

JAMES TYLER VARIAX BY LINE 6 JTV59, JTV69 & JTV89 £1,099, £1,049 & £949
ELECTRICS



MODEL CITIZENS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY NEIL GODWIN



The Korean-made versions of James Tyler's brilliant USA Variax guitars have finally landed, dressed to the teeth, and half the price of their American cousins. So, the obvious question is, were they worth the wait? **BY ED MITCHELL**



James Tyler Variax by Line 6 JTV59, JTV69 & JTV89

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What we want to know

1 **Remind us, who is James Tyler anyway?**
He's the well-respected American boutique luthier behind modern classics such as the Tyler Studio Elite... and also the fetching Psychedelic Vomit finish. Tyler designed four US and three Korean JTV Variax models back in 2010.

2 **2010? They took their time getting here!**
Well, they're here now. If you subscribe to the crazy notion of paying your mortgage while still scratching your Variax itch, we reckon the Korean-built JTVs could be worth the wait.

3 **Well they look just like my regular electric guitars do...**
That's the sizzle. While first generation Variax guitars were great at reproducing classic tones, few would call them oil paintings. Line 6 forgot that guitars should look cool – Mr Tyler has redressed the balance in fine style.

It was back in issue 333 that we first put a US James Tyler JTV69 Variax through its paces. That was nearly two years ago and while the Korean-made version was 'in the post', it and its two brothers have only just landed fully in the UK. The good news is that the new, more affordable JTV Variax guitars carry the same internal modelling gubbins as the US-produced models. And as we found out with the US version review, Line 6 has improved the sound of the technology exponentially from its first iteration.

Looking back at the original 2002 model Variax, the most obvious difference with the Tyler model is the addition of some old school magnetic pickups. It's your classic 'best of both worlds' scenario. You can still tweak the onboard digital models with Line 6's Work Bench software and program

your own alternate tunings. You can also connect the Variax to other Line 6 products like a POD and assign guitar models and effects to change simultaneously. But the great thing about having real pickups is that if the rechargeable Lithium-ion battery goes west and the Variax circuitry goes down, the old-school humbucker and single-coils will take up the slack and get you through the gig.

When it works however, the onboard arsenal includes classic electrics (a '60 Tele Custom, '59 Stratocaster, '58 Gibson Les Paul Standard, '59 Gretsch 6120 and '66 Rickenbacker 360-12), jazz

boxes (a '57 Gibson ES-175 and '53 Gibson Super 400), iconic acoustics (a '59 Martin D-28, '95 Gibson J-200 and a '35 Dobro Alumilite) and a couple of quirky items (the Coral/Dano Elektrische Sitar and a Gibson Mastertone banjo) – phew!

JTV59

This might seem like a dispatch from the Ministry of the Bleedin' Obvious but the new JTV59 is based on the Gibson Les Paul. Even if the '59' in the model designation didn't tip you off, the JTV's single-cutaway mahogany and maple constructed body is a dead giveaway. Adding to the established old-school vibe is James Tyler's '59 profile set-neck, which is pleasantly plump while not feeling much more than a handful. The JTV's neck heel is sculpted to offer good access to each of the 22 well-seated and dressed jumbo frets; the Les Paul-a-like 305mm (12-inch) rosewood fingerboard radius adds to a playing experience that's pretty much as good as the real thing.



The knob of guitar versatility...



The JTV59 features a Tyler-designed hardtail wraparound bridge



The JTV69 is the Korean variant of the USA Variax in issue 333

The JTV59 is more than just a good Les Paul derivative. You also get all the Variax models and alternate tunings

The twin vintage-voiced, alnico-magnet powered humbuckers are wired to a master volume, master tone and a three-way toggle switch for the classic Les Paul pickup combinations. While it's all textbook stuff we should point out a curious anomaly we unearthed with the JTV59. We actually had two examples of this guitar at our disposal and found that there was a good pound and a half of difference in weight between them. Our cherry sunburst model was the heaviest at 10lbs. That would have The Incredible Hulk reaching for the Ralghex after a night with this guitar hanging

from a strap. What we're saying is, strap on a few examples before you unload your bank account on a JTV59 and get one you're comfortable with.

