



THE FOUR TOPS

We test four hot-rodded guitars designed to convert unbelievers to the Fender faith, and get hooked in the process. Now it's your turn... **by Ed Mitchell**



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP SOWELS





Fender Blacktop Stratocaster HH, Telecaster HH, Jaguar HH & Jazzmaster HS £539 each

What we want to know

- 1 Yet more new versions of the famous four?**
Well, the Blacktops are aimed at players who want higher-gained sounds from a Fender, hence the humbucker emphasis. The shapes might not be new, but these are focused, affordable instruments that occupy their own niche in the range.
- 2 But can't Fender design some new guitars?**
Fender and Squier has a past littered with new shapes, but sell-through has been tiny compared with the established designs. We guitar players seem to just love those classic Fenders.
- 3 So who's gonna play these then?**
Well, that's the thing. As we mention in the review, it's evident that Fender is trying to win itself some converts from the other big brands here, and whether it will remain to be seen. That said, there's a lot to like for Fender fanatics too.

There was a time when Fenders had single-coil pickups and Gibsons had humbuckers, and people were okay with that. You paid your money, took your choice. Then hard rock happened and suddenly everyone wanted more power from their pickups. By the early 1970s, the chisels were out and humbuckers were in, no matter what you played. Fender got the message and released the twin humbucker-equipped Tele Deluxe and Thinline in 1972. Later in the decade, tinkerer extraordinaire Edward Van Halen drove the point home by forcing a humbucker into the bridge position of a 'Strat-style' body and, well, the rest is history. The legacy of that early tonal cross-fertilisation can be seen in these new Fender Blacktop guitars. The range consists of four classic Fender models – Telecaster, Stratocaster, Jazzmaster and Jaguar – each modified with humbucking pickups and a bunch of other features that include bolt-on maple necks with a gloss urethane finish, a 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius, medium jumbo frets and 'skirted' amp-style knobs. The fact that the Blacktop Series is being marketed with downloads of sticker designs and stencils is a good clue to the

type of player Fender is hoping to snare with this range. Young punk, metal and indie guitarists who wouldn't have considered a Fender as 'their thing' but might be tempted by the extra firepower on offer. But where does that leave the rest of us?

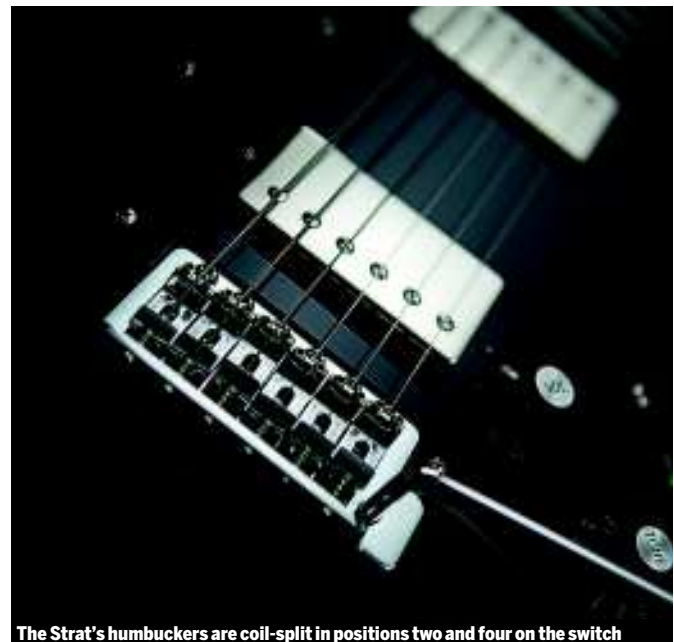
Blacktop Stratocaster HH

We understand Fender has to tie the four models in the Blacktop Series together with some unifying features. That said, there may be those of you

The Rivals

Blacktop Stratocaster HH

Twin-humbucker Strats with classic vibratos are thin on the ground, but there are countless descendants available from the likes of **Jackson** and **Ibanez**. Outside the box, look at the **Hagstrom F20T** (£379) – it's like a Strat meets an SG.



