

FIRST PLAY



**FENDER AMERICAN DELUXE
STRAT HSS SHAWBUCKER**
£1,339

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WHAT IS IT? Feature-packed
HSS 'SuperStrat'

SET TO STUN

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S-1 switching features alongside the Shawbucker bridge 'bucker on this fully loaded Strat. Pickup expert Tim Shaw tells us more about his new design

Earlier in 2015, Fender announced the Shawbucker-equipped American Standard and American Deluxe guitars. While the guitars themselves are pretty standard Fender fare, the Shawbucker is lesser known. Its designer is Nashville-based Tim Shaw, who won't mind being classed as a veteran of the musical instrument industry, with spells at both Gibson and Fender – and, interestingly, it's Tim's spell at Gibson that informs this new pickup design. One of Tim's earliest teachers was pickup legend Bill Lawrence – "I learned a lot from him about pickups and circuits," says Tim, which sounds like understatement – but it was at Gibson's old Kalamazoo plant that Tim's research began in earnest.

"I got there in '78 and met Walt Fuller, just about the time he retired," continues Tim. Fuller was working on what was to become the Heritage 80 Les Pauls, and the job of the pickups fell to Tim. "I had a lot of information from Seth Lover; I had his mimeograph sheets with all the specs and vendors of the materials for the original humbucker."

For a variety of reasons, the materials had changed. "You see, magnets at that time... well, it wasn't a precise science, so the Alnico mix could change – that was one variable."





Then there was the coating of the copper coil wire, which had changed from the thicker and more expensive plain enamel to thinner and more cost-effective polyurethane (known as single poly with trade names such as Polysol).

“So, a coil wound with 5,000 turns of plain enamel-[coated] wire takes up a little more room than 5,000 turns of wire coated with single poly and it sounds a little airier because it’s got lower capacitance,” Tim explains.

“This was a detail that no-one cared about at Gibson at the time – the new poly coating was cheaper and more consistent, so they changed. Then the magnet material changed from Alnico II to V around ’71, though that’s not a documented change – hey, it’s a magnet, it works, who cares? So there were a bunch of changes – either actively, the wire, or passively, the magnet – that had changed. When I started looking at the old stuff, I realised whatever we were doing wasn’t what we started out doing. And as people seemed to like these old ones, my charter was, ‘Well, how close can we get?’”

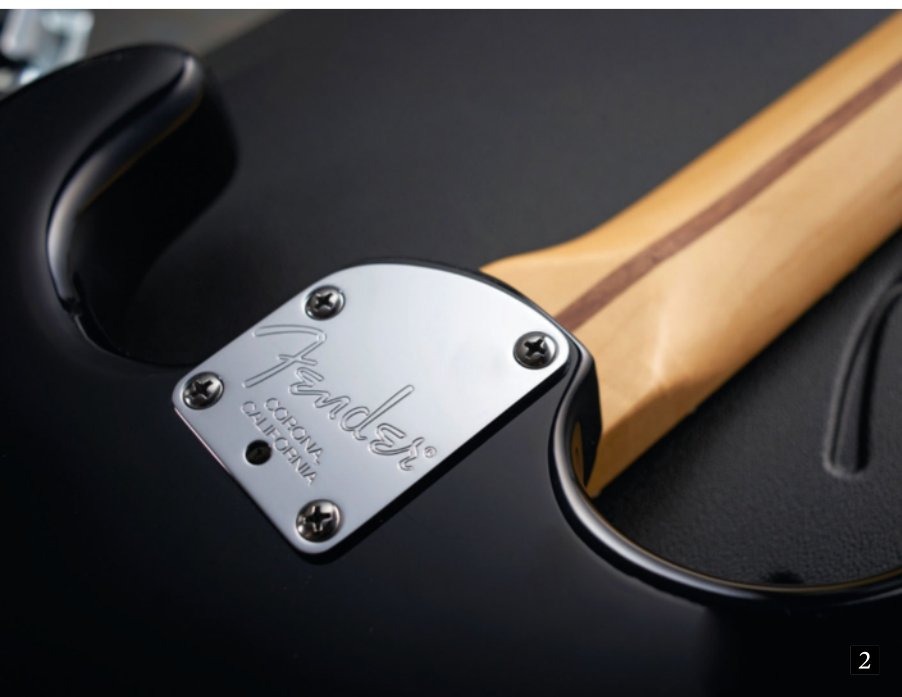
The answer was pretty close indeed, and the “Tim Shaw” humbuckers, made in Kalamazoo between 1980 and ’84, are the stuff of legend.

Tim left Gibson in 1992, and was hired by Fender in 1996. It wasn’t until he was asked to recreate his humbucker for Fender in 2013, however, that the Shawbucker project started. Tim and his research team built some prototypes to his original recipe.

