

Second Coming

The Coronado and Starcaster might not have broken sales records or captured a slice of the ES-335 market the first time around, but both models are cult classics with killer looks and bags of leftfield sonic appeal. Now they're back, with a Modern Player series twist...

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What We Want To Know

1 Aren't these inspired by a couple of turkeys that never sold in the first place?

That's a bit harsh. It's certainly fair to say that neither model was a runaway success compared to Fender's more mainstream instruments, but each has certainly had its share of high-profile fans over the years.

2 Who played them?

Dave Davies, Courtney Taylor-Taylor of The Dandy Warhols, and more recently Serge Pizzorno from Kasabian, have all played Coronados. Radiohead's Jonny Greenwood has used a Starcaster extensively since 1996. Other Star players include Leo Nocentelli from The Meters and Dave Keuning of The Killers.

3 Ah – so they're mainly for indie kids who can't play and rely on their effects, then?

Now, now! Wouldn't life be boring if we all just played tasteful blues-rock on Strats, Teles and Les Pauls?

Fender Modern Player Coronado & Starcaster

£754 & £802

We'd heard whispers for years, but 2013 finally saw the Starcaster and Coronado make a comeback under the banner of Fender's Modern Player series. While neither model was a roaring success on its initial release – see The F-Hole Story on p103 – both guitars have found enough favour among a range of leftfield musicians and alternative rockers over the last couple of decades to keep interest bubbling away, and the prices of vintage examples on a steady upward trajectory. Happily, the 'Crafted in China' decal on the rear of each headstock guarantees that these new models are priced with mortals in mind.

Like other instruments in the Modern Player series, such as the Jazzmaster HH and the P-90-loaded Mustang, neither the Coronado nor the Starcaster is a strict vintage reissue. In the case of the Starcaster, we now get a four-bolt neck join in place of Fender's 1970s three-bolt configuration, simpler Gibson-style controls – goodbye master volume – and an Adjusto-Matic bridge and stopbar tailpiece. Unlike the original hollowbody

Coronado, the Modern Player features an alder centre block to help minimise feedback, and a pair of Fideli'Tron humbucking pickups – Fender's Gretsch Filter'Tron-style units developed for its Mexican-made Cabronita Telecasters. Although dispensing with some of the quirks of the original designs may irk fans of the

vintage models, these largely pragmatic changes help Fender to deliver the guitars at a price, and in some cases arguably make for a smoother ride for the contemporary player.

The Starcaster is the more tidily built of the two – our Coronado is finished a little scruffily around the nut, f-holes and pickup cavities – but both

Both guitars have found favour among leftfield musicians and alt-rockers over the last two decades



The Coronado's Fideli'Trons offer versatile, Gretsch-like tones



The new Coronado has a feedback-reducing alder centre block



335 players won't find upper-fret access quite as comfortable



The Coronado's headstock reminds us this is a Fender, after all

instruments are well put together, considering their sub-£700 street price points and production-line origins. Aesthetically, both guitars are as cool as you like; the gloss polyester Aged Cherry Burst (Starcaster) with a hint of Cherry Coke in its red hue, and the timeless Candy Apple Red (Coronado) are our preferred finishes in both instances. As is customary, there's an upcharge for 'Burst and Natural finishes, which will set you back an extra £48 on the retail price.

The Starcaster's body is 15.5 inches at its widest point and feels relatively compact when strapped on, compared with the Coronado's big 16.3-

Strat and Tele players may find that the standing playing position of both instruments takes a little adjustment

inch width. Predictably, the physically chunkier guitar is also 0.3kg heavier, but neither is any weightier than your average modern Gibson ES-335. With front strap-button positions on the inside of the upper horn (Starcaster) and at the heel (Coronado), Strat and Tele players may find that the standing playing position of both instruments takes a little adjustment, but it's far from a deal-breaker. Despite the

Gibson-style bridges, the basic feel is very familiar and Fender-like, as both guitars feature a comfortable medium C-shaped bolt-on neck and 25.5-inch (648mm) scale length, with a taut string tension and a snappy acoustic response.

If we're nitpicking, those aforementioned maple necks feel a little generic and overly glossy, but it would be churlish to expect the same personality that you'd get from either a

vintage original or an instrument subjected to more hand finishing in the manufacturing process. That said, the vintage-style stains look the part, and there's even a subtle flame visible on the rear of the Starcaster's neck.

