



# Fender Highway One Stratocaster, Telecaster & Jazz Bass 'Upgrades' £699, £599 & £649

## FENDER HIGHWAY ONE STRATOCASTER UPGRADE

**PRICE:** £599 (inc gigbag)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Offset double-cut solidbody electric

**BODY:** Alder

**NECK:** Maple

**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5-inch)

**NUT/WIDTH:** White synthetic/43mm

**FINGERBOARD:**

Rosewood, 241mm

(9.6-inch) radius

**FRETS:** 22, jumbo

**HARDWARE:** Vintage-style pivot vibrato, Fender/Ping tuners, all chrome plated

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 53mm

**ELECTRICS:** Three Fender Hot Alnico III single-coils (middle reverse-wound and reverse polarity), master volume with two tones both with Greasebucket circuitry, five-way lever pickup selector switch

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.5/7.7

**OPTIONS:** Maple fingerboard. The H/S/S Strat, with an Atomic humbucker in bridge and two Hot Alnico III single-coils, is also £599

**LEFT-HANDERS:** Yes, S/S/S-only at £599

**FINISHES:** Three-colour sunburst, Daphne blue (as reviewed), flat black, honey blonde, wine transparent – all satin nitro-cellulose

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Fender's ultra-affordable Highway One series has been revamped and upgraded for 2006, and they were already among the best value guitars around by Simon Bradley & Roger Newell

Fender's Highway One series first appeared in Guitarist back in December 2002. Four years on and the successful range – the entry point to the USA-made instruments – has been substantially upgraded in specification but not price: that stays the same. So the three upgraded Strats (S/S/S, H/S/S and leftie), along with the Tele still cost £599; the Jazz and Precision basses are slightly more expensive at £649.

### Highway One Strat & Tele Upgrades

Originally conceived as affordable players' guitars the 2006 upgrades concentrate on sound: "It's function over looks: performance," says Justin Norvell, Fender Electrics marketing manager. Arguably at the top of the 2006 upgrades is the finish. It remains satin to the touch but, instead of the thin acrylic of the original models, it's now nitro-cellulose, offering a much more palpable vintage vibe. It's still a thin coating and there's no getting away from the fact that it's very likely to mark much more readily than a thick layer of high-gloss poly. But that's the point, Fender wants it to show the battle scars. A huge advantage is that the finish, tonally, will allow maximum resonance too.

If you default to disliking the overly shiny new look of some guitars, this is the perfect remedy and in the flesh, the Strat's Daphne blue shade benefits from the satin finish possibly more than the sunburst of the Tele. Neither Closet

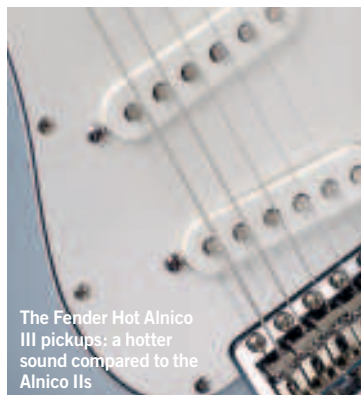
Classic nor brand new in the literal sense, a restrained vibrancy seems to be the order of the day as far as the look of both is concerned.

Another notable change is with the overall livery, which has changed from a fifties-style – spaghetti logos, medium-jumbo frets and small headstocks – to an unashamedly seventies feel. So, this equates to a big headstock for the Strat (also providing more mass) with black outlined gold Fender logos, parchment pickguards and 22 enormo-frets for both.

HIGHWAY ONE STRAT	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** The palpable vibe of our example; great fretwork

■ **WE DISLIKED** There's no excuse for the off-centre bridge



The Fender Hot Alnico III pickups: a hotter sound compared to the Alnico IIs

Electronically Fender has gone back to the drawing board too with the power of both guitars' pickups being increased. Replacing the vintage-style single-coils are what Fender describes as Hot Strat and Tele single-coils that are all based around an Alnico III magnet foundation, a mid-strength magnet that should provide a slightly enhanced, hotter performance when compared to an Alnico II.

Additionally, both guitars offer Fender's increasingly popular Greasebucket tone circuit that was developed in the Custom Shop as a way of rolling off the high-end without the usual low-end woomph of a standard passive tone control circuit. Didn't this have something to do with a certain Billy Gibbons? "We designed with him in mind," states Fender's Mike Eldred, "and he was the testing guy. I actually named it myself after the can of used bacon grease that used to sit on our stove at home when I was a kid." So now you know!