The Strat's humbuckers are coil-split in positions two and four on the switch



who would prefer open-coil 'buckers and a set of regular knobs instead of nickel pickup covers and skirted control knobs. All good – these guitars are priced keenly, so mod away!

The humbuckers are hooked up to a five-way switch. In position one, the bridge pickup is firing on all cylinders.

The Rivals

Blacktop Telecaster HH

The Blacktop Telecaster's biggest rival is the **Schecter PT** model (£599) that we reviewed in issue 337. Inspired by Pete Townshend's custom Schecter guitars of the seventies and eighties, the PT has a truly stonking pair of humbuckers onboard.

Position two activates each humbucker's inside coil. Position three has both 'buckers on full, while the next click on the switch selects the inside coil only on the neck pickup. The final selection is the neck pickup running at full throttle.

The Strat and Tele are both available with either a maple or rosewood fingerboard. We mentioned before that all the models in the range have gloss urethane-finished necks – it's an unusual choice given that satin-finished necks have become the norm these days. The gloss finish certainly adds a cool vintage vibe to the guitars, but the trade off is that the

going could get a bit sticky if you get sweaty mitts when you play.

The Strat's old school vibe is completed with a classic 'synchronized' vibrato. Ike Turner, Hank Marvin and Jimi Hendrix made their bones with a Strat vibrato and it still cuts the mustard today, provided it's set up correctly.

Blacktop Telecaster HH

The Telecaster HH has an alder body with Strat-like contouring at the rear to help the guitar rest against ribs, or beer belly, whichever it hits first. It also features a six-saddle fixed bridge with through-body

stringing and a control plate that appears to have been put on upside down. This has become a common mod for Tele nuts looking for better access to the volume and tone controls. Advocates also reckon that flipping the controls prevents accidental contact with the pickup selector switch while playing. Many of you will no doubt prefer Leo Fender's original design, but it's all down to personal preference and certainly not a deal breaker.

The Tele has a three-way pickup selector switch for the usual bridge only/neck only/both pickups on arrangement. We think Fender has missed a trick by not fitting a five-way switch on the Tele as it did with the Strat, it would have made it much more versatile. We took a closer look at the pickup wires and they're not four-conductor, so you can't modify the stock pickups to split the coils. Pity.

The neck on the Telecaster HH has a slim 'C' profile that should find favour with most players. Like the other guitars in the range, it comes fitted with a set of Fender Super 250L (0.009-0.042 gauge) strings.

Blacktop Jaguar HH

Take a bunch of well-known Fender Jaguar fans; let's say, ex-Smiths guitarist Johnny Marr, ex-Red Hot Chili Pepper John Frusciante and Kurt Cobain. Hand them the new Blacktop Jaguar HH and we reckon they'd say (even Kurt, hypothetically) something along the lines of, "Er, what happened to all the rollers and switches?" That would be shortly before they noticed that the floating vibrato with the long arm has also done a runner. >

The neck on the Telecaster HH has a slim 'C' profile that should find favour with most players



The Tele's Strat-style body contouring will appeal to those who find the usual slab body uncomfortable



The Rivals

Blacktop Jaguar HH

It's tough to find something that matches the stripped-down vibe of the Jaguar HH. **Fender's Special Edition Jaguar HH** (£689) retains the original sixties control layout while the **ESP LTD Phoenix 200** (£499) is a cool twin-humbucker take on the classic Gibson Firebird.

The Blacktop Jaguar HH has been stripped down to a point where we're not even sure if it qualifies as a Jag any more. The silhouette might be the same as its surf-friendly ancestor, first launched back in 1962, but this latest incarnation is a very different beast. The original Jaguar came loaded with a pair of single-coils, but the HH has the same complement of Hot Alnico humbuckers as the Blacktop Tele and Strat.

