

Hailing Cabs

The Cabronita may have first appeared as a four-figure 'dream machine', but the current standard models are much more affordable

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Fender & Squier Cabronita Telecasters

£298-£802

When Fender's Custom Shop La Cabronita Especial was launched in 2009, it's sheer drool-worthy desirability – combined with a wonderful simplicity that harked back to Leo Fender's earliest solidbody prototypes – resulted in almost immediate grassroots appeal. However, the Custom Shop models were limited in numbers and priced beyond the reach of all but household name players such as John Mayer and Keith Urban, and the most well-heeled of bedroom warriors.

While guitar forums in all corners of the web grew heavy with photographic evidence of players – even some luthiers – building their own Cabronita clones, 2011 at last saw a more affordable alternative spring up in the Fender catalogue as part of the company's 'Telebration' series of limited-edition 60th anniversary Telecasters. The Fender USA Cabronita Telecaster was followed last year by Mexican-made models even more gentle on the wallet, but still very easy on both eye and ear. Now, here at the end of 2013, we find ourselves surrounded by Cabronitas in a variety of different orientations and denominations.

Superficially, the Squier and Fender-badged Cabs here look very similar indeed. Unlike the

Custom Shop models, there's no relic'ing, no TV Jones pickups and no S-1 switching. Instead, you get Fender's own Fide!i'Tron pickups – no prizes for guessing from where their inspiration is drawn – and, erm, an extra fret. All of the Custom Shop models to date have sported chunky 21-fret, 50s-inspired necks while the Fender USA, Mexican and Squier Cabronitas all feature more contemporary neck profiles with 22 frets, the 22nd sitting on an overhang in the

modern Fender style. For some hardcore purists this is an unacceptable aberration; for other players, it provides extended scope for high-register soloing; you decide.

You might expect the Mexican (Fender) and Indonesian (Squier) manufacturing process to impart greater uniformity on the instruments here. However, it's noticeable that all four guitars – including the Mexican Classic Player Series solidbody model (see p93) – have very

different neck depths, despite all being described as a 'modern C' profile in their respective official specifications.

Starting at the thickest end of the spectrum, our Candy Apple Red Fender Classic Player solidbody has a nicely rounded 21.6mm depth at the 2nd fret, fattening out to approximately 23mm at the octave. The Thinline is a little slimmer with 21.2mm at the 2nd fret and 22.8mm at fret 12. The hardtail Squier is thinner still at the 2nd fret, with 20.7mm of meat, but



The Thinline's semi-hollow alder body creates a bright, pop-friendly tonality



Fender's Fideli'Trons are a lighter, less throaty take on the Filter'Tron, but their sonic heritage is still abundantly clear

hits 23mm at the 12th. The Bigsby-equipped Squier, meanwhile, is noticeably skinnier altogether with a depth of 19.3mm at the 2nd fret and 21.1mm at fret 12. It doesn't sound like much, but these small differences make a big impact in hand, especially when you throw the slightly narrower nut width of the Squier necks into the mix.

For this writer, there's no such thing as too thick when it comes to neck profiles and the definition of maximum comfort

is a fat 50s baseball bat, but many will prefer dimensions along the lines of the Bigsby-loaded Squier. The variations on display just go to show that even in this age of e-commerce the best advice we can give is still to walk into a music shop and play the actual instrument you are interested in buying.

In contrast to the Thinline, which has a high-density chunk of foam glued to the back of each pickup to allow for height adjustment, the Squiers have both foam and springs in their

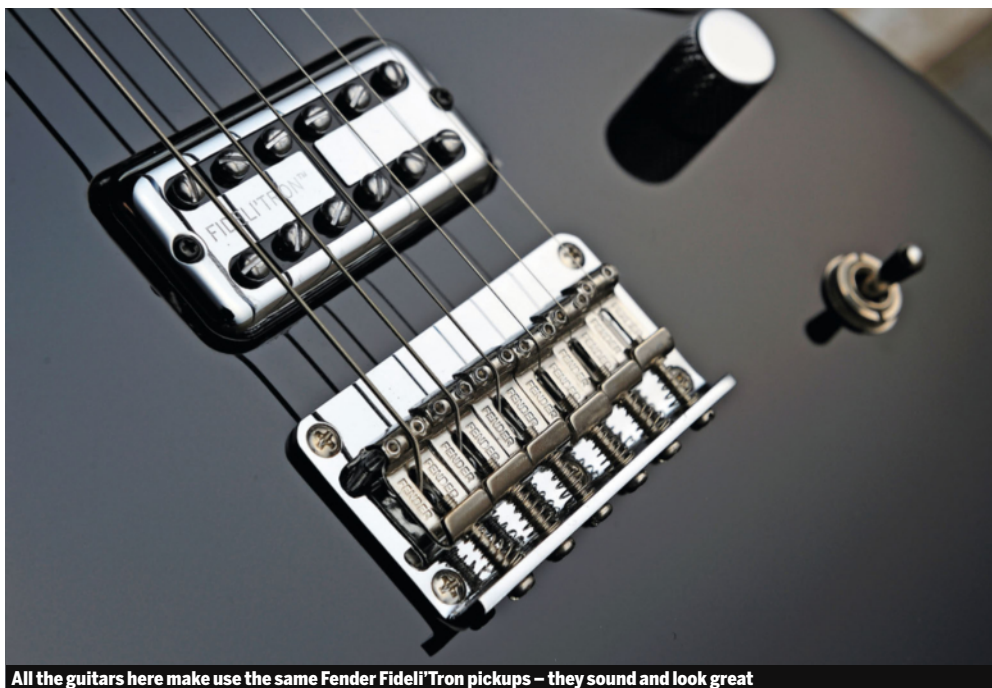
Fideli'Tron routs. The optimum setup for Filter'Tron-style pickups from a tonal standpoint is achieved by raising them as close as possible to the strings without physically touching them when strummed hard, and foam rather than springs, is preferred on a flat-top solidbody. It's an easy mod to add thicker foam if you need to raise the pickup height further than any of these guitars allow out of the box, but we found it straightforward enough to obtain a balance with which we were happy.

