

Deluxe Redux





A new year, a new Strat and Telecaster. What can Fender possibly do to refresh its most advanced series? Well, change its name, for starters...

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FENDER AMERICAN ELITE STRATOCASTER & AMERICAN ELITE TELECASTER £1,439 & £1,389

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What You Need To Know

1 Elites? Weren't they Fenders from the early 80s, with active circuitry?

Yes. Produced between 1983 and 1984, the Elite Telecaster and Stratocaster Elite were unusual beasts, not least the Tele, with its Les Paul-like four-knob controls. The Strat had push-button switches for the pickups, instead of the usual five-way selector.

2 So, nothing to do with these 2016 Elites, then?

Nope. These Elites are a revamp of what we previously knew as the American Deluxe series: 'improved' Strats and Teles with modern features such as compound-radius fingerboards and S-1 switching.

3 Name aside, then, what's new?

They feature the fourth generation of Fender's Noiseless pickups, a new neck shape and truss-rod adjuster. Not radical, but a better tool.

For 2016, Fender's American Deluxe range is no more; they are now Elite. Name aside, the range is trimmed to just four guitars: the Strat and Tele you see here, an HSS Shawbucker Strat and a thinline Tele. So, what's new? Along with cosmetic additions in the form of new colours, a refreshed headstock logo and 'soft touch' rubber control knobs, there's a new neck shape, a new wheel-style truss-rod adjustment (we lose the Micro-Tilt adjustment) and slightly altered-shaped heel geometry. Then we have the latest (fourth) generation of Noiseless pickups controlled, as before, by the S-1 switching, activated by a push/push switch within the top of the volume control's knob that expands the sounds from the five-way or three-way pickup selector switches.

If you've experienced the previous Deluxes, you'll know they're all about subtle upgrades, which are ongoing here. On the Elite Stratocaster, there is slightly deeper contouring, noticeably on the back rig-cage contour, and as before we have a compound-radius fingerboard with jumbo frets. Body wood is colour dependent, but a choice of rosewood or maple 'boards is available on all. The hardware stays the same: the excellent twin-post vibrato, with its six block saddles and pop-in arm, and the sealed, chromed rear-lock tuners (although instead of the previous dual-height string posts, they all have the lower height posts, which subtly increase the back angle behind the nut on the bass strings). A new-design string tree increases that back angle further on the top two strings; another change is the bone nut.

Its Light Blue Metallic finish with darker blue sunbursting might look a little Las Vegas close up, but it makes for a vibrant

stage colour, contrasted by the more vintage-y mint-green laminate scratchplate. Thanks to both 'Fender' and 'Noiseless' silver logos, these clearly aren't vintage pickups. Overall, a very tidy job, a little on the heavy side perhaps, but easy to live with.

Onto the Elite Telecaster 226 with its more classic-looking 'bursted finish and white top-edge binding, there's a classic 60s vibe that allows us to see a finely centre-joined slab of ash and a rib-cage contour round the back, which really works with that mint-green scratchplate. The six-saddle bridge, with chrome-plated brass saddles, is fully adjustable and we have locking tuners – not really necessary without a vibrato, but they do make string changes fast. A classy, well-made piece, slightly lighter in weight, which, before we plug in, edges forward in our favour.

Sounds

Okay, so the new neck shape is nothing too dramatic. The spec's C-to-D shape seems pretty subtle; as you move up the neck, the shoulders of the lower position's C shape seem to fill out slightly, giving a subtle flat back, more of a contemporary feel perhaps, which suits the compound radius and bigger frets. Of the two, the Strat's is slightly deeper, enough to feel a difference, but along with the way the shaping flows into the heel and is tidily shaped into the flat back of the headstock, there's an almost Custom Shop vibe to the detail.

Both are set up low with 0.009s, creating a pretty mainstream feel, but, of course, there's no 'right' way to set up your Fender. The important thing here is that the new truss-rod adjuster – as any Music Man owner will attest to – means neck-relief adjustments are now dead simple.



