



# Twang Of Four

Since the post-war trade embargo that kept them from our shores, the Stratocaster has held a special allure for British guitarists. Fender gave us an early sneak peak at the new 2015 crop...

WORDS **Chris Vinnicombe** PHOTOGRAPHY **Jesse Wild**





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Looking for an American Stratocaster, but fancy something a little outside the norm? Fender's class of 2015 was launched at the Winter NAMM show in Anaheim in January [see our full report next issue – Ed] and each of this quartet of new instruments brings something different to the menu, though the Californian giant has resisted the urge to make the kind of sweeping specification changes that have seen its rival over in Nashville draw considerable social media heat.

This cross-section of new, American-built Strats sees Fender blend vintage and contemporary features, adding yet more depth and choice to an already near-bewildering catalogue that includes the dual-humbucker instruments we looked at last issue. Always wanted a USA Strat with a big 70s headstock and sandblasted finish? How about an American Standard model with a one-piece rosewood neck? A 70s-style hardtail with a modern feel? A super-tweaked Deluxe HSS? Read on to find out more...





### Limited Edition Sandblasted Strat w/ Ash Body

We kick off with an instrument in a finish so contentious that it has even caused eyebrows to be raised in the jazz-fusion corner of the office. Seeing the Sandblasted Strat's ash body on the page doesn't fully prepare you for the heavily textured feel of the finish treatment in the flesh, as it were. In order to create this effect, a transparent urethane paint is applied, then sandblasted, leaving grooves in the grain behind, in which a black filler coat is visible. Obviously, due to the natural variance in ash, no two instruments will have the same grain pattern. It's similar to a finish we've seen on Jens Ritter's high-end basses, but it's certainly uncommon in the mainstream world inhabited by the Fender Stratocaster. It'll make purists shudder, for sure, but there's hardly a shortage of Strats in more conventional finishes, should your tastes be more traditional.

Aside from that, the Sandblasted Strat has a lovely, light weight and – in common



The radical Sandblasted finish won't be to all tastes

with the three other guitars here – features a modern C shape neck profile that, while lacking in vintage character, provides a neutral platform for a variety of styles, particularly in combination with the 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius and jumbo frets.

Interestingly, this guitar comes loaded with American Standard single-coil pickups, despite the fact that since 2012 these units have been superseded by Custom Shop Fat

price of just under a grand. As a result, we're a little disappointed that, as per the substantially more affordable, Mexican-made Classic Series models, Fender supplies a Deluxe gigbag rather than a hard shell case in which to transport your instrument.

### Limited Edition American Std Strat w/ Rosewood Neck

Although we had all available appendages crossed in the hope that Fender would send us the gorgeous Daphne Blue incarnation of this particular model, there's no doubt that it's still a looker in Three-Colour Sunburst. Every inch an American Standard Stratocaster, apart from its one-piece rosewood neck with a hand-rubbed oil finish, there's a special vibe here that sets this instrument apart from its siblings – the neck's sumptuous feel and lightly-rolled edges giving this 'Standard' much more of a Custom Shop or boutique flavour.

With a feature set that's otherwise identical to the American Standard Stratocaster

'50s pickups on the American Standard guitars themselves. The rear, 'no-load' tone control for the middle and bridge pickups bypasses the tone control circuitry when wide open, and wound down should provide a useful way to tame any excess treble you might expect to encounter when using the bridge pickup of a maple fingerboard, ash-body Strat.

At the time of writing, this instrument was available from several retailers with a street





since the 2012 overhaul – bent steel saddles, Custom Shop Fat '50s pickups, parchment scratchplate and aged plastic parts – the fruits of which we subjected to scrutiny back in issue 357 – the overall level of fit and finish is tidy, as expected, and it really is all about that neck. The light figuring of the rosewood looks as good as the neck feels, and the etched headstock adds a further touch of elegance. We can't wait to plug it in...

The overall level of fit and finish is tidy, and it really is all about that neck

### Limited Edition American Vintage 70s Hardtail Strat

The other models in Fender's American Vintage series zero in on specific model years, and an overhaul in 2012 saw the company track down vintage examples, restore original tooling dies, reformulate

vintage colours and much more in the name of vintage accuracy. This 70s Hardtail Strat is a different animal altogether, and feels more like a nod to an era rather than an attempt to create a period-correct replica.

