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PRS S2 VELA  
£1,289

WHAT IS IT? USA-made, retro-flavoured solidbody electric

# BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY

PRS's affordable USA S2 line gets a new original design that just might make the 30-year-old company cool, at long last!

WORDS DAVE BURRLUCK

PHOTOGRAPHY ADAM GASSON

Introduced in 2013, PRS's S2 line is made in the same USA factory as the now-called and higher-priced 'core' models, but on a completely different production line. These new production techniques are aimed at producing a top-flight guitar but one that is, from conception, more affordable.

At the original launch, two of PRS's more 'modern retro' designs, the Mira and Starla, took centre stage. Now it's time to introduce the third in that 'original series', the Vela: the first S2-specific original design that's not a reworking of a previous or existing core model.

If Vela's outline looks like an offset Custom, that is actually how the design came about. The Custom's outline was cut up the middle, the bass side was moved upwards and the design team filled in the curves. Other than that, the body is very similar to the Mira: overall depth is 42mm, thinner than the Custom by about 6.5mm, or a quarter-of-an-inch. Again, as with the Mira, Starla and the S2 Standards, the body is all mahogany, like the neck. While the core models use one-piece necks and body backs, the S2 guitars retain a thinner one-piece body but with a three-piece neck with a spliced headstock, cut from the



VIDEO DEMO



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PRS S2 Vela **FIRST ▶ PLAY**







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same thinner-but-wider slab of mahogany (which doesn't need extra headstock wings like the core models), plus an additional piece for the heel. Even through the Vela's old-school translucent Vintage Cherry you can barely see any joins.

But if the style of the construction is different, the feel really isn't. The pattern regular neck has a deep-ish, rounded C profile – 21.8mm at the 1st fret, 23.5mm at the 12th – and the unbound rosewood 'board has standard plastic 'clay'-like dots (bird inlays are optional extras). The fretwire is the same as the core models, we have the same 254mm (10-inch) radius and, of course, the 'halfway' scale length of 635mm (25 inches).

The Vela, however, moves the S2 into a different tonal area. Instead of using the brand's Stoptail wrapover bridge or its industry-standard vibrato, along with the top-locking tuners and friction reducing nut we get a new bridge design – actually based on a bridge PRS designed some years ago – referred to as a 'plate-style'. Imagine a non-vibrato Strat bridge but with top-load strings that sit in roomy key-hole cut-outs in the aluminium base (they don't pass through the body), and instead of six saddles we get just two Tele-like

**1** Look, no birds! The Vela is one of the few PRS guitars to come with dots, though twitchers will be glad to know that bird inlays are available as an optional extra...

**2** The volume control features a treble-bleed cap to retain highs as it's turned down, and the tone control has a pull switch to voice the single coil of the bridge humbucker

**3** The Vela makes use of PRS's seldom-seen 'plate-style' bridge, which features a pair of Tele-style brass saddles for the strings





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While the bridge pickup certainly sounds like a clean humbucker, the neck pickup is much more hot single coil - not a million miles away from a Gold Foil

brass rods acting for the top three and bottom three strings. There's a large machined grooved under each string, height adjustment is via a small screw at the ends of each saddle, and there are two intonation screws per saddle controlling the overall tilt, necessary for the different intonation required by the increasing diameters of the wound and plain strings. Top loading (as opposed to strings-through-the-body) bridges are known for their bass-light, brighter character, and that's immediately apparent from the first unplugged strum.

The differences continue with the pickups. Okay, yes, the Starla bridge pickup with its 12 visible pole pieces isn't new, albeit only used on the eponymous S2 model, but the neck pickup certainly is. Like the old DeArmond-made Gretsch 'Dynasonic' pickups, we have magnetic pole pieces that appear to be height adjustable via six smaller diameter slot head screws. They don't actually adjust anything, but they are magnetic so could play a subtle part in the pickup's sound.

