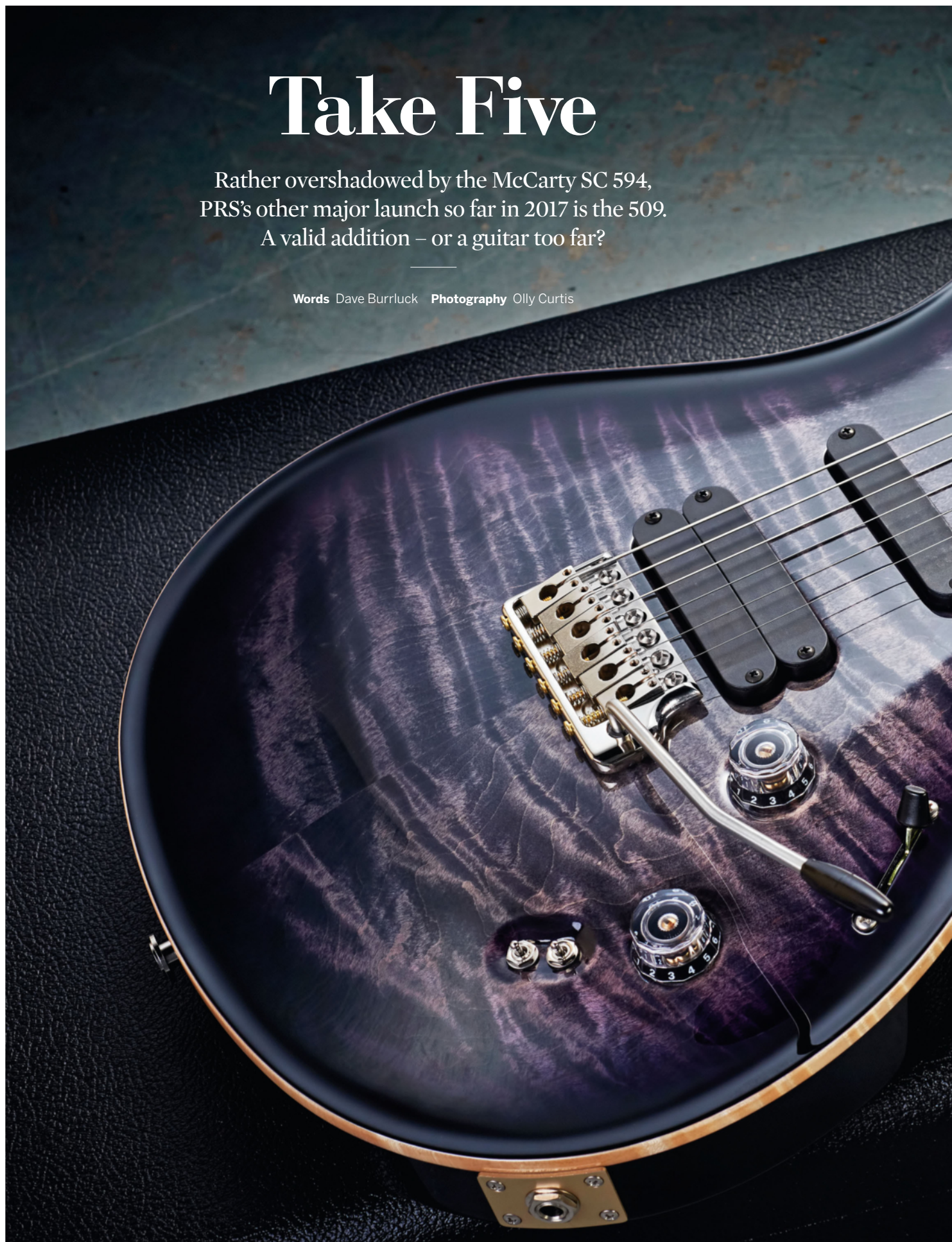


# Take Five

Rather overshadowed by the McCarty SC 594, PRS's other major launch so far in 2017 is the 509. A valid addition – or a guitar too far?

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Olly Curtis











## PRS 509 £3,655

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### What You Need To Know

- 1 509: where does it get its name?**  
'509' refers to the guitar's five single-coil pickups – the outer pairs grouped as humbuckers – creating nine sounds via the five-way lever switch and two mini-toggle coil-split-like switches.
- 2 Haven't we seen this before?**  
You're probably thinking of its predecessor, the 513, which used the same style pickups but via a five-way lever pickup selector and a three-way lever mode selector to produce 13 sounds.
- 3 So this is an updated model with fewer sounds? That's odd...**  
"We sold a lot of 513s, but almost universally people don't use the 'heavy' humbucking tone," says Paul Reed Smith today. "They use the 'clear' humbucking and the single-coil [tones]. That's kinda normal, right? Somebody buys a Fairchild compressor and they only use the '1' and the '2' positions on the attack and release and they don't use the '3', '4' or '5' positions. So we figured out a way to make it simpler: we've not only changed the wiring but the pickups a little bit, too."