“We had original spec and some hotter ones, overwinds of 42 gauge wire and stuff. We listened to them. Fender’s Justin Norvell picked the one he liked, which was the one I liked, and it ended up in the Strat you have there. So Alnico II magnet, plain enamel-coated wire and it’s not potted, not waxed

1. Alongside the new Shawbucker are a pair of ‘noiseless’ N3 stacked single-coil-sized humbuckers that use different Alnico magnets. If hum pick-up from standard single coils bothers you, these are extremely quiet
2. The tapered edge of the body heel requires a differently shaped neck plate. We also have Fender’s Micro-Tilt neck adjustment, which makes setup far easier than a vintage-spec Stratocaster
3. More refinements can be found at the headstock with rear-locking tuners – which feature staggered-height string posts – and LSR’s high-tech roller nut. These subtle tweaks dramatically improve the vibrato’s return-to-pitch efficiency





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There's a very journeyman feel to the whole instrument, especially when you find your 'core' sounds

at all. There is an airier quality, a kind of transparency that you get when you don't pot them. Also, it's pretty much the lowest output, with a DC resistance of around 7.6kohms: the lower end of the humbucking wind."

Aside from the zebra Shawbucker, things look pretty standard here. Modern Fender features such as the two-post vibrato, staggered-height locking tuners, LSR roller nut and a compound-radius fingerboard (plus a very slick setup) are present and correct, but the S-1 switch within the volume control knob and an additional push switch above the dual tone controls tell us this is no standard ride. The five-way lever switch selects the bridge, bridge and middle, middle, middle and neck and neck pickups in parallel with the S-1 switch in its up (or off) position. Depress the switch and the combinations slightly change and are primarily in series, not parallel, with some additional trickery.

For example, in position 1 we have the bridge humbucker and the middle pickup in series, not parallel, while position 2 combines them in series with 'a special capacitor' on the bridge pickup. Position 3 selects all three pickups in a combined series/parallel linkage, position 4 links neck and middle in series with a special capacitor on the neck pickup and, finally,



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position 5 links neck and middle in series. That small push switch instantly selects the bridge humbucker, bypassing the volume and tone.

Feel & Sounds

The refined nature of the Deluxe is reflected in its feel, with the modern, slender but not over-thin and quite full-shouldered 'C' profile of the neck, larger frets, the compound radius 'board, and the chamfered corner of the neck heel – not to mention the slinky in-tune vibrato system. While initially daunting, the expanded sounds give you many options both in cleaner classic Fender territory and beefier gained situations. The first surprise is how matched the 'bucker is with the N3s. It's a little thicker, wider and smoother sounding, and a little louder, but tonally, there's plenty of Fender-y high-end bite. While the bypass sound may be a little bright for some, voiced with the volume and tone in circuit, that crispy high end is slightly attenuated and it really sits well with the 'noiseless' N3s. These units certainly don't pick up as much hum as a standard single coil in solo selection – mixed, they're even quieter.

Push the S-1 switch down and, in series, the bridge/middle selection sounds bigger and wider than the sole humbucker. Position 2 is more hollowed, a great rootsy low-gain



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rhythm sound, and position 3 is wider and darker but still very Fender-y. The two neck/middle selections provide another flavour of Fender funk. There's not a bad sound to our ears anywhere, although the N3s do sound quite 'modern' – bright-edged and hollowed, less thick and chunky compared with Texas Specials, for example – but that balance between the humbucker and the N3s means you're not contrasting balanced levels.

There's a very journeyman feel to the whole instrument, especially when you find your 'core' sounds, whatever they might be. It's obviously oh-so-Fender, but the Shawbucker addition doesn't mean, like some, that we have a Fender/Gibson duality. Sure, you could use it like that, but to our ears, this is 100 per cent a Fender guitar with a low-output clean, clear humbucker that really works. Is it the 'best' PAF-alike out there? Well, there's an open, uncompressed voice here that really suits and it might just change your view on humbucking-pickup-equipped Strats. Frankly, our much loved old Road Worn feels like a museum piece in comparison.

Verdict

If you prefer a more conventional drive, then we'd suggest the cheaper Shawbucker-equipped American Standard, but the raft of upgrades on offer here – not to mention the S-1 switching – kicks the Deluxe into a different league. It's more refined, and will suit someone who knows their guitars and needs a lot of sounds from a single instrument. **G**

4. The new Shawbucker is highly vintage-informed and falls into the low-output side of the PAF-alike humbucker. It's very different from the high power 'buckers that were a common mod in the 80s

It might just change your view on humbucking-pickup-equipped Strats... Our much loved old Road Worn feels like a museum piece in comparison



FENDER AMERICAN DELUXE STRAT HSS SHAWBUCKER

PRICE: £1,339 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, Modern 'C' profile, bolt-on with Micro-Tilt adjustment

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: LSR roller/42.8mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood,

241-356mm (9.5-14") radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Chrome-plated 2-Point Deluxe vibrato with pop-in arm, Deluxe staggered cast/sealed locking tuners vibrato, vintage-style tuners with Fender logo

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm

ELECTRICS: Fender Shawbucker (bridge), Noiseless N3 single coil-sized humbucker (middle, neck), 5-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume (with S-1 switch), tone 1 (neck), tone 2 (middle and bridge)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.47/7.6

OPTIONS: Maple fingerboard, Sunset Metallic and 3-Color Sunburst cost £1,399

RANGE OPTIONS: Other American Deluxe Strats are available from £1,159. See www.fender.com

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Black (as reviewed), Olympic Pearl, Sunset Metallic, 3-Color Sunburst. Satin urethane neck; gloss polyurethane body

Fender GBI

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PROS A hugely refined Stratocaster with low-output bridge humbucker and versatile S-1 switching

CONS Vintage purists, or indeed lovers of high output 'rock' HSS Strats, should look away