Fretwork in both cases has been neatly executed, with no sharp, protruding ends. Due to the sheer physical bulk of the traditional Fender bolt-on heel arrangement, neither guitar provides the kind of easy upper-fret access offered by an ES-335; and along with the tension of the 25.5-inch scale, this means that blazing away in high registers requires a little more stretch and fight from the



The F-Hole Story

Neither the Coronado nor the Starcaster set the world alight the first time around. Here's the skinny on two former ugly ducklings that have since found favour on the left side of the field...

AFTER designing pivotal instruments for Rickenbacker in the late 1950s, Roger Rossmeisl was brought into the Fender fold by Leo Fender in 1962 to focus on acoustics and later electro-acoustics, all manufactured at a separate facility on Fullerton's Missile Way. The legendary Rossmeisl's first electrified design for the company was the Coronado, in 1966.

In an attempt to make a play for the burgeoning market for semis and hollowbodies that saw The Beatles and many other 1960s stars sporting Epiphone Casinos and such, Rossmeisl's Coronado models featured fully hollow, symmetrical bodies of laminated maple, with dye-injected laminated beechwood used on the psychedelic Wildwood models from 1967.

Single-pickup, dual-pickup and 12-string versions of the Coronado were all equipped with floating bridges and DeArmond single-coil pickups. Despite the Coronado's undeniable visual appeal and its profile being raised significantly following appearances in two Elvis movies, *Speedway* and *Clambake*, the lack of feedback-resistance deterred guitarists embracing the fuzzier tones of the psychedelic-rock era as much as traditional jazz players found the bolt-on necks off-putting: production ceased by 1972.

Fender's next attempt to crack the ES-335 market came in 1976, with the Starcaster. Designer Gene Fields initially intended to use up the company's stock of old Coronado parts, but with its offset body

construction, six-saddle string-through-body hardtail bridge, three-bolt neck and a bold headstock design that was a recycled throwback to Fields' mid 1960s Marauder prototype, the Starcaster ended up evolving into an instrument that looked and felt much more Fender-like than its forebear.

Despite being a strangely attractive beast with a versatile set of sounds – thanks to its Seth Lover-designed Wide Range humbuckers – like the Coronado, the Starcaster didn't exactly fly off the walls of guitar shops, either. It was discontinued and consigned to relative obscurity in 1982, with Fender returning its primary focus to the Stratocasters and Teles that embedded the company in the affections of guitarists in the first place.

In more recent times, both the Coronado and Starcaster have proved popular with indie guitarists, particularly in the US. Assisted in no small part by heavy stage and studio use by Radiohead guitarist Jonny Greenwood since the late 1990s, the price of vintage Starcasters has been driven up to well over three grand. And that's if you can even find one. Original Coronados, particularly those in rare custom colours, aren't too far behind. Silly money? Well, perhaps. But that's where these new reissues enter the equation...



The new Starcaster's Adjusto-Matic replaces the string-through-body bridge



The Starcaster's Wide Range humbuckers differ from Seth Lover's originals

fingers of your left hand. You can get up there, but both guitars feel more like natural platforms for interesting chord voicings, low riffing and sonic experimentation than vehicles for mainstream blues or rock lead playing.

Sounds

The Coronado's larger physical size lends more air and a little more volume to its acoustic tone than that of the Starcaster, but plugged in, the contrast in the character of the Fide!i"Tron and Wide Range humbucking pickups is marked. Predictably, Filter"Tron-style pickups in a semi-acoustic chassis make for a Gretsch-like set of tones from

the Coronado – it just begs for a Bigsby and lashings of spring reverb. Fide!i"Trons don't quite have the aggressive midrange growl or the level of harmonic complexity offered by Gretsch's Japanese-made Filter"Trons or aftermarket TV Jones pickups, but they certainly get in the right ballpark for a variety of styles, from rockabilly and indie jangle, or even to overdriven classic-rock rhythm playing. And thanks to the centre-block and humbucking pickups, it's much easier to control feedback at stage volume than it is with a vintage Coronado. Whether that makes the ride more or less fun depends entirely on your playing mindset.