It's some 13 years since PRS introduced the 513. It promised more sounds – and supplied them – but a decade and a bit in the guitar industry is a long time. The 513 is dead: long live the 509! The new guitar continues the 513's 'five single coil' concept, but reduces its available sounds. However, on paper at least, it's still the most versatile PRS currently being made. Grouped into the trio of 'Speciality' models in PRS's Core USA-made line, the 509 certainly remains rather unique to PRS 2017.

For starters, it's the only three-magnetic-pickup model currently being made; the others all have dual humbuckers. In fact, it's the only Core model to offer a *true* single-coil pickup, period. It's also the only guitar to feature a 641mm (25.25-inch) scale length, the longest standard scale currently offered by PRS outside of extended baritone or bass scale lengths. And it also has a unique neck joint – the body heel is extended, as it was on the 513, which is intended to add a little more Singlecut-like low-end content.

In most other aspects, though, it's very much PRS: that classic double-cut outline and flamed maple-topped mahogany construction (with McCarty depth); those ubiquitous bird inlays on the unbound rosewood 'board with its 'halfway' 254mm (10-inch) radius. It also shoots for the biggest 'jumbo' fretwire that PRS employs, as seen on the DGT and Santana guitars.

Hardware looks familiar, certainly the Phase III open-backed tuners with their top-locks and aluminium buttons, but the vibrato is another new-for-2017 design. This Gen III is an upgrade to all Core vibrato-equipped models, and "the mounting screws have been redesigned with a larger thread and a larger custom

head", says PRS. "This added mass creates more contact from the screw to the bridge and the guitar's body, resulting in greater sustain... [Also], grooves have been added to the bridge plate [that are] radius'd to match the radius of the height adjustment screws, again so there is more contact and a better fit." It's typical PRS: constant attention to the smallest detail if it improves the recipe.

Now, the 509 certainly isn't the only PRS guitar to offer single-coil sounds alongside humbucking voices – that's always been a feature of PRS guitars since the first Custom was introduced. Today, the Custom achieves this duality from its five-way lever selector, while other vibrato guitars, such as the DGT, use a three-way toggle pickup selector with a pull/push switch on the tone control to introduce partial coil-splits of the twin humbuckers.

Like the other two Speciality guitars – the 408 and Paul's Guitar – however, the 509 has two discreet, small-tipped mini-toggle switches. In 'down' position, they voice both coils of each humbucker, but on each pickup, one of the coils is tapped (namely, we're not getting its full output – effectively, this is the 'clear' humbucking sound of the 513). In the 'up' position, it's the outer single coil of the bridge pair and the inner single coil of the neck pair that are voiced. Consequently, measuring the DC readings on the pickups, the humbucking selections come up with a fairly classic 8.02 and 8.29kohms for the neck and bridge. In single-coil modes, they drop to 5.72 and 5.84k; the central single coil measures 5.97k.

### Sounds

As its price suggests, the drive here should be first class and few players will have any issues. The pattern regular neck fulfils that





**1.** New for 2017, this Gen III vibrato is now standard on all PRS Core models with numerous subtle tweaks to improve sustain and vibration transfer

**2.** The five single coils are proprietary designs but mean we can't swap them out for our favourite humbuckers or single coils. "There are individual [rectangular] bar magnets that sit upright – like a Strat pickup with rectangular magnets instead of round ones – and a bar magnet. To clarify, on the single-coil pickup there is no bar magnet; on the two humbuckers there is," says Paul Reed Smith





‘it disappears’ feel, slightly narrower and less girthing than the pattern profile, less deep than those big ol’ 50s Fender necks. The additional 6.4mm to the scale length? Well, if you play as many guitars as we do, it’s hard to comment. If you only play a shorter Gibson scale, you’ll feel a little extra resistance to bends, less so if you’re a Fender player – but it’s subtle whatever direction you’re coming from. The theory says we should expect a slightly zingier voice, but it sounds like a modern PRS to us and feels it, too: perfectly set up, really in tune, and these slightly bigger frets make it even more bend-friendly than, say, a Custom or our reference 2016 McCarty.

It’s interesting to compare the two – that subtle scale difference (the McCarty is 635mm/25 inches) and its Stoptail bridge versus the 509’s vibrato in what is otherwise a pretty identical build. The McCarty has just a little more acoustic ring and resonance; the 509 sounds a little smoother. We’re hearing the whole guitar and feeling its resonance, though, from the tip of the head to the base of the body. Yes, that’s what you’d expect, but it’s not always what you get, even at these prices.

If you expect a guitar that switches from ’59 ’Burst to ’54 Strat, then you might be disappointed – the differences you hear on those two benchmarks are about more than just the pickups. Paul Reed Smith is particularly picky about high-end, and likewise his artists, Carlos Santana being one. So if you want thin ice-pick-like highs, look elsewhere.

