

Standard Bearers

We've pondered the validity of 'Standard' guitars in 2012, we've had three pros give us their thoughts, and now we put our three new Standards under the Guitarist microscope *by Dave Burrluck*







Fender American Standard Telecaster & Stratocaster & Gibson Les Paul Standard 2012

What we want to know

1 So, more new versions of the classics, is it?

Well no – these new Standards are all upgraded from the previous 2008 versions, the Les Paul more dramatically so than the two Fenders.

2 But we just want the old ones!

Both Fender and Gibson make those, too. These new Standards feature numerous player-centric tweaks that you won't find on vintage-spec guitars. Think of these as pro-spec, state-of-the-art, USA-made working instruments.

3 So who's going to actually play them?

Well, these are the three most popular solidbody electric guitars, aimed very much at the working musician. Collectors and vintage snobs may look elsewhere, but if you gig, they should be on your must-try list.

It's 60-something years since the Fender Esquire/Broadcaster (soon to be Telecaster) was unveiled to a less-than-receptive audience. Glancing at Fender's new American Standard Telecaster, some might ask: what has changed? Same for the 1954-introduced, made-in-2012 Strat and even the new Les Paul Standard – viewed from your audience's perspective, they hardly look that different, do they? Rarely, if ever, has the electric guitar successfully reinvented itself. In reality, the progressive journey of the instrument has been one of subtle tweaking and 'improving', albeit not always for the best. These three new Standards typify that evolution. So what's on offer here?

American Standard Telecaster

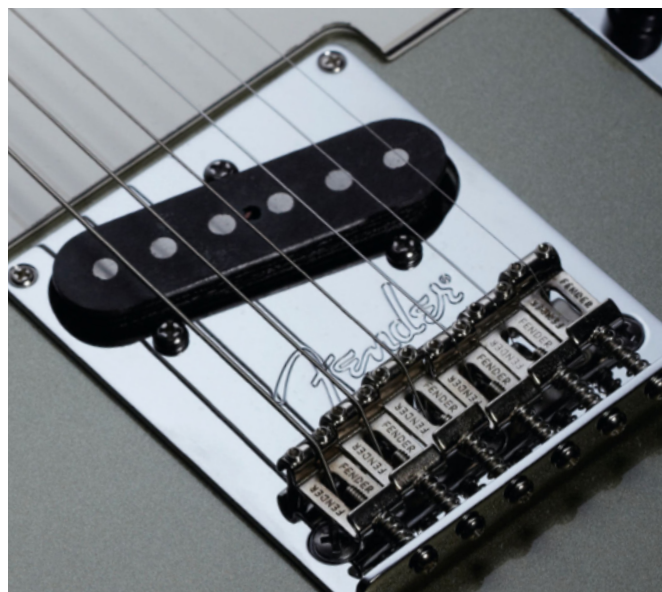
The main updates for this year's American Standard Tele are new pickups and aged (off-white) plastic parts. More minor changes include a thinner undercoat to the urethane body finish and a light tint to the maple neck. Both Fenders also feature new, longer-than-vintage string-slot holes in the bent-steel bridge saddles – a minor change but

one that should ensure the string passes from its anchor hole to the dome of the saddle without impediment. The previous American Standard range update (2008) saw the Telecaster fitted with a six-saddle bridge – and here they're placed on an open-sided brass bridgeplate. New to this 2012 Tele upgrade, however, is the Strat-like ribcage contour, altering the usually slab-bodied form, and our sample comes in the new 2012 colour addition,

Jade Metallic Pearl, inspired by Lexus no less.

Neck-wise, don't expect a vintage handful. In terms of profile we have Fender's modern 'C' which, combined with the flatter-than-vintage radius (9.5 inches instead of 7.25 inches) and well-dressed medium jumbo frets, makes for a very playable mainstream feel. Depth-wise, it measures 20.9mm at the first fret and 22.5mm at the 12th. The rosewood fingerboard, unlike the maple fingerboard of the Stratocaster, has no finish covering. As a result, there's slightly more fret height and you notice the slightly rounded fingerboard edges more.

