



Music Man StingRay HH bass £1,320

Finally, Music Man expands the classic StingRay format with an extra pickup. Twice the power? We find out by Roger Newell

The rivals

Yamaha RBX374 £239
 Warwick FNA Jazzman
 from £1,239
 Icení Funkmeister 4
 from £1,395

Yamaha's dual humbuckered RBX374 has a heavily chamfered body, active electronics and a two-band EQ. It's a nice little bass but at under £250 don't expect similar quality of sound or performance to the Music Man. Warwick's FNA Jazzman uses MM and J-style passive pickups with an active EQ and is rather aptly named. It's beautifully built and a top quality performer. Prices vary depending on final specification. The Funkmeister 4 from Icení can also be custom built and adapted to your desires but its standard model features the MM/Jazz styling and prices start around £1,400.

When a bass guitar is championed by the likes of Flea, Tony Levin and Pino Palladino you know it must be something special, and that is a fitting description of Music Man's mighty StingRay bass. Over the course of time it has received a number of tweaks, updates and innovations, all of which have had their merits, but perhaps this latest design is the one that has the most appeal. Yet strangely it's not a massively different approach, nothing like the piezo bridge or the excellent bargain SUB Bass version. No, all that's happened here is that it's gained another pickup. So what's all the fuss about? Well, Music Man has a long history of two pickup basses from the Sabre and Sterling to the recent Bongo Bass, but what all fans have all been waiting for is a two pickup StingRay.

The single-pickup original has certainly stood the test of time – thanks to its remarkable versatility – but this model has opened up the parameters even further. The Bongo showed exactly what a twin humbucker bass could do, but for many it was a visual design step too far. Bassists are an adaptable bunch but, when it comes to the 'Ray, they may be reluctant to leave her tried and tested formula behind.



The StingRay HH offers extra versatility in a familiar package

So what exactly does the HH bring to the playing field? Visually the usual components are exactly as they should be. Oval scratchplate, chromed crescent moon control plate, heavy-duty bridge but now with added pickup and surface mounted selector switch. The bridge pickup is positioned exactly as on the regular StingRay and the additional unit sits fairly centrally between that and the end of the neck. All the other major features stay pretty

true to form; Schaller BM tuners with tapered string posts, the neat capstan wheel truss rod adjuster and the chrome-plated brass cover plate sitting over a graphite coated control cavity that keeps background noise to a minimum. However, while presentation is as you'd expect, the electronics are much more sophisticated.

In order to fully appreciate what's on offer it's perhaps best to think of the two humbuckers as four separate



MUSIC MAN STINGRAY HH TEST RESULTS

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

■ **WE LIKED** Traditional StingRay looks; pickup switching options; great sounds

■ **WE DISLIKED** Are you kidding? We've been waiting for this for years!

single-coil pickups running one-four from bridge to neck. So at the furthest extremes of the switch you either engage coils one and two (bridge humbucker) or three and four (neck humbucker) and in the centre position you activate all four coils (both pickups on). Standard textbook stuff, of course, but it's the other two switch positions that give this bass a very interesting tonal twist. One activates coils two and three for a really big central pickup sound while the other offers coils one and four for a super-wide hollow sound. Backed up by a master volume, with bass, middle and treble active EQ, there's a lot of sonic potential here.

SOUNDS: With heavy-duty hardware, a secure six-bolt neck plate, a comfortably contoured body and a compensated nut for greater tuning accuracy, this bass is definitely built for battle. The ever-so-slightly wider neck takes a little getting used to but, as the general proportions remain within the optimum, the StingRay playing experience is hard to fault. And although there's still a difference in sound between the Ernie Ball-made models and the original Leo Fender examples – those really early ones were notably bass heavy with a rounder sound – today's versions are far more versatile, having added presence and clarity that's ideally suited for this updated model.