Roughly half the price of the other Strats in the American Vintage series, you get a Deluxe gigbag rather than a hard case and – big headstock, black scratchplate and a trio of American Vintage '70s Strat Single-Coil pickups aside – there are plenty of features here that deviate from the period. Of course, that isn't necessarily a bad thing; though we've played some very good examples from the early part of the decade, we've also had experience of some Fenders from the tail end of the 70s that might be better used as a ship's anchor than a musical instrument. Shockingly, not every vintage guitar is a classic!

Back in 2015, Fender's 70s Hardtail finds itself equipped

with a satin urethane rather than high-gloss-finished maple neck, with a very similar profile and dimensions to the other guitars here. Unlike the other American Vintage models, there's no nitro finish, but then there wouldn't have been in the 1970s either. There's no truss-rod 'bullet', a four-bolt neck rather than three, contemporary sealed tuners instead of the 70s F-stamped units, dual 'T' Roller string trees rather than butterflies... you get the picture. To all intents and purposes, this is a contemporary hardtail Strat with a 70s flavour rather than a slavish reissue, and many players will find it all the better for it.

### American Deluxe Strat HSS Shawbucker

Fender's American Deluxe range sits on a high branch of the tree when it comes to USA production instruments outside of the Custom Shop, and while the cosmetics are classic, there's an emphasis on pro-spec features that offer contemporary guitarists the kind of smooth ride that smaller boutique builders are famed for. ➤



The American Standard's beautiful etched headstock



This HSS model benefits from a compound radius rosewood fingerboard, a treble-side heel access, an LSR roller nut, S1 switching options, a 'Passing Lane' switch, noiseless N3 stacked 'single coils' and Schaller strap locks as standard.

Compound or conical radius fingerboards are nothing new, of course – violin makers have been doing it for centuries – but for many guitarists it's still rather more novel. In practice, the 241mm (9.5-inch) to 356mm (14-inch) 'board here means that chordal work feels comfortable at the lower end, but there's no choking when you bend up at the top, and indeed a lower action is possible overall. If you haven't tried a guitar with a compound radius fretboard, you really should.

The push-push Passing Lane switch situated between the instrument's tone controls is similar to the John Suhr 'blower switch' or the 'straight out' function on the 2015 Les Paul

Standard in that it routes the bridge pickup signal to the output jack, bypassing the pickup selector, volume and tone circuitry – although it's much easier to engage on the fly here than pulling up the bridge pickup's tone pot on an LP. What you get is an instant jump in volume and bite – but more on that later.

The neck and middle pickups are Fender's noiseless N3 units, which appeared on the American Deluxe Stratocaster in 2010 (reviewed in issue 335), while the bridge humbucker is the Shawbucker that appears in the model name. Tim Shaw was the engineer at Gibson in the early 1980s who was tasked with replicating the PAF for its sought-after Heritage 80 Les Pauls, and his forensic analysis of 1950s humbuckers yielded a pickup with a big voice that now commands serious money on the second-hand market. Shaw has been working behind the scenes at Fender, and designed the Shawbucker that carries his



Shaw has been working behind the scenes at Fender, and designed the Shawbucker that carries his name

name here, which appears along with a clever volume pot that operates at either 500k or 250k to suit the pickup selection. The Shawbucker in our guitar is a pre-production unit – Fender says the instruments will ship with a pickup that's a little brighter and spankier.

### Sounds

Unable to resist the allure of a one-piece rosewood neck, we turn first to the Limited Edition American Standard. While its tonal identity is still firmly rooted in classic Stratocaster territory, there's a warmth and a woodiness to the midrange and a slightly softer high end, thanks in no small part to the aforementioned timber choice and the voicing of the high-

quality Custom Shop pickups. As always, having a tone control for a Strat bridge pickup is a real boon for faux-humbucker tones with high gain, and the natural voice of this instrument helps those sounds out a lot, too.

Switching to the ash body and maple neck of the Sandblasted Strat, there's a somewhat predictable hike in the amount of treble and a little less sophistication and depth as we move through the tones on offer from the American Standard pickups. They aren't bad tones by any means, though, and there's plenty of scope for this instrument's cutting, percussive character in reggae, funk and 60s pop contexts. Whether or not it has the right look for those genres, however, is another question entirely...