While the Mira uses a three-way lever switch to select its two pickups, the Vela swaps that for a Gibson-style toggle placed at the base of the nicely retro scratchplate onto which all the electrical components are fixed apart from the side-placed, metal-plate-mounted output jack. We do get the very comfortable and practical proprietary lampshade knobs,

though, and the tone control has a pull switch to turn the Starla Treble pickup to single coil, voicing the bridge-facing coil.

### Feel & Sounds

With the change in body geometry comes a change to the feel of the guitar when it's played, both seated and strapped on. Seated, the neck sits further into your body, the nut or 12th fret positions feel less elongated than a Custom 24, and the Vela hangs more like a Stratocaster on our strap.

Acoustically, there's a different tonality before we get near an amp: a slight upper-mid push and a subtly hollowed character as opposed to a more balanced ring from our 30th Anniversary Custom 24.

Plugged in, 'different' is an apt description. Compared with a Fender Roadworn Strat, for example, the Vela has a hotter output from the bridge 'bucker: thicker and considerably - though not excessively - darker with a smoother nose to the note. The neck pickup has less spike, again thicker than a Strat's more recognisable voice. Swapping back to the most classic-sounding Custom we've heard, a 30th Anniversary Custom 24, gives us a hotter tonality that's more rock. Back to the Vela, though, we drop back a decade or three: it's immediately more characterful on lower gains and clean/crunch tones. While the bridge





pickup certainly sounds like a clean single coil – not a million miles away from Lollar's Gold Foil, for example. It certainly doesn't have the high-end sparkle of a tougher Texas Special Strat single coil, and with a similar DC resistance to the bridge humbucker and Lollar's Gold Foil, it's little surprise we're hearing a rounder high end.

That balance of edge-to-girth is what gives Vela its character. On perhaps a maple neck/alder body platform, combined with the top-load bridge, there just might be too much high-end. Here it's more balanced and creates a wide sonic palette, from cutting Elmore James slide, through to *Exile*-era Keef, abrasive early Who, any Tom Petty record and the raw raunch of Springsteen and Lil' Steve. It's a Rickenbacker, Gretsch, Dano... and quite a few others all rolled into one. A superb rhythm guitar but equally good for those crunchy SG-meets-Telecaster gnarly leads.

## Verdict

Let's face it, with their 'doctors and dentists' association, bird inlays, vibrantly-coloured maple tops and high prices, core PRS guitars aren't for everyone. But if the S2 Mira and Starla releases put some retro-cool back into the brand, then the Vela kicks it out of the park... and beyond.

Now, S2 guitars are supposed to appeal to a new audience of younger bands but there's plenty for the, ahem, more mature player here in a simple, no frills – but typically classy – fashion. Enough words. Back to playing. **G**

**4** With its big pole pieces and Gretsch Dynasonic vibe, the new Type D single coil is a departure for PRS, and has a Lollar Gold Foil sonic quality to it



## PRS S2 Vela

**PRICE:** £1,289 (inc gigbag)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Offset double-cutaway, solidbody electric

**BODY:** Mahogany

**NECK:** Mahogany, 'pattern regular' profile, glued-in

**SCALE LENGTH:** 635mm (25')

**NUT/WIDTH:** Friction reducing/42.8mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, dot inlays, 254mm (10") radius

**FRETS:** 22, medium

**HARDWARE:** PRS Plate-style bridge with brass saddles, S2 locking tuners

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52.5mm

**ELECTRICS:** PRS S2 Starla Treble humbucker (bridge) and Type-D single coil (neck), 3-way selector switch, master volume and master tone (with pull/push coil-split for humbucker)

**WEIGHT (KG/LB):** 3.04/6.7

**OPTIONS:** Bird inlays (£100)

**LEFT-HANDERS:** No

**FINISHES:** Antique White, Seafoam Green and Black opaque; McCarty Tobacco, Sienna and Vintage Cherry (as reviewed) translucent

**PRS Europe**

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**Guitarist would like to thank**

**Wildwire Music and Audio (01757 701996) for the loan of this guitar**

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

**Guitarist says:** *The first all-original design in the S2 range, the Vela could appeal to a broad range of players with an anti-posh, retro sensibility*