To put it as nicely as possible, the original spec Jaguar is not without its quirks. It's over-engineered to a certain degree, with a dizzying layout of controls and a complex vibrato. Even die-hard Jaguar fans would have to admit that it suffers from annoying buzzes and rattles if it isn't set up right. The height adjustment grub screws in the bridge saddles can work their way loose (a drop of clear nail varnish is one solution to that problem) and the vibrato can make a grating sound when the arm is moved. So, while it's true that some of the charm of the original guitar is missing from the Blacktop version, the simple control layout and fixed



The Jaguar features the most extreme changes, and benefits from them greatly

tune-o-matic-style bridge and tailpiece arrangement make perfect sense for contemporary rock players.

The Jaguar's shorter 24-inch scale has made its way onto the spec sheet of the Blacktop model. When you figure in the same 241mm fingerboard radius and 22 medium jumbo frets you end up with probably the most playable Jaguar yet. By way of comparison, vintage spec Jags come with a 184mm (7.25-inch) fingerboard radius and thin frets.

Blacktop Jazzmaster HS

It's really only the control knobs that tip you off that this Jazzmaster HS is part of the Blacktop Series. This is because

the pickup layout is different to the other three guitars in the range. 'HS' equals humbucker and single-coil, so you get an open-coil humbucker paired with a classic Jazzmaster neck pickup. Both units are (Seymour) Duncan Designed.

First unleashed in 1958, the original Jazzmaster had the longer 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length of the Tele and Strat, but shared the same floating vibrato with its Jaguar sibling. Oddly, Fender has chosen to include this temperamental unit on the Blacktop Jazzmaster and almost immediately we begin to experience the familiar rattles and squeaks for which it's notorious. We also notice that the bridge humbucker alignment is a bit off, with the

high E string not quite centred on its polepieces. However, a quick run through our amp confirms that, sonically at least, the alignment issue doesn't cause any discernible loss of signal or string balance.

Like the Jaguar, our Blacktop Jazzmaster has superb playability thanks to the modern spec medium jumbo frets and fingerboard radius. The simplified control layout makes it a bit more user friendly than the original vintage model. The Jazzmaster HS is responsible for the only departure from the £539.99 asking price of the Blacktop range, with the three-colour sunburst version coming in at £574.99, which is still hardly a fortune.

Sounds

Each of the four guitars was set up perfectly straight from the box. Heavier strings would be good, but that's a personal choice. Playability is uniformly excellent with a comfortable action and easy string bending right up to the top frets.

Although the Tele, Strat and Jag all share the same pickups, they actually sound very different. The Jag has a slightly darker tone than the others. It sounds good clean in all three pickup settings, but it really doesn't perk up until you dial-in some overdrive. Sustain is fantastic and you can really noodle away above the 12th fret. Not something you can say about a vintage Jag, that.

The Tele and Strat cover a lot of ground tonally. The neck 'bucker on both guitars offers a warm jazz tone with bags of clarity and little evidence of the muddiness that can afflict similar spec guitars. The Strat is ➤



The Rivals

Blacktop Jazzmaster HS

There are plenty of other proper Fender Jazzmaster models knocking about, but how about the equally quirky vintage cool of the **Eastwood Airline MAP** (£649) with its licensed Bigsby vibrato?

obviously a bit more versatile given that it has an extra two notches on its selector switch, but the Tele gives an excellent account of itself. It actually offers a bit more depth in the bridge position; the Strat's vibrato perhaps adding that top-end sizzle we can hear. Despite its humbucker-based arsenal, the Telecaster excels when attacked with some country licks. The bright snap of the maple 'board combined with the beef of that bridge humbucker really works well with pedal steel licks.

We also love the Strat's second position (the outside coils of both humbuckers). It's great for blues noodling on both clean and slightly distorted sounds. And both the Strat and Tele react well to heavy-duty filth – if you think you need a pointy rock guitar to make eardrums bleed, think again. By the way, it would be great to see a hardtail version of the Strat added to the Blacktop range, we reckon it would be pretty special.