Obviously the JTV59 is more than just a good mid-range Les Paul derivative. It's a Variax, so you get access to the aforementioned guitar and folk instrument models and alternate tunings, which include standard, drop D, a half step down, drop D_b, one full step down, DADGAD, open D, blues G, reso G, open A and baritone.

JTV69

The JTV69 can nail its flag to the mast of the good ship



All three have the same Variax innards

Stratocaster. It's as plain as the nose on your face. The maple neck, which is bolted to an alder body via a rounded and tapered heel, shares the same bountiful but manageable '59 profile as the set-in number on the JTV59. The 69 has 22 jumbo frets and the same fingerboard radius too. We do have a couple of gripes regarding the neck. The satin finish is a bit rough in places and the top nut slots could be cut a bit lower. Pushing the strings down at the first fret takes a little more effort than we'd prefer. But these are just two pimples on the otherwise perfectly clear complexion of the JTV69's build quality.

The Rivals

You can't mention modelling these days without bringing up the **Gibson Firebird X** (£3,299). The X uses analogue technology to replicate classic electric and acoustic guitar tones, and a bunch of effects. It's your classic acquired taste but it might be just what you're looking for. Alternatively, the floor-mounted **Roland VG-99 Virtual Guitar System** (£999) offers a staggering range of electric, acoustic, amp and effects models, plus alternate tunings. You'll also need to fix the **GK-3** (£115) pickup to your guitar to make the VG-99 work. You should also sniff out the new **Fender VG Stratocaster G-5** (£1,199), which has Roland's VG-99 and GR-55 Guitar Synthesiser technology built-in. The VG offers classic electric, acoustic and 12-string sounds, plus oodles of alternate tunings.

The 69's H/S/S format pickups are manipulated via a master volume and tone and a five-way blade switch. The five options are: bridge humbucker; bridge humbucker full and middle single-coil; middle pickup only; middle and neck together; and neck single-coil solo. Moving on, the JTV69 is packing a floating two-pivot vibrato unit – with a little pull back on offer – and a set of locking tuners. The Variax stuff is neatly split between the model selection knob situated between the volume and tone controls, and the alternate tuning selector lurking close to the neck single-coil pickup. The



69 has exactly the same models and factory set alternate tunings onboard as the JTV59, so let's move on.

JTV89

Say hello to the 'metal' Variax. Its reverse headstock is as evocative of the late eighties as big girl's blouses in spandex and foil-wrapped root vegetables. Talking about packing, the JTV89 has a mahogany body with a stepped Firebird-esque top and a comfort-contoured back to accommodate any midriff; even if you're not quite as snake-hipped as you were back in the day. The three-piece maple neck is bolted to the body's rounded heel with big recessed screws. The 89 has the slimmer Fast 'N' Flat Tyler neck profile with more of an eighties Charvel vibe than the beefy articles on the other two models. Again, the rosewood fingerboard has a 305mm radius but the 89 has two more jumbo frets than its brothers. Like the JTV69, the top nut slots on the 89 are a little high. A little bit more attention to detail makes all the difference.

The JTV89 shares the same wraparound bridge as the JTV59, with the LR Baggs Radiance Hex piezo circuitry built into the saddles that feed the Variax. In now-classic JTV style there's a pair of alnico humbuckers with a master volume and tone and modern switching in attendance. Kicking off, you're offered the choice of bridge humbucker running full blast; bridge 'bucker with split inside coil; both humbuckers on full; neck humbucker with split inside coil, and the neck 'bucker on all cylinders. While the 89 has the same virtual models in its Variax mode as the JTV59 and

69, the factory-set alternate tunings are a tad different. Standard tuning, drop D and baritone are still onboard, but other tunings have been replaced with metal stuff such as drop C. Of course, you can customise the alternate tunings so it doesn't really matter what the factory settings are.

Sounds

Getting to grips with a Variax is pretty intuitive. That's one of the reasons the technology has survived the past 10 years: it's easier to use than the competition. And it sounds great too. We raved about the improvement in the sounds of the next generation Variax when we tried the US JTV69

back in the day. Obviously, with the Korean models carrying the same brilliant seed we're just as impressed. In a way we're even more impressed given the substantial difference in price with these JTVs and the American jobs.