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1. The Strat's vibrato has Fender's two-post design with six-block saddled and pop-in arm
2. The rear-locking tuners are the same as previous models except they no longer have dual height string posts. Even on the Tele, the same tuners are used – not necessary with a hard-tail but great for quick string changes
3. Redesigned for this series, Fender's fourth generation Noiseless pickups are single-coil-sized stacked humbuckers: single-coil tone with virtually zero hum



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For 2016, Fender's American Deluxe is no more; they're now Elite, and the range is now four guitars

The Tele is a simple drive. With the S-1 switch out, it's standard bridge or neck pickup and both on in parallel. Depressing the S-1 switch with the selector in the middle position simply links the pickups in series for more output and a thicker tonality. The Strat is more complex: with the S-1 switch out, it's classic Strat; push it down, however, and we have five different selections. Tone control 1 takes care of the neck pickup, while the No-Load Tone 2 looks after the middle and bridge pickups. The Tele's master tone is also a No-Load and fully up, there's a subtle click in the feel

and it's effectively bypassed for maximum treble response.

Plugging in the Strat after a quick play of our reference Roadworn, we're reminded just how a different setup and string gauge can massively influence what we hear. There's a lighter, brighter tonality to the Elite and raising the action and increasing the treble-to-bass stagger on the pickup heights narrows the gap a little, as does pulling back the No-Load tone control. There's obviously a big difference in the pickups – our Roadworn has retro-fitted Custom Shop Texas Specials – and the Elite sounds more classic. But despite a less-pronounced magnet stagger, to our ears, the second-string response is a little 'soft'. The Elite does sound more refined, not quite as 'dirty' or as raw as our Roadworn, but with a touch more output.

It's a similar story with the Tele: immediately brighter and a little more open compared to our original '69, with high-end cut aplenty from the bridge pickup without too much midrange spike.

The Rivals

There's no shortage of Fender copies or clones out there from brands as diverse as ESP and Schecter, to Tom Anderson or Suhr, whose Classic Pro in SSS or HSS has a street price of around £1,799. Music Man will be entering the Strat market with the yet-to-be-priced Cutlass, which will be launched at the annual NAMM show in January 2016. Ex-Fender luthier John Page has his Classic Ashburn (£1,199), made in Japan, with numerous tweaks (not least an opposite-to-Fender bridge-pickup slant). The UK's Trev Wilkinson has some smart Fender-style guitars in his Korean-made Fret-King range: the Strat-inspired Corona SP (£539) with P-90 at bridge and the Tele-esque Country Squire Classic (£519) with humbucker at neck



S-1 Switching

The expanded S-1 switching has been with us since 2003 and changes from instrument to instrument. The Tele's system is straightforward but the Strat's is more complex; even armed with an ohm meter and tapping the pickups, two of the Strat's five positions – bridge and bridge and middle – had us foxed. In bridge position, with the S-1 switch depressed, according to Fender's spec sheet, all three pickups are on. However, the middle and neck pickups are linked together in series but added to the bridge pickup in *parallel*, accounting for a DC resistance of approximately 9.43k ohms – slightly lower than the non S-1 bridge selection of 9.63k ohms of the solo pickup. Here, though, the neck and middle pickups are classed as having 'diminished volume'.

In bridge and middle, with S-1, the DC resistance rises from 4.92k to 9.59k and Fender tells us the neck pickup is in parallel with the middle and bridge pickup that are in series; again, the middle and neck pickups have 'diminished volume'. In middle position, the bridge and middle pickups are linked in series; in middle and neck position, the two pickups are linked in series, not parallel; and in neck position, with the S-1 depressed, all three pickups are linked in series. So, there you go...



The surprise is the neck pickup. It's less clouded and soft: more like a good Strat, with plenty of attacking percussion. That makes the parallel mix brighter and more Strat-y, and the series link is a little less rounded in the highs, but still noticeably louder, darker and with plenty of lows.

Switching the S-1 switch down on the Strat really does take us to a different place. Selecting the middle pickup and switching in the S-1, it's as though you've kicked in a thickening boost: more humbucking, with more power and low end, plus there's a little 'cocked wah' to the highs. Moving to the middle-and-neck combination, the change is more dramatic, like you've cocked that wah pedal back further, losing the shimmering highs. At the neck, with the S-1 depressed, we have a similar voice with some of the highs restored. The bridge-and-middle position is less contrasted, sound slightly harder and a little phase-y; the bridge position is the most subtle.

As our test time continues, the neck shape is interesting, because we really didn't notice it; likewise, that compound camber. Both are really comfortable. But it's the added sonic flexibility, especially of the Strat, that commands our time. The series linkages really do add a different voice that loves crunch and gain. Conversely, switch to a clean amp, pull the volume down and select the S-1 neck position and you're good for your jazz gig. Knock it back to middle and neck, wind up your gain and it's a big rock rhythm sound.

