

FENDER BLACKTOP & MODERN PLAYER £598, £598, £442 & £442  
ELECTRICS



## Fender Blacktop & Modern Player electrics £442-£598

Does Fender really have a guitar for everyone? Well, as this quartet of mid-priced solidbodies proves, if not, it isn't for the want of trying **by Ed Mitchell**



**T**he Fender Blacktop and Modern Player series guitars may be separated by a few quid on their price tags, but the modus operandi of all four is the same. All that chrome, groovy paint and the pimped-out pickup selections are designed to entice younger players and the as-not-yet-faithful to the Fender brand. Yes, it sounds cynical, but you can't blame Fender for going on a fishing trip. Like yer old pal Dracula, guitar manufacturers need plenty of fresh blood to survive and us Hank Marvin fans ain't gonna live forever...

Ironically, it seems the best way to attract the young and less-enlightened is to add some bling and bite to some pension-aged designs. Here's the proof of the pudding. The four new models in this round-up are based on guitars that first saw the light of day in the fifties and sixties: the Telecaster, Stratocaster and Jaguar. You could say that Fender is too lazy to come up with totally new designs, instead relying on short spells at the drawing board and a load of hot pickups and fat frets. More likely, the truth is that these designs are

so good, they haven't ever been past their sell-by date. It's also true that many of us don't want radical new designs; we'd rather have better, more affordable tone and playability in a familiar package. To that end, while it feels like Fender is pumping out seemingly endless variations of its classic models, it's the quality of the product that matters.

The Modern Player and Blacktop series guitars are strategically placed to fill the gap between Squier models and the Mexican Road Worn and US-made Fenders – alongside

the Mexican Standards and Classic Series reissues, natch. The Modern Player Telecaster Plus and Blacktop Jaguar 90 are the most obviously 'pimped' models on offer here, with non-standard pickups and hardware, while the Strats are packing increased firepower in the shape of humbuckers. Of course, all the gravy in the world won't disguise a poorly made pie, so the questions we need to answer are: do these guitars cut the mustard; and what do they have to offer those of us who have already been bitten by the Fender bug?



## Blacktop Stratocaster HSH £598

**W**e had a great deal of time for the Blacktop Strat HH. A time-proven chassis, updated with younger players in mind via a pair of rocking humbuckers. The only difference between the HH model and the new HSH is the 'S' bit, the single-coil that nestles between the two humbuckers. And rather than a Strat single-coil, we get a chrome-encased Tele neck job.

The Blacktop HSH crams all of its goodies onto an alder body. Like the other three amigos in this round-up, this well-finished guitar's bolt-on maple neck has a slim 'C' profile and 22 large frets, which feel great for string bending. Tuning stability from the Strat vibrato is thankfully well up to snuff, just like the Modern Player Strat HSS.

### Sounds

The first generation Blacktop Strat HH was primed to be an out-and-out rock machine. Still going strong, it won plenty of

fans thanks to its thick humbucker tones, glassy split coil options and first-class playability. The HSH version offers more of the same. The bruising bridge humbucker still provides the rock and metal goods, while the combination of the split-bridge/split-neck and middle pickup is great for classic rock and R&B rhythm, but the middle pickup sounds damn fine running solo. Strum hard à la Townshend in this position through a clean channel for big-sounding chords with an almost acoustic-like quality.

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Well-made; tonal range from the single-coil

**We dislike:** Those knobs still don't look right

**Guitarist says:** A rock beast now has a gentler side. That extra pickup offers a lot more options too

## Blacktop Jaguar 90 £598

**T**his latest version of Fender's sixties offset switches out the dual humbuckers of the existing Blacktop Jaguar HH for a pair of sweet-sounding P-90s. Like the HH, the new Jag comes sans the vibrato unit that plagued/made the original guitar. In its place, the Jaguar 90 features a chrome Adjusto-Matic bridge and anchored tailpiece that suffers none of the tuning problems often present in the sixties guitar and its reissues. This Jag's alder body, slim-profile maple neck, big headstock and the crucial 24-inch scale length offer just enough Jag-style vibe to keep this guitar clinging to a branch on its family tree. Those looking for a cool alternative to a Gibson Les Paul Special should give it a go.

