

EVH WOLFGANG & FENDER BLACKTOP STRAT HH FLOYD ROSE £2,662 & £682
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY SIMON LEE



Guitarist CHOICE

EVH Wolfgang & Fender Blacktop Strat HH Floyd Rose **£2,662 & £682**

Here are two guitars that prove that 30-odd years after Eddie Van Halen met Floyd Rose, the pair's iconic ideas are still bearing fruit *by Ed Mitchell*

Has there ever been a more Marmite piece of guitar hardware than the Floyd Rose vibrato? Well, love it or loathe it, the noble Floyd changed guitar history when it was patented in 1979. Its double-locking concept book-matched with some ideas that a young Edward Van Halen had about how a guitar should sound and perform. Thanks to Ed and Mr Floyd D Rose, a Strat body, bolt-on maple neck, bridge humbucker and a locking Floyd became *the* blueprint for rock guitars in the eighties and beyond.

More than 30 years on, the Floyd Rose vibrato has survived more changes in musical fashion than Bon Jovi; and it's still Van Halen's bridge of choice, down-bend only, of course. His latest Wolfgang signature has one fitted. Not to be outdone, the latest addition to the Fender catalogue, the Blacktop Strat HH Floyd Rose, has one, and both have twin humbuckers too. Although they're priced two grand apart, the EVH proves what a great

guitar designer the man is; the Blacktop reminds us just how good a Floyd looks on a Strat.

EVH Wolfgang

According to the EVH website it took almost a year to develop the pickups for the Wolfgang. That's pretty remarkable when

you consider that Ed used to get by with an old Gibson PAF chiselled into a \$50 'Boogie Body'. Well, Ed's a tone freak and unquenchable tinkerer – that's probably why the EVH Wolfgang, in its new stealth black finish, feels like a guitar that was built by a guitarist.

Ed is a tone freak – that's probably why the new EVH Wolfgang feels like a guitar that was built by a guitarist



The EVH licensed Floyd Rose also features his now customary D-Tuna

The Wolfie's thinly applied rubbery finish almost conceals a 38mm thick basswood body mated to a 12.7mm arched AA maple top. We say almost because Edward requested that the control and vibrato cavities be left unpainted (it's true; we looked) to allow the body wood to breathe for better tone. Does it work? Who knows, but if it makes Ed happy...

The bolt-on maple neck, quarter-sawn for rigidity, has the classic 648mm (25.5-inch) Fender scale length. The neck heel is sculpted for easy upper fret access; the ebony fingerboard has a conical radius for easy chording and

The Rivals

EVH Wolfgang

You could try tracking down one of Van Halen's highly regarded and sought after **Music Man EVH** or **Peavey Wolfgang** signature models on Ebay or the like. Treasure hunting aside, the EVH Wolfgang's obvious rival is the **Music Man Axis HH** (£1,960). Although evolved from Ed's former Music Man signature, the Axis features non-Ed tweaks such as body contouring, a slightly widened neck and a relocated volume knob. If the price tags of the EVH Wolfgang and Axis make you wince, get your foot on the ladder with the **Sterling by Music Man AX40** (£615). It looks the part, plays great and comes fitted with two humbuckers and a licensed Floyd Rose.



string-bending. The 'board has rolled edges for comfort and EVH has defied modern rock guitar convention and specified 22 stainless steel vintage-size frets instead of the more usual, jumbo nickel-silver jobs.

The Wolfie's black EVH-licensed Floyd Rose vibrato rests on the body so you can only lower the pitch. Tuning stability is unwavering; just as it bloomin' should be. The Floyd comes with D-Tuna device on the low E string. Pull the D-Tuna out and the string's tuning drops to D. Marvellous. The metal hardware is completed with a locking top nut and a sextet of EVH-branded Gotoh machineheads.

The Rivals

Fender Blacktop Strat HH Floyd Rose

Few guitars embody the hot-rodded eighties rock aesthetic like the **Charvel San Dimas Style 1 HH** (£742). Available in a 22-fret maple fingerboard format only, the Charvel comes loaded with a pair of Seymour Duncan humbuckers: a SH-4 JB at the bridge; a SH-1 '59 in the neck position. Like the Blacktop, the Style 1 boasts a classic Strat headstock shape. Alternatively, there's the **Rasmus Modern M200** (£899). Designed by luthier John Suhr, with a pair of US-made Suhr humbuckers and a Gotoh Floyd Rose. Its elliptical profile neck is one of the best we've ever nestled in our palm.

Those two body-mounted EVH humbuckers that took so long to get right are wired to a classic Ed-spec reversed three-way toggle switch (bridge 'bucker only, bridge and neck; neck only), a low-friction Bourns-manufactured volume pot and a high-friction Bourns tone control. At the risk of pointing out the obvious, the low friction volume is designed to move freely for quick volume changes and swells. The high friction pot is stiffer: roll off the highs and the control will stay put. To complete the package, the EVH comes with a tough SKB moulded case with 3D Van Halen stripes on the outside, heavy-duty catches and a plush Wolfie-shaped interior.

Fender Blacktop Strat HH Floyd Rose

This rather, er, snappily titled Fender Blacktop Strat has the same chassis as the non-locking Blacktop Strat HH that we looked at in issue 339. And it's not just a clever name: this new Blacktop has a floating Korean-made Floyd Rose Special locking vibrato sitting in the bridge cavity. According to the Floyd Rose website, the Special utilises zinc alloy saddles in place of steel and a zinc alloy sustain block in place of brass. You're getting a Floyd that looks and hopefully performs like the Original, but costs less to make.