On the Tele the Greasebucket affects all three pickup selections, while the Strat's neck and bridge pickups (there's no tone control on the middle pickup) benefit from their own greased-up tone pots. Any electricians among you will appreciate the information that each Greasebucket tone control wiring includes two ceramic disk capacitors alongside a 4.7k ohm metal film resistor: for the rest of us, just knowing it's there is enough... ➔





### The rivals

STRATOCASTER	
Tyler Classic	£1,995
Fender American Series	
Strat	from £849
Squier Standard Strat	£209

Of the myriad three-pickup guitars inspired by Fender's classic out there, easily the best is this sumptuous Tyler option. Three custom-wound Tyler, Suhr or DiMarzio single-coils, a neck you'd kill for and a wonderful all round performance makes this a real contender. The American Series continues to prove amongst the most popular guitars available today. With rolled fingerboard edges, a trio of Fender single-coils, a two-point vibrato... need we go on? The voice of legends. Squier's cheaper options are getting better and better with every passing moment. With 21 frets, a great neck and a sixties-inspired vibe, who'd buy a copy?





**FENDER HIGHWAY ONE TELECASTER UPGRADE**

As Strat except...

**TYPE:** Single-cut solidbody electric

**HARDWARE:** Traditional three-saddle, string-thru body bridge

**STRING SPACING,**

**BRIDGE:** 55mm

**ELECTRICS:** Two Fender

Hot Alnico III Tele pickups (bridge and neck), master volume, master tone with Greasebucket tone circuit, three-way lever pickup selector

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.4/7.5

**OPTIONS:** The Highway One Texas Tele, yet to be upgraded and featuring two Hot Vintage pickups, costs £699

**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not yet

**FINISHES:** Three-colour sunburst (as reviewed), Daphne blue, flat black, honey blonde, wine transparent – all satin nitro-cellulose

HIGHWAY ONE TELE	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ <b>WE LIKED</b> Wonderful Tele tones with extra warmth	
■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> Small construction issues aside, it's near faultless	

→ But we're not done yet. The Strat's middle pickup is also reverse-wound with reverse polarity, so positions two and four on the five-way pickup selector should be devoid of hum pick-up. The vibrato block has been changed from zinc to more vintage-accurate steel and the string spacing at the bridge is slightly narrower – with the bigger frets and smoother playability, it's clear Fender didn't want us slipping off the edges.

Elsewhere everything remains within the ballparks that made the 1950s originals of these designs so compelling. The cast and sealed tuners are made by the far eastern Ping hardware factory while the Tele's bridge plate bears a trio of chromed saddles and traditional thru-body stringing. Both guitars feature single-piece necks of a lightly flecked maple and both come with a padded Fender Deluxe gigbag.

Niggles? Well, we did discover a couple of shoddy points. When we removed the Tele's control plate during our investigation into the Greasebucket circuit we found that one of the screw holes securing the chrome had been drilled into the body twice, while the Strat's bridge was just off-centre sufficiently to disallow us from being able to get the vibrato arm in place without using excessive force. This latter problem is certainly irritating and we hope that these are both isolated incidents.

**SOUNDS:** A conundrum with reviewing such iconic guitars is exactly what to plug into, let alone what to play, so we ultimately plumped for a Rivera Clubster 45 and set to work.



Medium jumbo frets: a more comfortable option

**It still amazes us just how versatile a Tele can be, and the Greasebucket circuitry simply adds more and more sounds to your fingertips**

Beginning with the Strat, there's little doubt that the influence of the Greasebucket circuit is best experienced with quite a fat overdrive tone – not unlike that of ZZ Top in effect. With tone one up full the bridge pickup, unsurprisingly, is brash, in your face and great fun to play with. Roll tone control one back to around seven and the edges of the sound round off to give an almost Gibson SG-style honk that's perfect for old school-style finger snaps and half-chords. Performing a similar action with the neck pickup and employing tone control two, proceedings range from a nicely mellow yet vibrant sound to an almost classic Clapton-esque ooze. Remember that the entire system remains passive yet, because Greasebucket doesn't overload the bass end and muffle the tone, it seems as if there's almost a mid-range hike.

Cleanly all five settings sparkle like a frosty lawn, with positions two and four, although unavoidably quieter than the solo'd pickups, sounding both smooth and rich to remind us why we like Strats so much to begin with!

The Tele is, as you'd expect, a far zingier proposition and with a similar gain setting it cuts like a knife... wholly musically, of course. It still amazes us just how versatile a Tele can be, and the Greasebucket simply adds more and more sounds to your fingertips. If the classic tone is just too bright for you, the tone pot is subsequently a far more capable tool to wield.

A Tele of a standard configuration will never be perfectly at home with extreme rock and metal styles but, for blues, country, pop and the rest it's ideally suited. As far as the feel goes, both guitars feature a modern 'C'-shape to their necks, although the Tele's fingerboard widens more expansively out towards the body, and those 22 jumbo frets – and they are big – have always been a more comfortable option to those spindly vintage wires.

**Highway One Jazz Bass Upgrade**

Although there was little wrong with the original Highway One Precision and Jazz basses these new upgrades are more than welcome. "Like the guitars, the basses have got the super-charged →

**The rivals**

**TELECASTER**

Peavey Omniac JD USA

£1,299

Fender American Series

Tele from £849

Squier Standard Tele

£209

Jerry Donahue's new signature model is an excellent variation on the classic theme. Boasting a pair of Duncan pickups and a custom-wound five-way pickup selector, it's a great all-rounder. The Tele has become a cornerstone of guitar design and with a modern neck profile, Delta Tone system and a parchment scratchplate, this instrument is made a classic. Again. The basic Squier Tele option puts everything you'd expect into a very affordable package. We're fans of the Vintage Modified and Master series, especially the Tele Customs reviewed in issue 262.