You'll probably have to take some of the Variax modelling sounds at face value. While the Strat, Les Paul and banjo models are easy to place, some of us won't know what the neck pickup on a 1968 Fender Telecaster Thinline or 1976 Gibson Firebird V is supposed to sound like. The same applies to the subtle difference between a 1959 Martin D-28 and a 1967 Martin 0-18. In those cases you have to enjoy the

sounds for what they are; appreciate how they sound in the mix. If the '59 Strat doesn't work, try the fatter-sounding Danelectro 3021 modelled with both pickups engaged.

We do find the 12-string and detuned settings still sound a bit synthetic here but they are dramatically improved in a mix. The acoustic sounds benefit from the sympathetic frequency range of an acoustic guitar amp or PA system. The banjo model is as brilliant as the Coral sitar is bonkers. If the closest you've ever got to a sitar is having fret buzz on your guitar then you're in for a treat.

Verdict

Yep, these Korean-made JTVs were worth the wait, with bells on. While the three new designs mean there really is a Variax for everyone, that doesn't mean the target market has changed. The Variax has

The Korean models carry the same seed as the US Variax, so we're just as impressed with the sounds available



The JTV89 looks metal, but it doesn't have to sound it...

always been an indispensable tool for the right player. That means studio and club guitarists looking for instant access to myriad tones and alternate tunings. A face-lift and magnetic pickups can't really change an instrument's demographic. We reckon that many existing Variax fans will upgrade to the Korean models, but the JTVs prove the Variax concept has not only stood the test of time, it's looking good for another decade at the top. **G**



James Tyler Variax by Line 6 JTV59

PRICE: £1,099.99
ORIGIN: Korea
BODY: Mahogany with carved maple top
NECK: Mahogany, set-in (24.6 inches)
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech black Tusq XL/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome James Tyler-designed fixed bridge, sealed tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2 x alnico humbuckers, LR Baggs Radiance Hex piezo, Master volume, master tone, guitar model and alternate tuning rotaries, three-way pickup selector switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.5/10
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: James Tyler Variax US Custom Shop JTV59US (£3,399); JTV59US Singlecut Premium (£3,499.99)
FINISHES: Cherry sunburst (as reviewed), tobacco Sunburst and black
Line 6
01788 566566

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



James Tyler Variax by Line 6 JTV69

PRICE: £1,049.99
ORIGIN: Korea
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech black Tusq XL/41.3mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome Tyler Custom vibrato, locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Alnico humbucker (bridge), 2 x single-coils, LR Baggs Radiance Hex piezo, master volume, master tone, guitar model and alternate tuning rotaries, five-way pickup selector blade switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.8/8.3
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: James Tyler Variax US Custom Shop JTV69US (£2,749.99)
FINISHES: Black (as reviewed), Candy Apple red, Lake Placid blue, three-tone sunburst

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Line 6 Variax by Line 6 JTV89

PRICE: £949.99
ORIGIN: Korea
BODY: Mahogany
NECK: Three-piece maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech black Tusq XL/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays, 305mm (12-inch) radius
FRETS: 24, jumbo
HARDWARE: Black nickel James Tyler-designed fixed bridge, sealed tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: Two Alnico humbuckers, LR Baggs Radiance Hex piezo, master volume, master tone, guitar model and alternate tuning rotaries, five-way pickup selector blade switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.3/7.2
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: James Tyler Variax US Custom Shop JTV89US (£2,749.99)
FINISHES: Blood red (as reviewed), black, Lake Placid blue

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★

The Bottom Line

James Tyler Variax by Line 6 JTV59

We like: The spot-on modelling sounds; it's genuinely easy to use; excellent playability
We dislike: You might have to knock back a can of spinach to lift it
Guitarist says: This is a huge palette of sounds on a classic canvas. The JTV59 is a brilliantly versatile instrument. Just make sure you get one that's light enough for you...

James Tyler Variax by Line 6 JTV69

We like: Modelling sounds, natch; excellent vibrato system; the chunky neck
We dislike: Rough finish patches on the neck; top nut could be cut better
Guitarist says: The 69's vibrato adds to the accuracy of some of the modelling sounds; the Fender Stratocaster and Gretsch G6120 settings being a prime example

James Tyler Variax by Line 6 JTV89

We like: The modelling again; the two-octave fretboard; the great sounding humbuckers
We dislike: Again, the top nut is cut a bit too high
Guitarist says: The JTV89's racy looks, slim neck profile and full two-octave fingerboard mean there really is a Variax to suit every player now