

FIRST PLAY



**GIBSON LES PAUL 70s
DELUXE**
£2,199

WHAT IS IT? Homage to the mini-humbucking Les Paul Deluxe but with regular LP construction. No volutes or pancakes here!

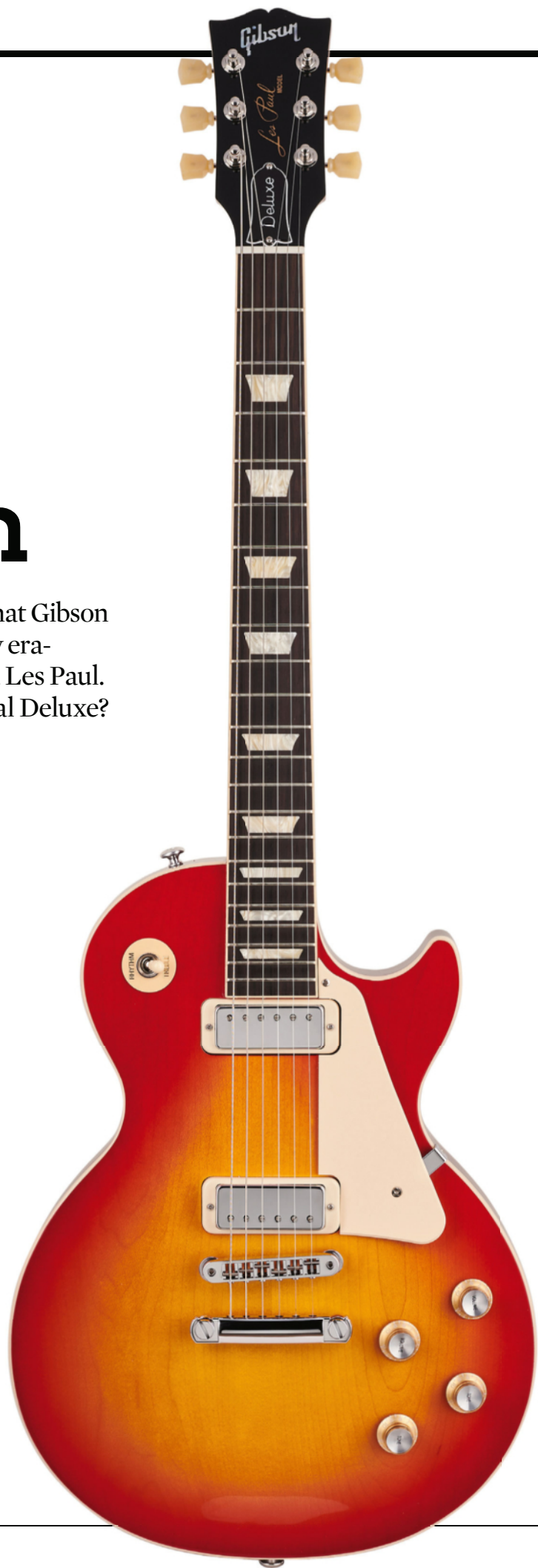
Deluxe Addition

The 70s are back, at least that's what Gibson would like us to think with its new era-inspired, mini-humbucker-loaded Les Paul. But does it do justice to the original Deluxe?

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

By contrast to the mighty Standard and Custom, the Les Paul Deluxe, originally produced from 1969 until 1984, was never quite in the same classic league. It shone brightly and sold in significant numbers in its early years because the single-cut Standard had, of course, been replaced in 1961 by the very different Les Paul/SG. But more and more high-profile players were picking up and playing Standards during the 60s, which simply increased demand that Gibson ignored. Even when the classic shape made a comeback in 1968, it was in the form of the twin-pickup Custom and, briefly, the goldtop P-90. So when the Deluxe launched the following year, its appeal was obvious. Except for the fact that, with its mini-humbuckers, it *wasn't* a Les Paul Standard – and its construction had changed, too, with a laminated 'pancake' body, three-piece mahogany (then maple) neck with a volute and a larger headstock.