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The Deluxe HSS Shawbucker is several orders of magnitude more versatile than that. Although its Noiseless N3 pickups aren't quite as alive, dynamic and spanky as the others on offer here – perhaps because the stacked coils are by definition cancelling some of the whole picture you get with a great set of true single coils – as you wind up the gain and volume, the noise-cancelling benefits are palpable. That's especially true if you record in close proximity to a computer monitor. Though Fender says our guitar's Shawbucker isn't quite right, it certainly sounds good to our ears, and the Passing Lane switch kicks the door down and brings more than enough ammo for hot-rod lead merchants.

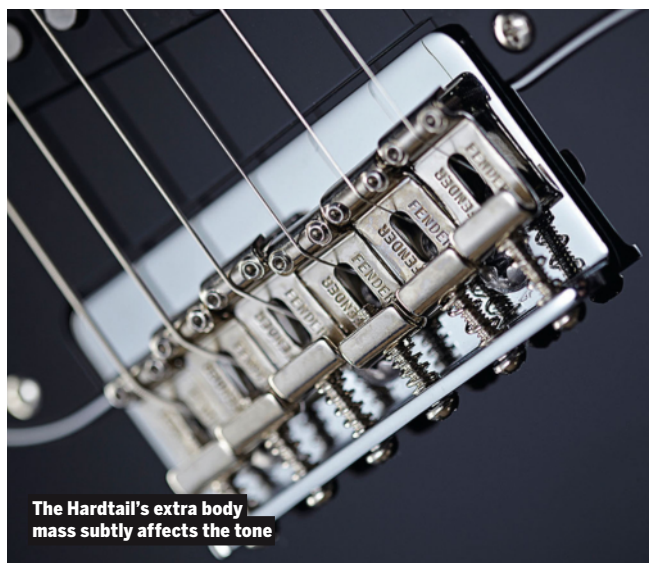
Received wisdom suggests that overtones from vibrato springs are part of a Stratocaster's sonic signature, and it's certainly true that their absence, in combination with the additional body mass behind the bridge that comes with the lack of a vibrato rout, has a subtle influence on any hardtail Strat's tonality. It's definitely the case here, too, although there's absolutely no doubt that it's a Strat you are listening to, and one with a nice medium-vintage output and a direct, choppy attack that's as

usable for Nile Rodgers-isms as it is Texas blues.

### Verdict

Anyone who usually finds a maple-neck Strat too brittle and glassy, and likes a little luxury into the bargain, should check out the Limited Edition American Standard Strat with Rosewood Neck fast – it's drop-dead gorgeous in its Daphne Blue incarnation, and justifies the additional outlay. While the Sandblasted Strat's looks will undoubtedly limit its appeal, the '70s Hardtail's all-black cosmetics and lack of vibrato contribute to a stripped-down utilitarian vibe that helps make it an excellent no-nonsense rhythm machine that's very keenly-priced for an American Vintage series model, averaging at around £750 street at the time of writing.

Given the American Vintage models are so specific elsewhere, its position in the catalogue is a little confusing, but it's a cool guitar nonetheless. Finally, the Deluxe HSS Shawbucker is another example of Fender's ongoing attempts to reclaim the 'Superstrat' and beat off competition from the Suhrs and Tom Andersons of this world. If you're a jobbing session musician or pragmatic modern rocker, then it comes highly recommended. **G**



The Hardtail's extra body mass subtly affects the tone



The N3 single coils keep the noise down on the Deluxe

### Fender USA Strat dimensions



SANDBLASTED STRAT



HARDTAIL STRAT



RW NECK



DELUXE SHAWBUCKER

|                             | SANDBLASTED STRAT | HARDTAIL STRAT | RW NECK      | DELUXE SHAWBUCKER    |
|-----------------------------|-------------------|----------------|--------------|----------------------|
| Nut width (mm)              | 42.8              | 42.8           | 42.8         | 42.8                 |
| 12th-fret width (mm)        | 51.5              | 51.5           | 51           | 51.5                 |
| 1st-fret neck depth (mm)    | 19                | 19             | 19           | 19                   |
| 12th-fret neck depth (mm)   | 22                | 22             | 20           | 22                   |
| Weight (kg/lb)              | 2.9/6.6           | 3.1/7.0        | 3.2/7.1      | 3.7/8.2              |
| String spacing, bridge (mm) | 52.3              | 55.5           | 52.5         | 52.5                 |
| Fretboard radius            | 241mm (9.5")      | 241mm (9.5")   | 241mm (9.5") | 241-356mm (9.5"-14") |



