



Fender Road Worn Player Stratocaster & Telecaster **£1,055 & £1,019**

We first looked at Fender's Mexican-made Road Worn Series back in February 2009. Like all pre-aged new guitars they were met with both joyful squeals and derisive jeers, depending entirely on whether you think beating up a brand-new guitar is either stupid or clever – as a man named St Hubbins once observed, it's such a fine line.

In fact, it's neither. It's Fender continuing what it does best, and that's offering its most popular guitars in every possible price and spec format, hence our latest two examples. There are in fact three new Road Worn Player guitars in total – the missing specimen is a rosewood 'board Strat with a humbucker at the bridge.

The three-single-coil Stratocaster should be familiar to all but the newest of intergalactic visitors, given this design's mainstream prevalence since the mid-1950s. It begins with a two-piece alder body that's deeply and lovingly contoured; not blocky like certain later guitars can be. When it comes to see-through finishes, Fender needs to be a little more careful with its wood selection from an aesthetic point of view, so you'll pay an extra £36 over the solid colour option (Olympic white is what's offered). On this

example there's a lot of black into the upper horn, which gives a more seventies rather than fifties vibe, exacerbated of course by the convincingly pre-worn black plastics.

The Telecaster body is also alder and finished in gorgeous Candy Apple red – there's just something so right about it on a Tele, even if it 'should' be paired with a rosewood fingerboard (Candy Apple wasn't officially introduced until 1963). It's just thin enough to reveal, almost imperceptibly, the grain of the

alder, so you can pick out the three separate pieces.

Given the 'Player' tag, you might assume some kind of belly contour would be appropriate: nope, this is a slab-body Tele, just like Leo intended. Even so, both guitars remain mercifully light; the Tele at 3.4kg (7.5lb), the Strat a shade lighter. We criticised previous Road Worns for being on the heavy side, so if they're all like this, hooray.

The Road Worn finish is the major talking point, a thin,

The Rivals

The **ESP LTD Distressed Series** is a good mid-price start, including the Tele-inspired **TE-202** (£419.99) with almost identical spec to the Road Worn Player, but with an extra fret and proprietary pickups. The **ST-203** (£419.99) is a rosewood-board, SSS Strat derivative. Both are aged. There's also the more upmarket **ESP Vintage Plus** S-type at £1,639.99. For a more budget choice, check out the **Vintage Icon Series**. Not up to Fender's tone or build quality, but fun nonetheless. The **V6HMR** (£349) is the maple-necked SSS model, while the **V52MRBS** is the maple-necked T-type. There's no neck humbucker option.



The Strat's Synchronised Tremolo is well set up and very stable



The thin nitro finish will appeal to vintage fans

almost-matte nitrocellulose top coat that's been mechanically aged to simulate a few years' heavy use. It's not convincing in a vintage guitar sense – the Tele is marginally more 'authentic' than the Strat here – but Fender is the first to point out that nobody is trying to fool you that these are old guitars; they just ape the feel of well-played instruments and, yes, look a bit vintage from afar.

The lightly worn satin finish of the necks is very similar to the existing Road Worns; inviting, quick under the palm and so much more playable than new nitrocellulose. The medium jumbo frets and a 241mm (9.5-inch) radius however, gives you the option of a lower action, enabling easier string bending with less fret buzz and choking. The difference isn't night-and-day perceptible from a 184mm (7.25-inch) radius and skinny frets (Road Worns have bigger-than-vintage Dunlop 6105s it should be noted), but play for a few minutes and you'll soon get the idea. We'd take these over vintage-correct fingerboards every day of the week. And as is common for modern-day Fenders – particularly if you buy from a good dealer – set-up, playability, and all that essential 'it-feels-great' stuff is of a high standard on both guitars. Being ultra picky, we might just take

the fret ends down a little bit on the underside of each neck, to sit more comfortably with the lightly rolled fingerboard edges. But they're by no means sharp, just for the record.

Profile-wise, the Tele feels like it might have very marginally more bulk, especially on the shoulders. The callipers put the Tele just 0.2mm deeper than the Strat's 21.3mm at the middle of the first fret. They're both spec'd as a modern 'C' shape, which means pretty even depth all the way up to the heel. Also worth mentioning is that if you've always liked the look and tone of maple fingerboards, but hate the feel because of too much glossy lacquer, make sure you try these – it's a whole different ball game.