Artists didn't exactly jump onboard. Pete Townshend was one famous exception, as was Scott Gorham, while Stateside, Barry Bailey of the Atlanta Rhythm Section, nicknamed 'The Steely Dan of The South', is a well-documented Deluxe user (although his very early '69 doesn't have that 'pancake'







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1. These tuners are a modern take on the classic vintage style and are used on numerous other Original Collection guitars. They're smooth and precise in use, too. Take note, there's no volute here!

2. Typically, a Les Paul's pickups tilt to match the string line. Presumably due to the pickup route, this neck pickup is angled in the wrong direction

The instruments we've seen from the new regime have all been pretty tidy, especially at this top-tier USA production level

body). The '68 Custom, however, had much bigger reach in the hands of Carlos Santana and Bowie sideman Mick Ronson – just two examples – and it's little surprise that although the Deluxe sold well during the early 70s, it was eclipsed by the Custom as the decade progressed.

But this isn't Historic Hardware – and although history hasn't been kind to the Deluxe (especially since the weights can be excessive and those mini-humbuckers are an acquired taste), it was a well-used and, in many quarters, well-loved Les Paul.

Fast forward to the present and this new Deluxe, now priced the same as the Standard '50s and '60s, is the first Les Paul that Gibson has introduced to its Original Collection since the reorganisation of the line back in late 2019. Except, of course, it's not really new. It's certainly not a reissue – and Gibson isn't marketing it as such – and as the mini-humbuckers have the same footprint as soapbar P-90s, it's pretty much a Les Paul Standard '50s P-90 with different pickups and chrome parts.

Like the other Original Collection Les Pauls, the new Deluxe isn't weight relieved, and pulling our cased review sample

from its cardboard shipping box we're wondering if it's made from concrete... At 4.44kg (9.77lb), the guitar is no lightweight, but neither is the shaped brown hardcase, which has a lighter red interior and noticeably rectangular-shaped latches compared with the earlier 2019 case. The case weighs 5.94kg (13lb) – the previous one is 3.94kg (8.67lb) – which means you're actually lugging 10.4kg (22.8lb) of cased guitar around. Time to hit the gym.

While the internet rants about the variances of Gibson's quality control, the instruments we've seen from the new regime have all been pretty tidy, especially at this top-tier USA production level. So, while this new Deluxe side-steps the construction of the originals, there's very little to moan about. In fact, the bright red of the Cherry Sunburst over the plain maple top transports this writer back to the days of the late 70s and early 80s flea-bitten rehearsal and recording studios when he owned a '72 original. This new guitar is unnervingly close in colour.

The chrome hardware adds to the 70s sheen. The Nashville-style tune-o-matic and aluminium stud tailpiece

VINTAGE VS MODERN

It might be far from a reissue, but how does the new Deluxe compare with an early 70s example?

Despite its speckled past, you'll be lucky to snag a real 70s Les Paul Deluxe for the price of this new model. As ever, vintage prices centre on condition and you'll often find repaired neck cracks or full breaks, and plenty of Deluxes routed for humbuckers with the minis long gone. Then there's the notorious weight, often 10lbs and over – the main reason why Pete Townshend stopped using his Deluxes.

But side-stepping vintage value, we're reminded of the potency of this 'wrong' Les Paul when playing an early 70s example that's been well used and has a neck repair that's been totally stable since 1980. The sample we get to play is lighter (3.94kg/8.67lb) than many, despite its 'pancake' body and three-piece mahogany neck. In fact, it's the lightest we've ever found.

The headstock actually looks huge. It measures 88mm across its upper tip; the modern head is 79mm and is around 0.6mm thinner in depth at 9.6mm. Both the neck pitch and headstock angle of the old guitar are flatter, too.