Actually, the Floyd on our review Blacktop sticks a bit. It returns to regular tuning no problem, even after some serious dive-bombing, but nudge the arm and the pitch changes slightly and stays there. Tap the arm and it returns to normal again.



The Blacktop Strat sports a pair of Hot Alnico vintage humbuckers

Van Halen's fussiness when selecting the pickups has paid off - the EVH Wolfgang is a tone machine

The Blacktop's Hot Alnico vintage humbuckers are hooked up to a five-way lever switch. The pickup options are: bridge humbucker; inside coils of both humbuckers; both 'buckers on full power; the neck pickup's inside coil; and the neck pickup on full. The guitar's construction is pretty much up to the high standard you'd expect from Fender's facility in Mexico. The bolt-on maple neck's gloss urethane finish is flawlessly applied, as is the alder body's coating of titanium silver paint. The 22 medium jumbo frets are well-dressed and seated on a 241mm radius rosewood fingerboard. Textbook. We aren't quite so chuffed to find that the neck

pocket appears to be a bit too spacious for its neck. There's a prominent lip on the treble side of the pocket. It doesn't affect playability but does look sloppy.

Sounds

The EVH Wolfgang is a tone machine. That might be thanks to its direct-mounted humbuckers or the fact that the Floyd Rose sits on its body. Whatever it is, there is an underlying beef to the tones offered by these humbuckers. Van Halen rejected many prototypes for these pickups because they were too harsh sounding. Well, his fussiness paid off. The bridge unit offers plenty of bite without a hint of shrillness. False harmonics fly



Something about a double-locking vibrato on a silver Strat just works...

out of this guitar like fireworks when you engage the bridge humbucker. The neck 'bucker fattens up the tone but there's still plenty of clarity there.

The Blacktop Strat offers no real surprises... in a good way. You get a great range of classic Fender single-coil and meatier humbucker tones with or without distortion. But the Blacktop lacks the tonal girth of the Wolfgang – yes, it's two grand cheaper, but we expected a different tone regardless of price anyway. Unlike the Wolfie, the Blacktop's pickups are scratchplate-mounted, which promotes a lighter tonal response. If you associate a humbucker and Floyd-loaded Strat with Richie Sambora, for instance, then you already have a good idea what this guitar sounds like.

Verdict

The Fender Blacktop Strat HH Floyd Rose is a well-priced meat and potatoes rock machine built around a classic chassis. Our example's messy neck pocket and sticky Floyd are annoying, but they're likely a one-off. Just make sure the one you try is in better shape. If you've got £700 to spend on a twin-humbucker, Floyd-equipped rock beast, the Blacktop's cool eighties vibe and multi-tonal options could be enough to snag that lolly burning a hole in your pocket.

The EVH Wolfgang is just about as perfect a rock guitar as Eddie could dream up. The big-voiced humbuckers and Stealth black finish aside, it's the old school touches that make the Wolfie so enjoyable. The

vintage profile frets and the rolled fingerboard edges make this guitar a cracking player for any guitarist, regardless of whether you turn your nose up at a Floyd Rose vibrato or not. Yes, at over £2,500 the asking price is a little bit hairy, but let's face it, we guitarists tend to aspire to something that is, at least temporarily, beyond our reach. If you aspire to owning the ultimate Floyd Rose-equipped twin-humbucker guitar, the EVH Wolfgang sets that standard. **G**

The Bottom Line

EVH Wolfgang

We like: Top class tone and playability; great looks

We dislike: Finding a second job to pay for it...

Guitarist says: It may be a modern rock guitar but it's the Wolfie's old school feel that makes it such fun to hang with. Yes, the price tag is eye-watering, but in this case you really do get what you pay for

Fender Blacktop Strat HH Floyd Rose

We like: Good range of tones; playability; classic looks

We dislike: The neck pocket miscue and the sticky Floyd

Guitarist says: We'd like to see a bit more quality control but overall the Blacktop Strat HH Floyd Rose is a good working musician's rock guitar

Guitarist
CHOICE



EVH Wolfgang

PRICE: £2,662 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

BODY: Basswood with an arched AA maple top

NECK: Quarter-sawn maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 25.5 inches

(648 mm)

NUT/WIDTH: Floyd Rose locking R2/41.3mm

FINGERBOARD: Ebony with dot inlays, 305-406mm (12-16-inch) compound radius

FRETS: 22, stainless steel vintage **HARDWARE:** Black EVH-licensed Floyd Rose with D-Tuna and locking top nut, EVH logo'd Gotoh tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Two EVH humbuckers, low-friction Bourns volume control, high-friction Bourns tone control and three-way pickup selector toggle switch

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.8/8.5

OPTIONS: N/A

RANGE OPTIONS: Black and vintage white gloss finishes (£2,556); AA quilt top tobacco burst, black cherry burst and transparent amber finishes (£2,866); EVH Special (£1,042) and HT Special models (£1,006) will be available soon

LEFT-HANDED: No

FINISHES: Stealth black (as reviewed), black, vintage white, tobacco burst, black cherry burst and transparent amber

Fender GBI

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Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender Blacktop Strat HH Floyd Rose

PRICE: £682 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Mexico

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 25.5 inches

(648mm)

NUT/WIDTH: Floyd Rose locking/42mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Chrome-plated Floyd Rose Special double-locking vibrato, die-cast tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Two Hot Vintage Alnico humbuckers, one volume, two tones, five-way pickup selector blade switch

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.1/9.1

OPTIONS: See finishes

RANGE OPTIONS: Blacktop Strat HH with non-locking 'synchronized' vibrato (£539)

LEFT-HANDED: No

FINISHES: Titanium silver (as reviewed) and black

Fender GBI

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www.fender.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★