£348.80) finishes
FINISHES: Trans red (as reviewed), trans black, blue smear

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★