Tone-wise, the most major change here is the inclusion of Fender Custom Shop pickups. There's a flush-poled Broadcaster single-coil at bridge and the popular Twisted Tele covered single-coil in the neck position, suspended from



The new Telecaster Standard retains the Strat-esque six-saddle bridge from 2008



The Rivals

American Standard Telecaster

G&L has Fender-related history, of course, and the **ASAT Classic** (from £1,600) has been around for ages. It's very Tele-inspired, with an alder body on the standard-finish range, plus a six-saddle bridge and two G&L Magnetic Field Design single-coil pickups. We were also very impressed with the **Magneto T-Wave** (from approx £1,800). It's an intelligent interpretation of the Tele-style guitar with a P-90 in the neck position.

the scratchplate in modern Fender style for easy height adjustment. On both Fender guitars we have behind-the-nut truss rod adjustment access, and on the four-screw neck plate there's the micro-tilt neck pitch adjustment system – all features that make quick adjustments easy compared to vintage-spec Fenders.

American Standard Stratocaster

Pickups here are Custom Shop Fat '50s with a vintage-style stagger to the magnetic slug pole pieces. Wiring is modern Fender: a standard five-way, master volume, neck tone and a notched no-load tone control for the bridge and middle pickups that, when fully on,

effectively bypasses the pot, adding a soupçon of high-end.

Other than that, things are very similar to the previous models. Weighing slightly less than our Telecaster, it does share the same mainstream 'C' profile as the Tele – it's very slightly thinner-depthed, but it's minimal. The two-post vibrato block has deeper drilled string holes so there's less dead string in the block, like a vintage-style vibrato, and the block is tapered at the rear to allow a little more down-bend. The arm still screws in – there's no tension adjustment but, as supplied, it has generous travel. Tuners on both guitars are the familiar non-locking modern types. The low E and A string tuners have a higher post-hole position; the other four tuner post-holes are closer to the face of the headstock. With only one string tree this helps to provide enough down-pressure over the nicely cut synthetic bone nut.

The Strat's neck is all maple – there's no separate fingerboard. The frets slot into the face of the neck, which is then finished. There is some pooling of the finish either side of the frets, and it does look a little thicker than on a vintage specification maple 'board. It also slightly widens the fret size and, perhaps more importantly, reduces the height of the fret above the playing surface.

Sounds

What we have here are two very playable, in-tune guitars that tick all the boxes in terms of sound without really making us go "Wow!" That's no criticism; in fact, it's an endorsement of Fender's American Standard benchmark ideal.

Even with some similarities – the six bridge saddles, neck shape and that ribcage contour – the Tele remains a very different beast to the Strat, although closer perhaps than a pair of fifties examples would be. Its three sounds are all classics in their own way. The spike of the bridge pickup is still such a great classic rock rhythm tone, while the softer, fuller voice of the old-school neck pickup always sounds surprisingly good with a little clean gain boost. The pickup mix setting is less complex than a Strat's, but it's a beautiful, soulful rhythm voice.

Compared directly with our modded '69 Telecaster, the new Tele sounds exactly that: a little brighter, a little more open (a little more Strat-like?) and slightly less mean. We have to say the ribcage contour feels more comfortable, especially seated, while the modern radius is extremely playable. Even those Strat saddles, while not

The Tele remains a very different beast to the Strat, although closer than a pair of fifties examples would be



The Strat has Custom Shop Fat '50s pickups with staggered poles



The Rivals

American Standard Stratocaster

Guitars based on Stratocasters? Well, Fender has a few... but if they don't work for you, check **Blade's RH-2** (from approx £950) with active VSC preamp, humbucker at bridge and fulcrum vibrato. **Vigier's Expert SSS** (£1,679) is superbly detailed with 22-fret graphite-reinforced neck, 2011 vibrato and DiMarzio pickups. **Taylor's SolidBody Classic** (from £1,499) comes in both dual- and single-cut versions with numerous pickup and vibrato and hardtail options.

ideal for nailing a real old-Tele tone, arguably make it sit better with more contemporary sounds and styles.