The Blacktop Jazzmaster HS offers some cool tones too. Thanks to that big old vibrato, the guitar almost has a hollowbody quality to its tonal make-up. You'll have to try it to

understand what we mean. The Duncan Designed bridge humbucker sounds brighter than the bridge units on the other guitars. Ironically, given the whole high-octane nature of this series, the neck single-coil on the Jazzmaster is actually the guitar's best setting. A clean tone, some reverb, jazzy chords and a gentle wobble of the vibrato arm and you'll be in fifties heaven. Whack on some distortion and fans of Sonic Youth and Nirvana will be just as happy.

Verdict

Some will see the Blacktop Series as a cynical marketing ploy designed to squeeze a bit more juice out of some very well-established designs. We did wonder about that, but what we discovered was three excellent guitars. The Blacktop Telecaster HH, Stratocaster HH and the Jaguar HH represent some of the best instruments to come out of the Fender factory in Ensenada, Mexico. The build quality,

playability and tone on offer from these three guitars is fantastic for the asking price.

But what about the Blacktop Jazzmaster HS? Well, it too is a good guitar in its own right. It just doesn't feel like it's part of the same series to us. For starters, the usual problems inherent with its bridge and vibrato put us off it a bit and sent us scurrying back to the other three guitars. You really have to try the Jazzmaster for yourself to form your own opinion on it.

There's no doubt that Fender is hoping to win some new fans with the Blacktop Series. That may or may not happen, but there's also something here for existing Fender fanatics. The addition of humbuckers hasn't diluted what makes these classic Fender designs great; instead it's thrown up a bunch of great new tones. The gene-splicing experiments that tone fiends inflicted on innocent guitars back in the day are now available as standard. And that means the chisel can stay in the toolbox where it belongs. **G**



The Blacktop Jazzmaster retains its usual vibrato and neck single-coil

The Bottom Line

Blacktop Stratocaster HH

We like: Wide range of tones, classic but quirky looks
We dislike: At this price, seriously nothing
Guitarist says: The beefy 'buckers and smart switching options mean this doesn't feel like 'just another Strat'

Blacktop Telecaster HH

We like: Warm sounding pickups with plenty of edge; cool looks
We dislike: A five-way switch would be nice
Guitarist says: Don't write this modified Tele off as a rock beast. It'll do country, blues, jazz... you name it

Blacktop Jaguar HH

We like: Updated styling; the simplified control layout
We dislike: Can this still be considered a proper Jag?
Guitarist says: A classic oldie reinvented as a contemporary rock machine. There's life in the old cat yet

Blacktop Jazzmaster HS

We like: Old school vibe with some modern beef
We dislike: The 'classic' vibrato and bridge
Guitarist says: Pimped it may be, but the quirks of the original Jazzmaster remain. It's up to you to decide if that's good news or bad...



**Blacktop
Stratocaster HH**

PRICE: £539.99
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome die-cast tuners, six-saddle vintage vibrato
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Two Hot Alnico humbuckers, one volume and two tone controls, five-way pickup selector switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8
OPTIONS: Maple fingerboard
FINISHES: Black (as reviewed), Candy Apple red, Sonic blue

Fender GBI
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Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



**Blacktop
Telecaster HH**

PRICE: £539.99
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple with dot inlays, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome die-cast tuners, six-saddle fixed bridge
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Two Hot Alnico humbuckers, three-way pickup selector switch, one volume and one tone control
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.1/7
OPTIONS: Rosewood fingerboard
FINISHES: Silver (as reviewed), black, Candy Apple red

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Blacktop Jaguar HH

PRICE: £539.99
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome die-cast tuners, adjust-o-matic fixed bridge and tailpiece
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: Two Hot Alnico humbuckers, one volume and one tone control, three-way pickup toggle switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8
OPTIONS: None
FINISHES: Black (as reviewed), silver

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



**Blacktop
Jazzmaster HS**

PRICE: £539.99
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with dot inlays, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
FRETS: 21, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome die-cast tuners, six-saddle bridge and floating vintage vibrato
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 56mm
ELECTRICS: Duncan Designed humbucker (bridge), Duncan Designed Jazzmaster single-coil (neck), one volume and one tone control, three-way pickup toggle switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/8
OPTIONS: None
FINISHES: Black (as reviewed), three-colour sunburst (£574.99)

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★