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### Fender Limited Edition Sandblasted Stratocaster With Ash Body

**PRICE:** £1,246 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Ash  
**NECK:** Bolt-on, one-piece maple  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT:** Synthetic bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Maple  
**FRETS:** 22, jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** 6-saddle, chrome vintage-style synchronised vibrato bridge, cast/sealed machineheads  
**ELECTRICS:** 3x American Standard Single-Coil Strat pickups, 5-position blade pickup selector switch, master volume, neck pickup tone, bridge/middle 'no-load' tone  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Sapphire Blue Transparent (as reviewed), Crimson Red Transparent  
**Fender GBI**  
**01342 331700**  
**[www.fender.com](http://www.fender.com)**

| GUITARIST RATING | ★★★★★ |
|------------------|-------|
| Build quality    | ★★★★★ |
| Playability      | ★★★★★ |
| Sound            | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money  | ★★★★★ |

**Guitarist says:** Some won't get past the finish, but this resonant axe has some usable tones



### Fender Limited Edition American Standard Strat With Rosewood Neck

**PRICE:** £1,606 (inc hard case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Bolt-on, one-piece rosewood  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT:** Synthetic bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** 2-point synchronised vibrato bridge with bent steel saddles, Fender Deluxe cast/sealed staggered machineheads  
**ELECTRICS:** 3x Custom Shop Fat '50s Single-Coil Strat pickups, 5-position blade selector switch, master volume, neck pickup tone, bridge/middle 'no-load' tone  
**OPTIONS:** The maple neck American Standard Stratocaster is available in numerous incarnations, with a base price of £1,438  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Three-Colour Sunburst (as reviewed), Daphne Blue



| GUITARIST RATING | ★★★★★ |
|------------------|-------|
| Build quality    | ★★★★★ |
| Playability      | ★★★★★ |
| Sound            | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money  | ★★★★★ |

**Guitarist says:** A sumptuous neck, with a unique voice; we like it in sunburst but love it in blue!



### Limited Edition American Vintage '70s Hardtail Stratocaster

**PRICE:** £982 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Bolt-on, one-piece maple  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT:** Synthetic bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Maple  
**FRETS:** 22, jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** 6-saddle, chrome vintage-style hardtail bridge, cast/sealed machineheads  
**ELECTRICS:** 3x American Vintage '70s Strat Single-Coil pickups, five-way blade pickup selector switch, master volume, neck pickup tone, bridge/middle tone  
**OPTIONS:** Various American Vintage Stratocasters available from £2,074  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Black (as reviewed), Three-Colour Sunburst

| GUITARIST RATING | ★★★★★ |
|------------------|-------|
| Build quality    | ★★★★★ |
| Playability      | ★★★★★ |
| Sound            | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money  | ★★★★★ |

**Guitarist says:** A dark horse that we like a great deal, just don't expect vintage accuracy



### American Deluxe Stratocaster HSS Shawbucker

**PRICE:** £1,822 (inc hard case)  
**ORIGIN:** USA  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Bolt-on, maple  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** LSR roller nut, 2-point Deluxe Synchronised vibrato with pop-in arm, Deluxe Staggered cast/sealed machineheads  
**ELECTRICS:** Shawbucker bridge humbucker, Noiseless N3 middle and neck pickups, 5-position blade selector switch, master volume with S-1 switch, neck pickup tone, middle/bridge tone, Passing Lane push-push switch  
**OPTIONS:** Various American Deluxe Stratocasters start at £1,702  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Three-Colour Sunburst (as reviewed), Black, Olympic Pearl, Sunset Metallic (all £TBC) also all available with maple necks

| GUITARIST RATING | ★★★★★ |
|------------------|-------|
| Build quality    | ★★★★★ |
| Playability      | ★★★★★ |
| Sound            | ★★★★★ |
| Value for money  | ★★★★★ |

**Guitarist says:** A versatile Strat that's subtly tuned for the modern rocker