### Sounds

If P-90s have passed you by, imagine them as fat-sounding single-coils; the chubby vibe is here in the Jaguar 90. Clean

tones are bright, yet well-rounded, in all positions on the three-way switch. Add some overdrive for a lovely clang when you hit power chords with the bridge pickup engaged. There's more edge on this alder-fuelled guitar than you'd expect from mahogany-bodied P-90 planks, but all those rock, mod and punk tones are in here. That edge also helps the clarity of the overdriven neck pickup, making it perfect for upper-fingerboard blues licks.

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Tones; playability; we don't miss the vibrato

**We dislike:** It's a Jaguar only in shape

**Guitarist says:** As much as we like the existing Jaguar HH, we had our fingers crossed for a twin-P-90-loaded version. The Jaguar 90 is every bit as great as we hoped it would be



Guitarist  
**CHOICE**



## Modern Player Stratocaster HSS £442

**C**ompared to the other guitars here, there's nothing special about the Modern Player Stratocaster HSS. It has an alder body, bolt-on maple neck and an old-school 'Synchronized' vibrato. Sure, it has a humbucker chiselled into the bridge position, but Eddie did that over 30 years ago. The 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius and 22 jumbo frets promote the slick, modern feel we expect from Fender instruments.

What makes this guitar worthy of your attention is how it delivers a great payload of tone and playability for not a lot of cash: a quick Google search will return some great prices. The build quality isn't quite a match for the Blacktop Strat – the finish isn't ultimately as flat, for example – but the Modern Player comes pretty close.

### Sounds

Approach the Modern Player Stratocaster HSS without knowledge of its unassuming

price tag and you'll think you're dealing with a more expensive guitar. Seeing the Fender logo on the headstock doesn't hurt, but it's the playability and tonal range that help this Strat punch above its weight. The single-coils have that glassy tonality any great Strat should have. The bridge 'bucker has plenty of bite, but it's no overwound monster; you can split it with the push/pull tone control. Like the Tele Plus, this guitar offers a great palette of tones, only in a more visually traditional package.

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** The price; great range of tones; playability

**We dislike:** The finish is poorly executed in places

**Guitarist says:** Near frighteningly good value for money, where playability and tonal range seal the deal on this do-it-all Strat

## Modern Player Telecaster Plus £442

**A**side from its Swiss Army knife line-up of pickups, the new Tele Plus features an unusual pine body. Most Teles are hewn from alder or ash, but Leo Fender built some early Esquire models using pine. As a result, there are many pine-Tele obsessed toneheads around the world. Those old-schoolers would be less comfortable with the new Tele's humbucker (bridge), Strat single-coil (middle) and Tele single-coil (neck) set-up.

Still, this is a Tele for modern players looking to pull as many tones as possible from that classic chassis. Plus, like the other models here in this round-up, the Tele Plus has a modern feel, with its jumbo frets, slim-profile bolt-on maple neck and flatter-than-vintage fingerboard radius.

### Sounds

Running this Tele's 'bucker on full will satisfy any gain junkie, with enough power to pull off

old-school rock and modern metal tones. Coil split the 'bucker and combine it with the middle single-coil for Stevie Ray Vaughan, Hendrix and Curtis Mayfield vibes, clean and with overdrive. In classic Tele style, the neck pickup is the right address for overdriven blues and jazzy chords. However, the lack of a traditional Tele bridge set-up makes it tough to judge what contribution this Tele's pine body makes to its tone when compared to a more traditional alder or ash-body model.