The Noiseless pickups are well named, noticeably quieter compared to any other passive single coils we had on hand. Working in front of our laptop, or stuck close to your amp on a cramped 'stage', there is virtually no hum pickup whatsoever. At higher gains and volumes, however, you will hear some hum pickup, but in every scenario, it is way less than our standard single-coil guitars. Are they really



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At the price, the Elites cram in a lot of upgrades, and then there's the duality of the S-1 switching

4. The Elite Tele's bridge is the same as the previous Deluxe with six chrome-plated brass saddles instead of the harder-to-intonate three saddles of the classic Tele recipe. Keith Richards, among many pros, has used a similar bridge for years on many of his famous Teles

5. Aside from the 'Fender' and 'Noiseless' logos, the Tele's neck pickup follows the classic aesthetic. Sound-wise, it's definitely more Strat-y, though, and of course, hum-cancelling

humbuckers? Well, they sound like damn good single coils to us.

Verdict

Fender provides choice, right across the price spectrum. If you want vintage spec, it's there; if you want more contemporary, no problem. It's the latter that the Elites aim for and, not least at the price, they cram in a lot of upgrades; and then there's the duality of the S-1 switching. The Tele doesn't have the expansive sonic change of the Strat: the additional series linkage alone is hardly worth upgrading for, especially as you could mod your own Tele, but it's a charming guitar from its weight, look, great neck, improved playability of the compound 'board and frets, even that ribcage cut (not to mention the more Strat-like neck voice, or the intonation and locking tuners). It's a very good guitar that die-hard Tele players could enjoy, too.

Our test Strat is a little heavy, and that slight imbalance of the second string won't work for every player. But its voice is nicely classic: engage the S-1 switch and it's 'game on' for those of us who find a Strat a little hard work. Whereas we'd usually take out our standard-spec Strat along with another (probably humbucking) guitar to cover a wide sonic repertoire, the Elite might just get you home on its own while giving the finger to the pesky hum of the past. Fender is moving forwards... are you? **G**



FENDER AMERICAN ELITE STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £1,439 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, modern 'C to D' profile, bolt-on, wheel truss-rod adjustment
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.85mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white pearloid dot markers, 241-356mm (9.5-14") radius
FRETS: 22, jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome-plated 2-Point Deluxe vibrato with pop-in arm, 'short post' cast/sealed locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Fender Deluxe Noiseless single-coil-sized humbuckers (bridge, middle & neck), 5-position selector switch, master volume (with S-1 switch), tone 1 (neck), No-Load tone 2 (middle & bridge)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.89/8.6
OPTIONS: Maple fingerboard same price. Ash body on certain colours
RANGE OPTIONS: Elite HSS Shawbucker, same colour-dependent price as reviewed Strat
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, £1,509
FINISHES: Sky Burst Metallic (as reviewed), 3-Color Sunburst, Aged Cherry Burst (ash body), Tobacco Sunburst (ash body), Mystic Black, Olympic Pearl & Autumn Blaze Metallic cost £1,389. Gloss polyurethane body; satin urethane neck with gloss headstock face



9/10

PROS Improved Deluxe Stratocaster with exceptional Noiseless pickups and new neck profile, plus an expanded range of sound

CONS Vintage purists won't like it: many, many players will!



FENDER AMERICAN ELITE TELECASTER

PRICE: £1,389 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody
BODY: Ash
NECK: Maple, modern 'C to D' profile, bolt-on, wheel truss-rod adjustment
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.28mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white pearloid dot markers, 241-356mm (9.5-14") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome-plated 6-Saddle American Tele with chromed brass saddles, 'short post' cast/sealed locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Fender Deluxe Noiseless single coil-sized humbuckers (bridge & neck), 3-position selector switch, master volume (with S-1 switch), master No-Load tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.66/8
OPTIONS: Maple fingerboard same price. Alder body on certain colours
RANGE OPTIONS: The American Elite Tele Thinline with maple 'board in Natural, Mystic Ice Blue or 3-Color Sunburst costs £1,459
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Aged Cherry Burst and Tobacco Sunburst (as reviewed), Mystic Black, 3-Color Sunburst (£1,439) & Autumn Blaze Metallic (£1,439) on alder body. Gloss polyurethane body; satin urethane neck with gloss headstock face

8/10

PROS Hugely likeable modern Telecaster: great playability; those Noiseless pickups; and slightly expanded sounds

CONS Again, not for vintage purists and only one additional sound