The Stratocaster's set-up is low and slinky, fast with plenty of new-guitar zing. In fact that middle/bridge no-load tone control adds a little too much high-end for most styles, and it sounds more natural backed off a little. Clean tones have it all – from the timeless funk in the mixed positions to the clean, bell-like projection from the darker neck pickup and the bright-enough-for-most middle pickup. The bridge pickup can be an ear-slicer – hardly

surprising – yet in comparison with a some other Strats, there's a musical width to the sounds here, almost three-dimensional compared to our Mexican Road Worn, which sounds a little hotter, but more focused. But there's certainly plenty of clarity and high-end sparkle, so that light-to-medium-gained tones need a little taming for more mid-range push. Certainly with some tone reduction we're getting more into earthier 'hot blues' sounds, darker and snappier, and if you decide to use the mixed pickup tones here, at least they're hum-cancelling.

It's the Les Paul's electronics that are the main departure. Each of the four control knobs hides a dual function

Gibson Les Paul Standard

There's little doubt that this is a very good-looking Les Paul, and it's been set up nicely too. The slightly upward-pointing flames of the AAA-grade maple top are strong, though it's slip-matched rather than perfectly book-matched. The centre joint too isn't the cleanest we've seen, but the dark 'bursting of the top and dark brown of the sides, back and neck are well done. Yes, it's not the mirror 'dipped in glass' finish seen on certain other high-ticket USA brands – this is nitrocellulose and there's noticeable 'orange peel' on the back. The edge binding too, around the top of the body, doesn't have the sometimes very noticeable ledge where during the finish process the binding is scraped of any colour – it's a pretty clean job.

The fingerboard is very smart, from those crisply inlaid trapezoid inlays to the perfectly cut nut and the tidy fretting. As usual, the fret ends don't sit over the too-thick binding – the end of each fret is actually the raised nib of the plastic binding, which does limit the playable width of the fret – but that's Gibson's way.

Lurking within this impressive presentation are the numerous tweaks that create this year's Standard specification. There's the 'modern' weight relief – the latest attempt by Gibson to reduce the weight of the mahogany back and also impart some additional resonance. It's not over-heavy, but certainly not light. Secondly, the fingerboard has a compound 10- to 16-inch radius instead of the classic 12-inch camber of most Gibsons. Like the previous



The Les Paul's tonal options have been expanded, via push/pull switches



The Tele's Strat-like ribcage contour may be a step too far for some purists

The Les Paul is really two guitars in one: a vintage-informed modern 'Paul, with expanded tones if you need 'em

2008 Standard, the neck profile is asymmetric and classed as a '60s SlimTaper: the shoulder is slightly more square on the bass side, more relaxed on the treble with a centre depth of 20.6mm at the first fret and 22.45mm at the 12th. It's a very good mainstream neck shape. This LP doesn't advertise the 'deep-set neck tenon' of the 2008 Standard, but we do have the steeply back-angled (17°) headstock. Other features that differentiate this model are the TonePros locking tune-o-matic and stud tailpiece, and the very smooth-actioned Grover rear-locking tuners with their metal kidney-bean buttons – not necessary on a non-vibrato guitar, but they do speed up string changing.

It's the Les Paul's electronics that are the main departure. Each of the four control knobs hides a dual function accessed via pull/push switches. Both the 500k-ohm volume controls have a 'coil-split' switch – anecdotally referred to as a 'Fat Tap' when we spoke to Gibson designer Jim DeCola earlier. A standard coil-split dumps one of the humbucker's two coils to

ground. Here, however, we have a 'partial tap' where some of the 'dumped' coil is retained for a fatter sound and a little hum cancellation. "This design also provides for a more balanced output between the single-coil and humbucking tones," says Gibson. "In single-coil mode, the pickups are reverse wound/reverse polarity which offers hum cancelling when both pickups are active."