Apart from the Bigsby-loaded Squier's standard single-coil bridge pickup, the bridge and neck pickups on all models are all the same Fideli'Tron units, regardless of the Mexican or Indonesian origins of the



Fender Classic Player Cabronita Telecaster £658

BACK in issue 365 we reviewed the first iteration of the Fender Mexico-made Cabronita and it received a *Guitarist* Choice Award. Now the model is a part of the Classic Player Series, Fender has abandoned 3-Colour Sunburst and White Blonde as finish options, replacing them with the altogether sexier Candy Apple Red and Surf Green hues. In addition, the guitar now has upgraded Fender-stamped American Vintage bent steel bridge saddles and a 50s-style round string tree.



All the guitars here make use of the same Fender Fideli'Tron pickups – they sound and look great



guitars themselves. However, there are areas in which the Squiers' lower price bracket translates palpably: scratchplates are a little rough around the edges compared to our Fender Mexico model, and neck and body finishing isn't quite as refined. The Squiers also feature lower-grade wiring, and the Fender Thinline model benefits from a chunkier, more confidence-inspiring three-way toggle switch and higher-grade volume pot.

None of the pickup routs on the three guitars here have been executed flawlessly and the Bigsby-less Squier arrived with a noticeably flaky bit of

finishing on the treble side of the bridge cavity, but it's a guitar that's designed to be knocked about a bit rather than babied, and we'll forgive a little scruffiness at such a tempting price point. Similarly, both Squiers offer a slightly rougher ride up and down the fretboard edges than the Fender, but overall the standard of manufacture is high for a pair of guitars with street prices that are significantly less than £300. It's noticeable that the strings on both Squiers line up better with the pickup polepieces than on either of the Mexican Cabronitas we've had in for review, but this is largely an

The Bigsby-toting Squier's bridge single-coil and vibrato make for much more of a white knuckle ride

aesthetic concern for the symmetry-obsessed rather than a serious practical or tonal issue.

All three guitars are pleasingly brash and resonant when strummed acoustically, while the licensed Bigsby B50-loaded Squier deserves special praise for its excellent tuning stability, courtesy in no small part to the Jazzmaster-style bridge, which rocks gently in conjunction with use of the vibrato arm and

minimises friction. It's comfortably the best solution when mounting a Bigsby on a Telecaster body.

Sounds

As we've said before in these pages, if you're new to Filter'Tron-style pickups, you're in for a treat. George Harrison, Malcolm Young, Billy Gibbons, Jack White: legendary sounds are here in spades and fans of raunchy rock 'n' roll will be in their element. Fender's Fideli'Trons are a lighter, less throaty take on the Filter'Tron than either the TV Jones Power'Trons fitted to the two Custom Shop guitars on our front cover, TV Classics or indeed the units fitted to modern Japanese-made Gretsch instruments, but their sonic heritage is still abundantly clear. In many ways they're the EL84 valve of the guitar pickup world: midrange complexity and chime in abundance with a soft treble characteristic and more compression than a PAF-style 'bucker.

Although each of these guitars are very close in overall specification, used in anger, the dual Fideli'Tron-loaded Squier and the Thinline Fender Cabronita are different animals: where the Squier's solid basswood body imparts its plugged-in performance with a darker, more classic rock-





Mass Appeal

Fender's head marketing honcho Justin Norvell on the Cabronita's journey from the Custom Shop to the production line...

Were you surprised at the popularity of the Custom Shop models and the homebrew Cabronita craze it spawned?

"Not really, because the reaction was instantaneous and unanimously positive as soon as we started showing them. While many guitars in high price points are very feature-rich – binding, carved tops, exotic woods, and so on – there's also something magical about a great, simple thing made from the best ingredients. Just like an Esquire is stripped down, but can absolutely blow your mind tonally because it's so right! It's also a new flavour or sound for the guitarist that thought they had everything... Tonally, it rests in between several instrument styles and that's really exciting for us – to have a new sonic tool for players."

Was Fender's decision to launch more affordable Mexican and Squier-branded Cabronitas influenced by the model's cult following and the many home and

luthier-built clones that began to surface a couple of years ago?

