

FIRST PLAY



FENDER JIMI HENDRIX STRATOCASTER £689

WHAT IS IT? Mexican-made Stratocaster tribute to one of the greatest guitarists of all time

If Left Was Right

Fender introduces a Hendrix-inspired guitar priced to appeal to younger fans, but which could inspire any guitarist lusting after that elusive 'cool' factor

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Neil Godwin

When we heard that another Hendrix tribute Strat was in the offing, the groans were audible. Often in the past, the great man's name has been used with less sensitivity than we would have liked. After all, he's not here to sanctify any of these products or decisions. The spec, too, seemed odd – a right-handed guitar with upside-down headstock and reverse-angled bridge pickup; surely it could only end up being the proverbial canine's supper?

But it's nothing of the sort. Built in Fender's Ensenada, Mexico factory, the Jimi Hendrix Stratocaster is available in Olympic White or Black, both with maple neck, tinted pickups and knobs on a white-black-white pickguard. Mexican Fenders are built supremely well; their polyester finish is exemplary and their necks never anything but great. Yes, this one's headstock is upside down and, yes, its bridge pickup is reversed, but these facets – the consequence of Jimi turning a regular Strat upside down – contributed greatly to its playability and sound in his hands.







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For example, the longer bass string travel to the farthest tuners meant greater tension and better tuning stability when drop tuning, as Jimi did, and the consequently slacker treble strings meant smoother bends and vibrato. Also, the 'wrong way round' pickup served to moderate the treble for a slightly thicker tone on the top strings and marginally more twang one on the lower ones. And actually none of this makes the guitar look weird, as we'd predicted it would.

Fender has sensibly chosen not to switch the vibrato block round (Jimi's upside-down Strat's arms protruded awkwardly from the top), while opting for modern-style headstock truss adjustment is a concession that makes real sense.

Two elephants in the room, though: the smaller being that the body is right-handed and not upside down; the larger is that a tribute instrument to the greatest left-handed guitarist ever, is not available left-handed! The latter of these is surely due to economics but seems, well, strange; the former makes tons of sense, as we'll see.

Feel & Sounds

Anyone who's watched Hendrix play will have noticed that his reversed Strat offered little upper-fret access. In fact, he didn't play up the dusty end much at all. Our guitar's right-handed body solves that problem in one fell swoop. The neck's shallow 'C' shape is mega-comfy in the hands and Fender's other modern twist – medium-jumbo frets on a flatter, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius 'board – adds greatly to the experience. Our guitar's action was too low to dig in like Jimi, with the top string almost choking off when going for big bends, but a quick adjustment of the first and second strings' bridge saddles and playability was restored. The vintage vibrato works well, coping with Jimi-style excesses and returning to pitch admirably. It's a joy to try all those great riffs, chords and solos on an instrument that seems much more grown-up than its meagre price tag suggests.

Plugging in, our Hendrix Strat instantly shows its mettle. The selector's five settings bring out a quintet of recognisable tones from these fine-sounding '65 USA Vintage

1. Available in white or black (Woodstock or Isle Of Wight!), the body and neck are perfectly finished in polyester
2. Tinted pickup covers and knobs contrast nicely with the white 'guard, while a vintage-style vibrato offers reasonable wobble and divebomb capability
3. The large, post-'65 Strat headstock looks cool when flipped over, especially with the 60s-style Fender logo the right way up. Some say the added mass even adds something to the tone, while the modern truss rod certainly makes adjustments easier

4. A four-bolt neck-plate proclaims 'Authentic Hendrix' to denote that this is an official release in conjunction with Jimi's estate. His image etched into the plate, and 'Jimi Hendrix' signature on the headstock, are registered trademarks

5. Angling the bridge pickup this way, with the treble end further from the saddles and the bass nearer, adds depth to the top strings and twang to the lower ones, and surprisingly, looks quite normal



Stratocaster pickups. All the sounds are bright, but not overly so, and the bridge pickup does seem somewhat tamed by its treble pole pieces' greater distance from the bridge. Favourite settings? Neck and middle, then middle (very *Hey Joe*); then neck (*Wind Cries Mary*). The bridge unit comes into its own when drive is applied – the more the merrier for those lairier 'voodoo' moments.

You barely notice the 'wrong way round' bridge pickup – which was the thing we feared might look the weirdest

Verdict

Despite initial reservations, we came to really like this guitar. It doesn't look odd at all – in fact, the upside-down post-'65 headstock with Fender facing the 'correct' way makes one feel almost anarchic playing it. What's more, you barely notice the 'wrong way round' bridge pickup – the thing we feared might look the weirdest. And if these changes to the basic Strat's formula do add a spark of Jimi magic to tone and playability, all the better, although it's hard to tell without a similarly equipped 'regular' Mexican Strat for comparison. That said, its range of tones from the USA pickups – a good move by Fender – is full of Strat-y personality, and that, and the use of the occasional Gibson aside, was the essence of the Hendrix tone.

Apart from needing a tiny action tweak, it was hard to fault this guitar in build, price or execution. In fact, more than one *Guitarist* 'old hand' has said how cool it would be to turn up to a gig with one. And if you can turn the heads of a bunch of old cynics like us, Fender is clearly doing something right! 🎸



FENDER JIMI HENDRIX STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £689 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Mexico

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple with walnut skunk stripe and reverse headstock with Hendrix signature

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple, integrated with neck, 241mm (9.5") radius

FRETS: 21, medium-jumbo

HARDWARE: Chrome-plated vintage vibrato, Kluson-style six-a-side tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm

ELECTRICS: 3x Fender US Vintage 65 'grey bottom' single coils, 5-way lever pickup selector, master volume and 2x tone controls (neck and middle pickup)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.59/7.9

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Mexican Standard Strats start at £480, including left-handers

LEFT-HANDERS: See range options

FINISHES: Olympic White (as reviewed), Black

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8/10

PROS Cool-looking guitar with real Jimi vibe; plays and sounds great

CONS Not available left-handed