Typical of a well-used and near 50-year-old guitar, its condition isn't great with plenty of wear and finish cracks to the back, sides and headstock, but less on the top, which suggests it was over-sprayed. The dual ring 'tulip' Gibson Deluxe tuners have definitely seen some action; the B, D and G string buttons have all been

severely bashed out of line. And while the owner can tell us all about its life from the early 80s, before that we can only guess. It's been played, that's for sure. The original wide 'n' low frets are now very low – approximately 2.65mm wide by 0.86mm high – and the fingerboard, as a result, is heavily worn, almost scalloped in places. A definite candidate for a refret!

But the neck profile is good and it's thinner back to front than our review sample – 20.1mm at the first, 24.9mm at the 12th – with a lovely

We're reminded of the potency of this Les Paul when playing an example with a neck repair that's been totally stable since 1980

unclubby C shape. The large binding strip in the cutaway looks rather funky, but you could certainly live with that. While the controls and probably the pickups have been removed at some point (probably during its repair and refinish) and then refitted, the pot codes date the guitar to 1972, as do the 'Gibson' logos on the front of the mini-humbuckers. The original 'Black Beauty' caps are still in situ, but about the only mod we can see is a replacement aluminium output jack plate and, possibly, what appears to be a reshaped heel.

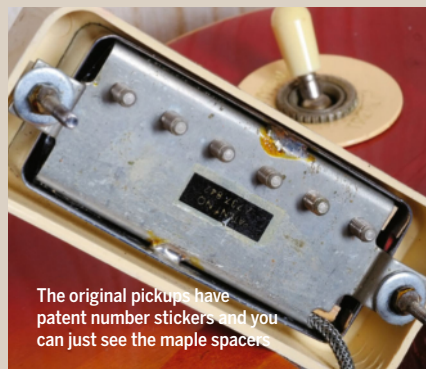
Comparing the decades-apart two guitars, it's not just the construction that differs, and no doubt informs the sound, but the unpotted mini-humbuckers of the original guitar expand and enhance what we hear from the new example. They are slightly hotter than their DCRs – 6.72kohms (bridge), 6.88k (neck) – but have so much more 'old Les Paul' about the voice, and that's with not particularly fresh strings and those really low frets. What does that mean? The old example is more vocal. There's also a

little more depth but still with that focus and a beautiful touch-sensitivity. Terms such as 'wiry' spring to mind, but in a very positive sense.

Of course, you can Deluxe-ise any soapbar Les Paul and the potential duality has immense appeal. There's a surprising choice of mini-humbuckers available, including from the UK's Ben Fletcher (www.fletcherpickups.co.uk) who we featured in Pickup Lines back in issue 463, and a multitude of P-90 soapbars. We can't help thinking that this new 70s Deluxe could be quite the tone-tinkerer's favourite.



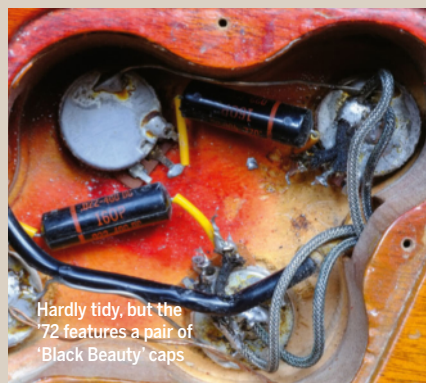
The neck pickup still doesn't follow the string rake, but lies flat to the body



The original pickups have patent number stickers and you can just see the maple spacers