The neck pickup tone control also offers an out-of-phase option with both pickups on. If just the neck pickup, in single-coil mode, is selected, engaging this mode will voice primarily the outer single-coil; with the tone switch down, it's the inner coil. Finally, the bridge pickup tone control doubles as a 'pure bypass' in either humbucking or single-coil mode, that "routes the bridge pickup directly to the jack, bypassing the pickup selector, volume and tone controls," for full brightness.

Sounds

Nicely balanced both in terms of relative output and string-to-string response, there's plenty of vintage-style, low-output

clarity from the humbuckers; played clean, you might think they're almost too bright for that 'classic' Les Paul tonality. There's immense presence and sustain to the sound, which really equates to 'good Les Paul tone' to our ears.

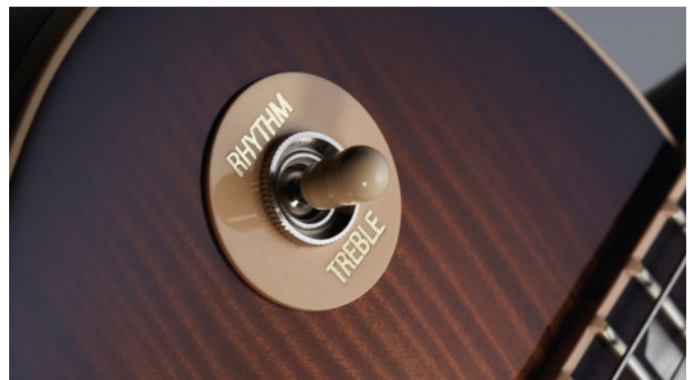
The single-coil modes are more surprising. Individually, you will hear some hum pick up but the tone, which is definitely stringier and slightly lower in output, sounds a little choked in the high end, as though you've just stepped on a slightly backed-off wah pedal. The pure bypass mode restores some of the highs but it's bridge pickup only – some might feel it's a little too bright. Played clean, the out-of-phase tone is quite challenging, but don't forget with both pickups on you can select either of the two pickups' modes – and that alone, combined with the tone controls and different amps tones, provides quite a palette of sounds. For example, with both pickups selected in out-of-phase mode, and a more gained amp tone, the clean-amp thinness translates to a nastier, aggressive, very grungy sound.

The Rivals

Gibson Les Paul Standard 2012

Like Fender and Strats, Gibson makes a fair few Les Pauls! If you can't find what you want there, **PRS's Singlecut** is a viable option: the **Stripped 58** is a corker, but more pricey (£2,995).

Taylor's single-cut **SolidBody Standard** (£1,999) uses a lightweight semi-hollow construction, again with numerous pickup, vibrato or hardtail options.



For many, crunchy gained sounds are the Les Paul's sweet spot. The single voices here sound a little P-90-ish – even a little mini-humbucker-ish – and while there's not a huge volume lift when you go back to humbucker mode, there's certainly more high-end, almost as if these single-coil tones are less Fullerton, more Seattle circa 1991.

Okay, the pull/push switches aren't the easiest to quickly engage but as the knobs, even depressed, sit a little way off the top they're easier to grab than you'd think. And it's worth it. From clean, bright-edged vintage-y tones through to classic seventies and eighties grind not to mention those grungy out-of-phase gnarly voices, there's much to enjoy.

Verdict

It's very hard to fault these three guitars technically, though we'd prefer thinner neck binding on the Les Paul and a slightly thinner finish on our Strat's maple 'board. These Fenders are more than fit for purpose: not vintage-specific, or overloaded with tweaks and

upgrades, just workmanlike, well-priced, very good playing and sounding USA guitars.

The Les Paul is really two guitars in one: a killer classic-sounding vintage-informed modern 'Paul but with, if you need them, expanded sounds including very usable, P-90-ish single-coil voices.