The Badass II bridge has been a popular upgrade for owners of older basses for years

→ treatment," says Norvell.

The look has changed slightly with seventies styling and the appropriate headstock logo and, like the guitars, the old-school satin nitro-cellulose finish, neatly paired with the off-white 'parchment' three-ply scratchplate.

Structurally, according to Norvell though missing from Fender's specs, the neck has the benefit of carbon fibre reinforcing rods, while more obviously the vintage-style bridge is replaced with a chunky Badass II bridge – a highly popular after-market upgrade on so many older Fender basses. This model offers spacing adjustment for the strings as well as intonation.

Overall there's already a kind of well-used feel about this Jazz, and the smoothness of the body and slinky neck are very inviting. The rosewood board has a warm, vibrant colour but it's a pity that the maple neck is a little anaemic-looking and more typical of Fender basses made outside of the USA. And while the graphite reinforcing in the neck is certainly not apparent there is a slightly edgier quality in the general sound. That's also partly attributed to this ultra thin nitro finish for along with the wood grain showing nicely it also allows a certain vibrancy of sound to shine through. Let's plug in...

**SOUNDS:** Electronically things are again slightly different for although the individual volume controls stay intact (essential for those subtle pickup blending moments) the Greasebucket tone control is much more sensitive. By naturally defeating the top tier tones rather than emphasising the woollier lower frequencies it allows the full qualities of the vintage Alnico single-coils to really shine through and induces a tighter and more focused sound. Naturally warm sounding, the Jazz is legendary for its tonal blending and resulting sweet spots of sound but this Highway actually produces another huge step forward. When setting your sound you discover there's far more interaction between the three controls so the bass can expand or compress its tonal values by a staggering amount – especially as it's all passive. Sweeping from the sublime to the raucous is achieved with the minimum of effort. This bass really is a joy to play.

### Verdict


Aside from purely aesthetic changes like the logo font most of these Highway One upgrades are all about sound and performance, even the bigger Strat head is designed to add more mass. Many 'upgrades' dictate

HIGHWAY ONE JAZZ BASS TEST RESULTS	
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ <b>WE LIKED</b> Vintage feel; Greasebucket tones; new colours	
■ <b>WE DISLIKED</b> The maple neck looks a tad anaemic	

**The Jazz is legendary for its tonal blending and resulting sweet spots of sound but this Highway actually produces another huge step forward**

gold-plated hardware, fancy inlays and colours. Not here.

The rejuvenated pickups of the Strat and Tele and the associated Greasebucket tone controls breathe more modern life into both guitars, giving what would have already been an extensive tonal pallet even more colours to play with. Little construction concerns aside, the big frets, thin nitro finish and no-nonsense approach make both of these guitars extremely alluring and, at a mere £599 for what is a genuine American Fender, these have to be on most players' must-try lists.

The bass is no different in terms of quality and value. There's a superb vintage-like feel about the Jazz Upgrade created by that silky finish and played-in feel of the neck. Add in the structural changes and that tone circuit and what was already a superb entry into the USA line has just gotten better. Try one out and we think you'll soon decide you want one! 

### Fender Highway One Stratocaster

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Fender Highway One Telecaster

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### Fender Highway One Jazz Bass

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

### FENDER HIGHWAY ONE JAZZ BASS UPGRADE

PRICE: £649 (inc

gigbag)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Passive four-string

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple with dual graphite rods, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH:

864mm (34-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: White

synthetic/38.5mm

FINGERBOARD:

Rosewood, 241mm

(9.5-inch) radius

FRETS: 20, medium

jumbo

HARDWARE: Badass

Bass II bridge with

vintage-style tuners, all

chrome-plated

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 19mm average

(centres)

ELECTRICS: Vintage

Alnico single-coil

pickups, Greasebucket

master tone control

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4/8.8

OPTIONS: None.

Upgraded Highway One

Precision bass £649

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISH: Three-colour

sunburst, Daphne blue,

honey blonde transparent

(reviewed), wine

transparent, flat black –

all satin nitro-cellulose

## The rivals

### JAZZ BASS

ESP LTD TA-200 Tom

Araya £649

Fender Deluxe Active

Jazz Bass from £649

Fret King Perception 50

£799

The Fret King is modelled on the Jazz but with a batwing headstock it presents a persona all its own. ESP LTD has a budget priced, passive version of Tom Araya's Signature four-string. This Slayer of a bass comes with a chiselled body edge and a mighty 35-inch scale. But if it's a real modern Jazz you want, Fender's Deluxe Series offers an active three-band EQ.