Even the bridge saddles are heavily worn and clearly made of brass



Hardly tidy, but the '72 features a pair of 'Black Beauty' caps



Our vintage circa 1972 Les Paul Deluxe

UNDER THE HOOD

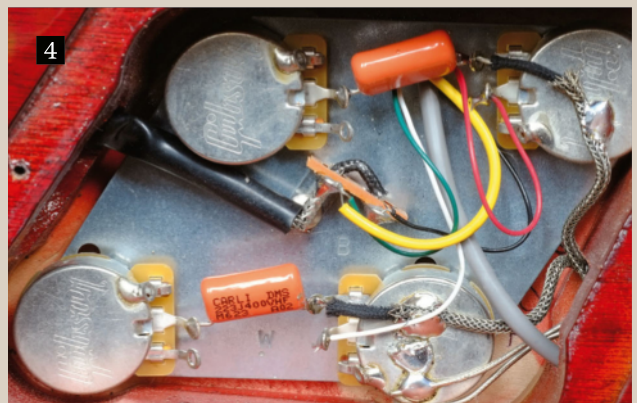
What's happening inside the Deluxe?

While an original Deluxe invariably used brown plastic coverplates for the control and switch cavities, here they're standard black. Inside the control cavity, mounted via a conductive metal screening plate, are four 'Gibson' stamped CTS audio taper pots, nominally valued at 500kohms as you'd expect with a twin-humbucker guitar. That said, both volumes are lower – the neck drops to 422kohms, the bridge closer at 496k – and we can't help thinking that reversing these would suit the guitar. The Orange Drop caps are .022microfarads on both neck and bridge, and the circuit is wired modern-style, like original Deluxes.

The pickups are labelled for lead and rhythm positions, the Pat number is stamped on the baseplate, and the bridge is slightly hotter, but not by much going simply by the DCRs measured at output of 6.31k ohms (bridge) and 6.16k (neck). Gibson states these wax-potted pickups are "vintage replicas of the original mini-humbucker with Alnico II bar magnets" and "authentic in every detail, from the cream-colored plastic mounting and coated enamel-like wire, to the maple spacers and vintage braided lead wire". Typically both have the same polepiece spacing that we measured at 49.54mm.

3. The patent number is stamped on the pickup base, while the sticker tells us this is the bridge pickup

4. The tidy control cavity here features Orange Drop caps and modern wiring



The rosewood fingerboard here is almost ebony-like black in colour, and we can't help wondering if it's stained. The fret work, however, is excellent and this example was very well set up

(with steel anchor bolts) are made by Advanced Plating in Portland, Tennessee; the steel saddles are pre-notched and height adjustment is easy via the Allen-keyed bolts. The tuners, meanwhile, do appear to be nickel plated with nicely antique-looking keystone buttons, but, importantly, they feel smooth and positive. We have no complaints.

Mini-Humbuckers

These mini-humbuckers were designed by Seth Lover for the Gibson-owned Epiphone line, and the reasons for employing them are also well documented. They were initially surplus stock once Gibson had stopped USA production of Epiphone, and they do give the Deluxe an almost player-modded vibe, sitting in their modified P-90 soapbar covers. Of course, there's nothing to stop you swapping over to standard P-90s here.

The minis also mount to the guitar in a different fashion from a P-90 or standard humbucker. The pickup has a preset height within its surround so, when you go to adjust it, both the pickup *and* surround move up or down. The bridge pickup is fine, but the neck is right down as far as it will go and it tilts in the opposite direction to the rake of the strings. It's not the end of the world, but it does look a bit odd.

Feel & Sounds

This new Deluxe is a big, chunky, weighty beast. Hey, it's a Les Paul! The neck feels very similar to the Standard '50s and dimensionally is very slightly bigger than the one we reviewed back in issue 448: 43.53mm at the nut with a 1st fret depth of 22.8mm filling out to 25.4mm by the 12th. There's no tapering to the shoulders, which tells your left hand it's bigger than it actually measures. Did we say it feels big? The fretting is perfectly good, from a low-ish medium gauge (approx. 2.28mm wide by 1mm high). The nut is well cut and, once strings are stretched and settled, tuning is stable. The rosewood fingerboard is very dark brown here, almost black, certainly compared with our reference late-2019 Les Paul Classic.