There are certainly more vintage-styled new versions of these classics from Gibson and Fender, or indeed more modernist tweaked versions, yet reflecting on our sound tests, we'd be more than happy to walk on any stage with any of these three. Clearly, a whole 60-something years on, Fender and Gibson are both still in a good place. **G**

The Bottom Line

Fender American Standard Tele

We like: Build quality; player-centric upgrades; mainstream feel; playability and sounds

We dislike: Veers towards the Strat's design with ribcage contour and six-saddle bridge

Guitarist says: Not the most vintage or modern Tele in Fender's range, this is nonetheless a thoroughly competent modern Tele: plug in, play

Fender American Standard Strat

We like: As the Telecaster

We dislike: Over-egged fingerboard finish

Guitarist says: Again, not the most vintage or modern Strat in Fender's range, but hard to fault on any level

Gibson 2012 Les Paul Standard

We like: Build; expanded sounds; neck; playability

We dislike: That over-thick fingerboard binding; takes some thought to introduce all the new sounds

Guitarist says: Looks like a classic 'Paul but has numerous good-sounding additional sounds. A very well-made guitar indeed



Fender American Standard Strat

PRICE: £1,402 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, modern 'C' shape, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/43.4mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot inlays, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Fender two-point synchronised vibrato with vintage-style bent-steel saddles, enclosed tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Fender Custom Shop Fat '50s single-coils. Five-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone one (neck), tone two (bridge and middle pickup, no-load circuit)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8

OPTIONS: Rosewood fingerboard. Non-burst colours cost £1,330

RANGE OPTIONS: The new American Standard Strat HSS costs £1,462 in 'burst colours, other colours, £1,378

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, 'burst colours at £1,474, other finishes, £1,402

FINISHES: Three-colour sunburst (as reviewed), Sienna Sunburst, Olympic White, black, Candy Cola, Jade Pearl Metallic, Charcoal Frost Metallic – gloss polyurethane body, headstock and fingerboard face (maple only); satin neck finish

Fender GBI

01342 331700

www.fender.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender American Standard Tele

PRICE: £1,330 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, modern 'C' shape, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/43.26mm

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

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Fender American Tele bridge with New American Standard bent-steel saddles and stamped brass baseplate, dual height enclosed tuners – nickel/chrome-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51.5mm

ELECTRICS: Fender Custom Shop Broadcaster single-coil (bridge) and Twisted Tele single-coil (neck), three-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master no-load tone control

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.86/8.5

OPTIONS: Maple fingerboard. 'Burst colours cost £1,462

RANGE OPTIONS: The new P-Bass in four- and five-string formats and the Jazz Bass in four- and five-string, plus left-hand and fretless formats start at £1,402

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, 'burst colours at £1,474, other finishes £1,402

FINISHES: Jade Pearl Metallic (as reviewed), three-color sunburst, black, Candy Cola, natural, Crimson Red Transparent

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Gibson 2012 Les Paul Standard

PRICE: £1,999 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway, carved-top solidbody electric

BODY: Modern weight-relieved mahogany with AAA carved maple top

NECK: Mahogany, asymmetrical '60s SlimTaper profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6 inches)

NUT/WIDTH: Corian/43mm

FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, figured acrylic trapezoid inlays, 254-406mm (10-16-inch) compound radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: TonePros locking tune-o-matic bridge and stud tailpiece, Grover locking kidney button tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51mm

ELECTRICS: Gibson Burstbucker Rhythm Pro at neck, Burstbucker Lead Pro at bridge, three-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup. Pull/push switch on each control offers partial coil-split (volumes), phase switch (neck tone) pure bypass (bridge tone)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.1/9

OPTIONS: Solid-colour models cost £1,899

RANGE OPTIONS: Too many to mention: also see the new Les Paul Studio (£1,099) and Les Paul Traditional (£1,399)

LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, all colours

FINISHES: Desert burst (as reviewed), Heritage cherry sunburst, light burst, tea burst, Fireball, translucent amber, translucent black, Ebony, Goldtop and Blue Mist cost £100 less

Gibson

www.gibson.com

Many thanks to Coda Music (01438 350815) for the loan of this guitar

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★