### The Bottom Line

**We like:** Great playability;

it's a tonal smorgasbord

**We dislike:** It's a bit of a Frankenstein's monster

**Guitarist says:** It's not the prettiest example, but if your tastes run to country and metal, this is one Tele that comes up with the goods



## Fender Blacktop Stratocaster HSH

**PRICE:** £598  
**ORIGIN:** Mexico  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5 inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic bone/42mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome Strat 'Synchronized' vibrato and vintage-style tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Two chrome-cover Blacktop humbuckers (bridge and neck), Telecaster single-coil (middle), master volume, two tones, five-way pickup selector blade switch  
**OPTIONS:** Blacktop Stratocaster HH (£662), Blacktop Stratocaster HH Floyd Rose (£706)  
**FINISH:** Titanium silver (as reviewed), black  
**Fender GBI**  
**01342 331700**  
**www.fender.com**

### Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★★
<b>Playability</b>	★★★★★
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



## Fender Blacktop Jaguar 90

**PRICE:** £598  
**ORIGIN:** Mexico  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 610mm (24 inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic bone/42mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome Adjusto-Matic bridge and fixed tailpiece and vintage-style tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Blacktop Jaguar 90 single-coil pickups, master volume, master tone, three-way pickup selector toggle switch  
**OPTIONS:** Blacktop Jaguar HH (£622.80)  
**FINISH:** Candy Apple red (as reviewed), two-colour sunburst

### Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★★
<b>Playability</b>	★★★★★
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



## Fender Modern Player Stratocaster HSS

**PRICE:** £442  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5 inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic bone/42mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome Strat 'Synchronized' vibrato and vintage-style tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Modern Player humbucker (bridge), two single-coils (middle and neck), master volume, two tones (one with coil-split push/pull for humbucker), five-way pickup selector  
**FINISH:** Silverburst (as reviewed), Olympic white



### Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★★
<b>Playability</b>	★★★★★
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



## Fender Modern Player Telecaster Plus

**PRICE:** £442  
**ORIGIN:** China  
**BODY:** Pine  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5 inches)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic bone, 42mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Maple, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Chrome fixed six-saddle bridge and vintage-style tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Modern Player humbucker (bridge), Strat single-coil (middle), Tele single-coil (neck), master volume, master tone, three-way pickup selector blade switch, mini toggle coil-split switch for humbucker  
**OPTIONS:** Modern Player Telecaster Thinline Deluxe (£442)  
**FINISH:** Honey burst (as reviewed), charcoal transparent

### Test results

<b>Build quality</b>	★★★★★
<b>Playability</b>	★★★★★
<b>Sound</b>	★★★★★
<b>Value for money</b>	★★★★★

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★

## The Rivals

For a HSH-loaded rock machine, see the **Fret-King Black Label Super-Hybrid** (£699), which also features a piezo pickup. For £330, you can get a three single-coil **ESP LTD ST-203**. It doesn't match the build quality of the Fenders but offers some great tones. Finally, at £249, the **Squier Vintage Modified Jaguar** comes with a pair of hot humbuckers and a Danelectro-style fixed bridge

## Verdict

The interesting result of Fender's determination to plug any possible gap in the mid-range sector is that it's getting tougher to tell its various Series apart. We reckon it's time to start concentrating on fixtures and fittings. That means existing Fender customers too.

While the Jaguar 90 has indie written all over it, the Blacktop and Modern Series Strats are, well, just very sorted affordable Strats. In this instance, it was

the cheaper Modern Player that blew our socks off, but the fact that both guitars cover so much tonal territory really does make them usable for just about any player.

The Modern Player Tele Plus is a great recording and club band guitar – it gives you a bunch of tones without the aid of modelling. The Jaguar 90 is probably the most Marmite of the guitars here. It's fair to say some of you Jaguar fans are

hostile to any radical variations on your favourite model. That's fine – the Jaguar 90 isn't for you. It's an alternative to P-90-loaded Gibson and Epiphone models – and the guitars that pay tribute to them. To that end, the Jaguar 90 is a great success, suggesting Fender has a guitar for everyone – you just have to find the one that's right for you. And it's not always the guitar with the highest pricetag. **G**