In terms of hardware, the Strat has a mid-range Synchronised Tremolo with a cast block and bent steel saddles. A quick tap and scratch test with a scalpel reveals the steel to be not as hard as those fitted to American Vintage series instruments, but the middle four screws are raised properly and it's set up well, with good tuning stability – top marks to Fender's fettleers.

The tuners are the die-cast square-button type with through-post stringing, rather than the split-shaft vintage type. The headstock has a



The black and 'burst scheme has a 1970s feel

Fender has chosen to orientate the Tele's control plate back-to-front so the selector switch is out of the way

25/64ths (9.9mm) diameter ferrule, so if you wanted to fit vintage Kluson-style tuners (as we would do), you'll need to purchase some 1/4-inch adapter bushings.

It's the same story for the Tele at the peghead, but the bridge is a more modern, flat baseplate type with six individual saddles; an intonation improvement over the vintage-style three-barrel saddle arrangement. You'll also notice that Fender has chosen to orientate the control plate back-to-front, so that the pickup selector switch is out of the way and the volume pot easier to reach with your pinky.

The pickups get a tweak too; with Fender's Texas Specials in the Strat (as used in the SRV Stratocaster since 1992. Alnico V magnets, and quoted as

6.2/6.5/7.0k ohms DC resistance for neck middle and bridge respectively, though they do vary). Our only slight moan is that, again given the 'player' tag, the bridge pickup isn't wired to the second tone pot: it's among the easiest and most useful Strat mods ever, so we'd do it immediately.

The Road Worn Player Telecaster meanwhile gets a Tex-Mex single-coil at the bridge position, again with alnico V magnets and a not-officially quoted DC resistance of around 8k. The bigger news is the Seymour Duncan '59 humbucker at the neck, giving a certain Keef feel to proceedings. Lest we forget, the numbers can often be a distraction when it comes to pickups, so let's just see how they sound.



Sounds

Hey guess what? Bright, open, airy and sparkling – yes, it's a maple-board Stratocaster! The lightweight two-piece body and thin finish seem to pay dividends when compared directly with the lower-spec Standard Stratocaster. The core, fundamental tone sounds fuller, deeper and brighter all at once; it sounds bigger than our Classic Series '60s Strat too, and isn't embarrassed by our American Vintage '62 with Seymour Duncan Antiquities. There's no doubt the lack of finish on the fingerboard keeps this guitar from being brittle-bright, which is a boon given the extra upper mids and high end from those Texas Special pickups. Clean partial chords soaked in reverb bring all the Jimi/SRV/John Mayer benchmarks, especially in positions two and four, while adding some gain on the neck pickup is pure Texas blues. Add more gain, plus a little delay, and Gilmour is there more than he is on the aforementioned American Vintage '62.

The bridge pickup begs you to attack it. The lack of a tone control means it'll bite you if you don't play it with confidence. But through a decent valve amp at volume, and with some BOSS Blues Driver or TS-808-style overdrive, it won't sound thin. Pile on more distortion and you can get closer to Blackmore-style classic rock, but always with edge – it won't do super smooth unless you can roll off some of that top.

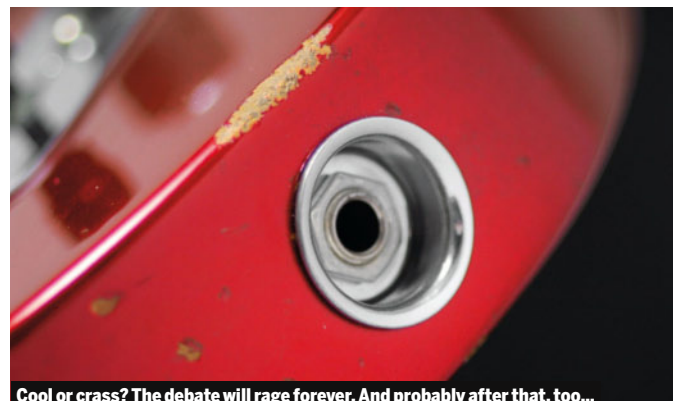
The Tele is a more mixed bag. While doing our CD demos, we found the bridge pickup to be edgy and bright, just as you'd expect from a good Tele. In isolation – and connected to the tone control – it enables you to span twangin' country licks, through classic rock chords and on to massive-gained riffing – few people realise how good most Teles are at that.