"They were planned to filter down through the regular line pretty quickly. It was a natural extension since they are so elegantly simple and speak to so many people. We just took our time to get them right and experimented with some alterations, like the Thinline body."

Could you give us some insight into the processes and challenges involved when taking a design born in the Custom Shop and turning it into a production guitar?

"We started the collaborations with the Custom Shop a few years ago with the Classic Players like the Baja Tele. Basically, we just get the Custom Shop designers and builders together with R&D and find out what's involved and discuss the 'magic' elements of the recipe – pickup location/mounting, wiring scheme, neck, etc. From there, we look at ways to make the guitar

more affordable and substitutions we can make while keeping the intrinsic 'soul' of the platform intact, like using Fidelel's Trons. So we had Chris Fleming in R&D working on the pickup – something with a great design and tone that retained the authenticity and sound of the Custom Shop version."

Is there a specific reason why the Fender USA, Mexican and Squier versions have 22 fret 'boards compared to the Custom Shop versions' 21?

"The Custom Shop ideal is more rooted in historical platforms so it makes sense there... for the other versions, we took a slightly more contemporary approach that was more mainstream – slimmer necks, top-adjusted truss rods, and 22 medium jumbo frets. Just a slightly more modernistic take on the platform."

Do you think any of the newer models, such as the Luchador Strat, might find their way into the more affordable end of the Fender catalogue in the future?

"Absolutely, it would be a natural extension."

What's next for the Cabronita series?

"We just did the Thinline and the Bigsby version, so yes we are definitely playing with options... As a great no-frills guitar, a thin lacquer finish at a mid-price level would be really cool, and has been requested a bunch from the community."




friendly tonality, the extra air in the Thinline's alder body makes for a less dense midrange ideally suited to 60s pop and Marr-style chiming indie chords. It's a great voice for tracking rhythm guitar parts without crowding a mix.

Switching to the Bigsby-toting Squier and the combination of bridge single coil and vibrato make for much more of a white knuckle ride. Raucous Neil Young-isms and bratty garage rock tones are a flick of the switch away from convincing Keef sounds in the middle setting and wonderfully woozy Richard Hawley-style tones in the neck position. These aren't the most sophisticated examples of these types of sounds we've encountered, but for the money, the sheer range is as exciting as it is inspirational.

Verdict

If you want a dual-humbucker Cabronita then Fender is really spoiling you; the Thinline and Squier versions here are worthy alternatives to the existing Classic Series solidbody and both have a valid voice of their own. With real world prices as low as £228 from UK retailers, it's the Squier that is the most dangerously tempting and has the broadest appeal – it's also a fantastic platform for mods and upgrades (see p86).

And then there's its Bigsby B50-equipped sibling. Although the neck is a little thin for this writer's personal tastes, we're struggling to think of any other guitar with a sub-£300 street price that's been quite as compelling or seemed as damn-near essential in recent history. It's not perfect, and if you're planning to subject it to life on the road, several parts would benefit from aftermarket upgrades, but at that price it's all part of the fun. If you like raunchy retro rock 'n' roll, it's a no-brainer and a worthy addition to your collection. You might even find yourself picking it up more often than some of your more expensive toys... 



Fender Cabronita Telecaster Thinline

PRICE: £802 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Thinline semi-hollow electric guitar
BODY: Semi-hollow alder
NECK: Maple, modern C profile, 241mm (9.5") radius, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: 6-bent steel saddle string-through-body hardtail bridge, Fender logo'd die-cast chrome-plated tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Fideli' Tron humbuckers, 3-way pickup selector toggle switch, master volume
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 2.5/6.8
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: 2-Colour Sunburst (as reviewed), Shoreline Gold and White Blonde (with ash body) polyurethane
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.fender.com

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

Guitarist says: Lighter tones and a lighter body make for a classy addition to Fender's Cabronita range



Squier Vintage Modified Cabronita Telecaster

PRICE: £298
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Solidbody electric guitar
BODY: Basswood
NECK: Maple, modern C profile, 241mm (9.5") radius, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/41.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: 6-saddle string-through-body hardtail bridge, vintage-style tuners: chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Fideli' Tron humbuckers, 3-way pickup selector toggle switch, master volume
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 2.8/7.5
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Black only (as reviewed) polyurethane

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

Guitarist says: The most affordable Cabronita yet sure doesn't look or sound like a budget option



Squier Vintage Modified Cabronita Telecaster w/ Bigsby

PRICE: £346
ORIGIN: Indonesia
TYPE: Solidbody electric guitar
BODY: Basswood
NECK: Maple, modern C profile, 241mm (9.5") radius, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic/41.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Licensed Bigsby B50 vibrato and Jazzmaster-style bridge, vintage-style tuners: chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54.5mm
ELECTRICS: Fideli' Tron humbucker (neck), standard Tele single coil (bridge), 3-way pickup selector toggle switch, master volume
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 3.2/8.6
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Black only (as reviewed) polyurethane



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

Guitarist says: Rock 'n' roll thrills, hot-rod cool and a stable Bigsby for truly daft money? Hell, yes!