It's impossible to find a bad sound here so if something doesn't sound right; it's probably you! Thankfully, the regular StingRay sound is retained but, of course, you get a whole lot more to play with. Using both pickups together produces a fat, thumping sound with a hollow edge that's hard to follow. Using

'Ray of hope

When Tri-Sonics was established in 1972 by Leo Fender and a couple of former Fender employees, Forrest White and Tom Walker, nobody fully understood the implications. The renaming to Musitek shortly after made no impact either but in 1974 things changed again; Music Man was born.

In 1975 Leo's 10-year non-competition clause instigated by the CBS takeover of Fender expired and it was announced that Leo was the president of Music Man Incorporated. A two pickup guitar called the StingRay 1 appeared as well as a four-string bass guitar – naturally called the StingRay bass. This had revolutionary active circuitry that was so highly secret at the time that the earliest models had the circuit completely covered in black bitumen to stop anyone copying it (check yours to see if it's an early model). Full production started in June 1976.

The early StingRay featured a slab body, bolt-on neck, 3/1-tuner arrangement, single eight-pole pickup, three-bolt neck plate, through-body stringing and individual string mutes. The twin pickup Sabre followed in 1978 with

the two extreme coils together unleashes a very cool, sumptuous hollow sound while the two middle coils tighten things up nicely. Individual volume controls could possibly have improved the blending options slightly but we're not about to second-guess the experts on this point. This new breed of StingRay offers countless tonal variations and the ability to focus your own sound preferences with the highly effective three-band EQ. Altogether it's a highly impressive, professional instrument from head to toe.

Verdict

What a truly fantastic bass! Apparently this twin humbucker version in black livery is currently the most popular configuration. Understandable, of course, as not only does it look truly

similar appointments but with a contoured body. The control plate was packed with volume, two tones, three-way selector switch and two mini switches as well as the jack socket! Both models were available with maple or rosewood fingerboards or as a fretless with an ebony board.

Leo's connection with Music Man was actually rather short-lived as he left to set up another operation, G&L, in 1978. However, the company continued and was sold to Ernie Ball in 1984. Following the takeover the Sabre was given plain-topped pickups but, in the shadow of the StingRay, popularity gradually waned and production ceased in 1991. The twin pickup Sterling took its place, introduced in 1994, and is still in production today. It features a smaller body but with similar intricate electronics.

Never ones to take the obvious route Ernie Ball introduced the Bongo in 2003, a much meatier two-pickup bass. This highly innovative instrument has a stunning sound but the radical design, by the same company used by BMW, has not produced mass appeal. Now at last a real traditional looking StingRay with two pickups is upon us.

stunning it produces an equally stunning variety of solid sounds to die for. But should you prefer a humbucker and single-coil combination, that is available at the same price. Of course, both models are also available in five-string denominations, and as the regular StingRays are available in left-hand models there's no reason to believe that this won't follow suit. What more could you possibly want?

They say good things are worth the wait, and this model has been a long time in coming. Although Music Man's twin pickup basses have something of a chequered past, here at last is their star attraction in this popular format. It's a real belter; the best just got better! 

Music Man StingRay HH Bass

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★



MUSIC MAN STINGRAY HH BASS

PRICE: £1,320 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Active four-string

BODY: Selected

hardwoods

NECK: Maple, bolt on

SCALE LENGTH:

864mm (34-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: 43mm

FINGERBOARD:

Rosewood

FRETS: 21, high profile, wide

HARDWARE: Hardened

steel bridge plate with

stainless steel saddles,

chrome plated, Schaller

BM tuners with tapered

string posts

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 19mm average

(centres)

ELECTRICS: Music Man

humbucking pickups,

three-band active

preamp, volume, treble,

mid, and bass, five-way

pickup selector switch

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.2/9.3

FINISH: High gloss

polyester black (as here),

white, blue pearl,

honeyburst, translucent

and natural plus loads of

other colours some at an

additional cost

LEFTHANDERS: Not yet

RANGE OPTIONS: Also

available are the four-

string StingRay with

humbucker & single-coil

pickup (£1,320), five-

string StingRay with pair

of humbuckers (£1,490)

and five-string StingRay

with humbucker and

single-coil pickup

(£1,490)

Strings & Things

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