The issue comes when changing pickups. In isolation the Seymour Duncan '59 sounds big, fat and full of all that rhythm raunch you'd want from a neck humbucker. But compared with the bridge pickup it's very dark, meaning you have to roll on a ton of treble to the amp, rendering the bridge pickup way too spiky. Fender has tried to alleviate this by fitting uncommon 375k ohm pots, as found in the American Vintage Hot Rod Tele (Teles usually have 250k pots, humbucker guitars 500k). To our mind it's a compromise too far – might this have been a case for three pots, or even dual-concentrics for ultimate flexibility between pickups? The '59 does have four-conductor wiring however, so you could buy a four-way switch and make use of the split-coil sounds. Or, simply unwire the neck pickup from the tone control and roll back the highs from the bridge only. The middle position is very satisfying, however, offering the 'bucker's girth with hair and presence from the bridge: a huge sound. Keef spent time here, and so should you.

There's no doubt the lack of finish on the Strat fingerboard keeps this guitar from being brittle-bright



The Tele's neck humbucker will appeal to Keef fans



Cool or crass? The debate will rage forever. And probably after that, too...



The polepieces and covers are aged to look like old pickups

You'll find those flatter fingerboards, bigger frets and worn-in necks really do improve playability

Verdict

Yet more Strats and Teles? If you aren't obsessed with every tiny detail of Leo's 'perfect' pair, you'll be rolling your eyes by now. Yet as with every variant that's gone before, it's the specific mix of those all-important details that make a particular Strat or Telecaster the right guitar for you. Leading the charge with these is the faux-ageing (charming if not absolutely convincing) and the black plastics, but look deeper and you'll find those flatter fingerboards, bigger frets and worn-in necks really do improve playability considerably over strict vintage spec. And of course, Keith Richards fans simply can't ignore the Tele.

Hikes in fuel prices and VAT, a global economic crisis, and the distant memory of very strong Sterling means that you're paying considerably more for your Fenders now than a few years ago, and that will be the rub for many of us.

Nevertheless, these are highly credible guitars with a slew of fine tones, no question. **G**

The Bottom Line

Fender Road Worn Player Stratocaster

We like: Pro-quality Strat tones; lovely playability; light weight; played-in feel

We dislike: Gigbags are average at best; limited colour choice; no rosewood 'board SSS model

Guitarist says: A rewarding mix of vintage and modern aesthetics and features. The ageing will be the decider

Fender Road Worn Player Telecaster

We like: Humbucker fatness; great looks; lovely playability; played-in feel; light weight

We dislike: As the Strat; the huge tonal contrast between pickups

Guitarist says: A must try for Keef-o-philes and anyone else wanting maximum tonal breadth from a Tele. As long as you like fake ageing...



Fender Road Worn Player Stratocaster

PRICE: £1,055 (inc deluxe gigbag)

ORIGIN: Mexico

TYPE: Offset double-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone, 42mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple, 241mm

(9.5-inch) radius, black dot inlays

FRETS: 21, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Fender Synchronized Tremolo with screw-in arm, Fender tuners, aged chrome

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Three Fender Texas Special single-coil pickups, five-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone (neck), tone (middle)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.3/7.3

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: Road Worn Player Stratocaster HSS and Road Worn Player Series Telecaster (same price).

There's also the existing Road Worn series: '50s Stratocaster, '60s Stratocaster, '50s Telecaster, '60s Telecaster (all from from £1,019), the '50s Precision Bass (from £1,199) and '60s Jazz Bass (from £1,307)

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Two-tone sunburst (as reviewed) and Olympic white (£1,019). Worn urethane neck, worn nitrocellulose body

Fender GBI

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Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender Road Worn Player Telecaster

PRICE: £1,019 (inc deluxe gigbag)

ORIGIN: Mexico

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)

NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone, 42mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple, 241mm

(9.5-inch) radius, black dot inlays

FRETS: 21, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Fender flat-plate bridge base with six saddles, Fender tuners, aged chrome

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54.5mm

ELECTRICS: Fender Tex-Mex Tele single coil (bridge) and Seymour Duncan '59 SH1N humbucker (neck), three-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.4/7.5

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: As Road Worn Player Strat

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Candy Apple red (as reviewed) and black. Worn urethane neck, worn nitrocellulose body

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★