Rather like the Deluxe itself, the mini-humbucker is far less a part of our sonic DNA than the PAF or P-90. The smaller pickup senses a narrower portion of the string, and with a lower inductance and output it produces a cleaner and brighter sound. We're not saying it sounds like a Fender, because it doesn't, yet it certainly loses some of that thump and chunk; it's lower in output than our Les Paul Classic with Burstbuckers 1 and 2. There seems to be a little more cut to the attack, but it's smoother – less grainy, if you like – than our

5. Like the chrome-plated hardware, these gold reflector knobs evoke the 70s, and unlike Gibson's Modern Collection there are no wiring tricks (or PCBs) here

6. Both these new mini humbuckers – which have one coil with adjustable polepieces, the other coil with a bar polepiece – use Alnico II magnets and have a relatively low output



GIBSON LES PAUL 70s DELUXE

PRICE: £2,199 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway, solidbody electric

BODY: 1-piece mahogany (no weight relief) with carved plain maple top

NECK: 1-piece mahogany, rounded 'C' profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech/43.53mm

FINGERBOARD: Single-bound Indian rosewood, acrylic trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stud tailpiece, vintage-style 'Gibson Deluxe' keystone tuners – chrome plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 50mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Gibson Mini Humbucker w/chrome covers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual volume and tone controls (hand-wired with Orange Drop capacitors)

WEIGHT (KG/LB): 4.44/9.77

OPTIONS: No

RANGE OPTIONS: The Les Paul Standard '50s, '50s P-90 and '60s all cost the same (£2,199)

LEFT-HANDERS: Not currently listed for this model, but the '50s and '60s Standard are available left-handed

FINISHES: 70s Cherry Sunburst (as reviewed), Gold Top – gloss nitrocellulose

Gibson
www.gibson.com

8/10

PROS Tidy build and finish; big neck; good playability; evocative, valid sounds from the mini-humbuckers

CONS It's the heaviest of Gibson's new Les Pauls that we've played; the reverse-tilt of the neck pickup looks wrong

Broadcaster-style 'Tele' reference. If you like your Les Pauls on the low-output side, which can certainly be surprisingly bright and clear at the bridge, that's where this Deluxe is aimed. It has more clarity than any other single-cuts we had to hand, and a little tone roll-off on the bridge pickup just tames the beast a little.

There might be less power, but we still have a good snarl at the bridge as we begin to add in some gain. Again, that lack of lower midrange thickness works in its favour at the neck, resulting in a clarity where our Burstbucker 1 now almost sounds too thick.

We simply didn't have the range and quality of outboard gear back in the 70s that we have today. Pickup outputs can be easily increased with simple boosts so the Deluxe's mini humbuckers become simply a different 'colour', and the clear humbucking voice is hugely valid, particularly for the recording musician. We don't all want to wail away like Mr Moore – and, actually, the Deluxe not only has a little more funk to its voicing, it begins to blur the line between those perhaps hackneyed Gibson and Fender contrasts, not least with both pickups engaged.

Yet experience suggests that on a big ol' chunk of Les Paul we should have an equally big voice – and that's exactly what we *don't* get. It's like putting a pair of humbuckers

It's leaner sounding than a PAF-style but smoother, less raw than a P-90 and without the hum

on a Strat: for some players, that mismatch can really reap rewards; for others, it's just wrong. If you like the feel of a Les Paul but don't enjoy its sometimes soupy thickness, try one of these.

Verdict

While this is far from a reissue of a Les Paul that ran for a 15-year period – and we're certainly not suggesting Gibson returns to those 'pancake' bodies, maple necks and volutes – it does give us that third pickup style after the P-90 and full-size humbucker. That's the appeal. And just like those other pickups, the mini-humbucker has its own style. It's leaner sounding than a PAF-style but smoother, less raw than a P-90 and without the hum. It's definitely a valid voice, not least at the neck, and although it might be perceived as somehow less 'rock' (although Who and Lizzy fans might disagree!), don't dismiss these minis in any way, especially if you like the Les Paul platform but just want a cleaner voice. It's a different flavour, pure and simple. **G**