The Starcaster's Wide Range humbuckers – which on an internal inspection are revealed to have originated from the South Korean company G&B Pickup Co Ltd, supplier of pickups for the Far Eastern ranges of many major manufacturers – may not have CuNiFe rod magnets like the original Seth Lover design, but all three pickup settings have plenty of natural compression and a slightly foggy high end that lends itself well to intricate arpeggios and chiming indie chords when clean, smudging up nicely when you add drive and giving low-string riffs an enjoyably grunginess. Think latter-day Radiohead or

The Rivals

Another branch of the Fender family offers the **Gretsch G5622T-CB Electromatic Center-Block** (£958). With a trio of new Super HiLo"Tron pickups, 'cat's eye' soundholes and a Bigsby, it's a beautiful machine. **Gibson's ES-335** is the daddy of the centre-block guitar world; and with street prices of £299 or less, the **Epiphone Dot** version is a justifiably popular take on the theme. For pawnshop looks, check out the Harmony-esque **Airline Jupiter Pro** from **Eastwood Guitars** (£679).



The Starcaster's tonal character is thicker and not as 'retro' as the Coronado's

PJ Harvey and you'll be playing to the Starcaster's strengths.

Spring reverb, crunchy analogue delay and a Pro Co RAT pedal are the Starcaster's friends. It has a slightly thicker, more aggressive electrified tonality than that of the Coronado, but if you're a tonehound looking for a guitar for Texas blues or a metalhead who craves bottom-end definition, neither of these instruments are likely to be for you. These are both great guitars for indie rock players who love effects, with the Coronado having a little more range at the 1950s rock 'n' roll end of the spectrum thanks to its Gretsch-inspired core sounds, and the Starcaster being perfectly suited to all flavours of 1990s-influenced sonic experimentation.

Verdict

In both instances, we wish Fender had supplied a case to accommodate these instruments' unconventional outlines, but that aside, it's great to have the Starcaster and Coronado back in the catalogue. The Coronado provides the biggest departure from the vibe of the originals, and in this incarnation it's perhaps the most comfortable route into

classic Gretsch territory for guitarists who crave that Fender feel and scale length, but don't want to go down the Cabronita route.

The Modern Player Starcaster retains more of the essential identity of the original model it's based on than the Coronado, but it's still a guitar that will prove massively polarising in aesthetic terms. If you 'get it', as we do, then it's something of a relief that Fender has finally made an affordable version available.

It was a while coming, and there's a danger that many of the 1990s indie fans who fell in love with the Starcaster thanks to Jonny Greenwood might have grown up to have more conservative six-string tastes these days, and thus be less inclined to pick one up than they might have been a decade ago. Hopefully, though, there's a whole new generation of young indie hopefuls waiting in the wings to unleash scratchy guitar textures on the world.

Now, wouldn't it be nice if Road Worn models of both of these guitars were available for those of us who find the glossy polyester feel a little too 'new'? And perhaps Fender could slap a Bigsby on them while it's at it? We can but dream... **G**



Fender Modern Player Coronado

PRICE: £754
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Semi-hollow electric
BODY: Maple laminate with alder centre block
NECK: Maple, C-shape
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm/25.5"
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, bound, 241mm/9.5" radius
FRETS: 21, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome pinned Adjusto-Matic bridge with floating tailpiece, cast/sealed machineheads
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x FideLiTron humbucking pickups, 3-way toggle pickup selector, individual volume and tone controls for each pickup
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 3.9/8.6
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Candy Apple Red (as reviewed), Black, 3-Colour Sunburst and Black Cherry Burst (both £802)
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.fender.com

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

Guitarist says: A Fender semi for Gretsch admirers, that conveniently doubles as a fabulous-looking and sounding indie-rock machine



Modern Player Starcaster

PRICE: £802
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Semi-hollow, offset-body electric
BODY: Maple laminate with alder centre block
NECK: Maple, C-shape
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm/25.5"
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, 241mm/9.5" radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Pinned chrome Adjusto-Matic bridge with anchored tailpiece, cast/sealed machineheads
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Wide Range humbucking pickups, 3-way toggle pickup selector, individual volume and tone controls for each pickup
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 3.6/8.0
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Aged Cherry Burst (as reviewed), Natural, Black (£754)

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

Guitarist says: Fender's most polarising electric is updated with a few twists. The result? A cool and affordable platform for experimental indie guitar