The central single coil is a good place to start with sparkle and depth. The Strat-like mixes either side retain that sparkle with their hollowed bouncy funk as you’d expect. Still in single-coil mode, the neck’s inner coil is big and fruity, perhaps lacking some choppy highs. Pulling the volume back doesn’t quite clean up enough – it’s almost as if we’d like to lose a little girth, too. In contrast, the bridge veers to a spikier sound, but referencing against our well-used Strat again, there’s more thickness and body here.

As we said, the ‘clear’ humbucking mode doesn’t introduce a volume leap: at lower volumes it’s surprisingly subtle, adding a little oomph at the bridge and a touch more thickness at the neck. Swapping to our McCarty, it does have a little more classic clarity, certainly on the neck pickup – in

3. This jumbo wire is the largest used by PRS and also features on the DGT and Santana. The scale length is extended here, but the fingerboard radius remains the same at 254mm (10 inches)

4. This subtly different neck heel was conceived for the 513. “It’s a stronger joint: [the body] holds onto the neck further out under the heel. We were trying to get more of the sound of the Singlecut Trem but on a double-cut,” said Smith in 2004

5. These mini-toggle switches provide the humbucking/single-coil transition. “They’re easier to get to,” says Smith, comparing the pull/push switch with coil-splits. “People forget they have push/pull switches, but they never forget these mini-toggles. The pull switches on the tone pot started with the McCarty: it looks cleaner”





both full and split modes – which might be less important on more gained voices. Still, it gets our vote for cleaner duties, though, of course, it has no specific ‘Strat’ sounds.

But referencing aside, and just thinning a little low-end and lower mids from our test rig, the 509 begins to shine: less to ape past benchmarks, more to simply produce hugely usable humbucking/single-coil voices. These voices aren’t chalk and cheese, but they are imbued with a fullness and richness that – not for the first time with a modern PRS – creates the impression you’re listening to a sound that’s been EQ’d and tweaked with an almost subtle hint of compression and dollop of thickness added. It’s quite a grower.

### Verdict

So is the 509 a valid addition to PRS or a guitar too far? It is unique in its number of sounds, its scale length and that middle-placed single coil, which all move it towards a more Strat-like voice. But it’s a relatively subtle shade compared with the other vibrato-equipped PRS Core models that also offer both humbucking and single-coil voices: the Custom, DGT, 408 and Paul’s

Guitar, not least that all five guitars share a very similar construction. Yes, the 509 does offer one more voice than either of the latter two, three more than the DGT and four more than the Custom, but is that enough to really give it a ‘must-have’ USP?

Well, we could ponder that for some time. What the 509 does offer us remains its Strat-like take on the PRS flavour, as well as all of the fine craft that PRS is renowned for – it’s a hugely considered pro-quality piece that’ll last you a lifetime. Would we like to hear more ‘Fender’, maybe listen to these 509 sounds on PRS’s bolt-on CE platform, or perhaps see it with a light ash or alder body? Yes, but as it stands, if you’re primarily a humbucking player looking for some additional single-coil, Strat-y sparkle, the 509 has serious legs for the player needing that versatility in the one instrument. It’s also a guitar that might make you rethink the ‘single-coil sound’: there’s nothing remotely over-bright or thin-sounding here. **G**

**Guitarist would like to thank**  
**World Guitars for the loan of this guitar**  
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### PRS 509

**PRICE:** £3,655 (inc case)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, carved-top solidbody electric

**BODY:** Mahogany with flame maple carved top

**NECK:** 1-piece mahogany, pattern regular profile, glued-in

**SCALE LENGTH:** 641mm (25.25")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Friction reducing/42.54mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, bird inlays (vintage ivory acrylic with green abalone centres), 254mm (10") radius

**FRETS:** 22, jumbo

**HARDWARE:** PRS Gen III vibrato, PRS Phase III locking tuners (w/ brass posts) – nickel plated

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52.5mm

**ELECTRICS:** PRS 509 Humbucker (bridge and neck), 509 Singlecoil (middle), 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone control, mini-toggle dual/single-coil switch for each humbucker

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.79/8.34

**OPTIONS:** 10-top maple (defaults to hybrid nickel/gold hardware). Artist Package (from £5,460)

**RANGE OPTIONS:** Other ‘Specialty’ models in the Core line include the 408 and Paul’s Guitar (both £3,695). The Custom 24 and 22 kick off the Core range at £3,469

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISHES:** Charcoal Purple Burst (as reviewed, a non-standard special colour), wide range of ‘bursts’, transluents and opaques. PRS V12 gloss finish

# 8/10

**PROS** Superb ‘super car’ build and feel; a humbucking guitar with single-coil sparkle

**CONS** A lot of cash, even for two guitars in one... and are we really getting the single-coil hit we want?