

FENDER ERIC CLAPTON, JEFF BECK & RORY GALLAGHER STRATS £1,799, £1,799 & £2,699

ELECTRICS

Fender Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck & Rory Gallagher Strats

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This trio of Custom Shop models pays tribute to some of our finest guitarists. Three Strat players; three very different Strats by Neville Marten

Fender has been making instruments based on the ideas of its players for years. Clapton's original Signature Strat emerged in the eighties and the first Jeff Beck model followed not long after. Recently Fender has added a Custom Shop version of each, more akin to the guitars that Eric and Jeff play on stage, and it's these instruments we're appraising here.

It's 10 years since Rory Gallagher passed away, and now the Custom Shop has released a remarkable-looking Tribute model based on his famous beaten-up guitar. As each of these guitars is imbued with its own unique characteristics, this should make for an interesting test... →



In the case of the Clapton and Beck models, their Custom Shop heritage means they're that much closer to the instruments used by these great players



FENDER ERIC CLAPTON STRAT

PRICE: £1,799 (inc hard case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Integral maple with black plastic dots and 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
FRETS: 22, vintage fine
HARDWARE: Blocked up vintage-style vibrato, Fender/Gotoh vintage-style tuners, angled jack receptacle: nickel/chrome
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: Three Fender Vintage Noiseless pickups, master volume and TBX tone controls, five-way selector plus 0-25dB active mid boost circuit
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.35/7
RANGE OPTIONS: Other models in the Custom Artist Stratocaster series include the upturned headstock and reverse-angled bridge pickup Dick Dale (£2,499), the Inca silver non-vibrato Robert Cray (£2,299), and Robin Trower's Signature (£1,799) and Tribute Strats (£POA) with their '69-style large headstock and Tex-Mex bridge pickups. The standard non-Custom Shop Eric Clapton Strat costs £1,299
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Mercedes blue, black, midnight blue
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.fender.com

→ **Eric Clapton Signature Strat**

It's ironic that Clapton is the world's most famous living Stratocaster player, since he made his name playing Gibsons and was rarely seen with a Strat until after the death of Jimi Hendrix. And while Eric's love of fat, powerful tones is evident in his particular Signature Fender, aspects of Gibson playability are present too.

The timbers for the Custom Artist range are the very best. On the EC model we find a top grade alder body that's been curved and contoured in all the right places, and polyurethane finished to unfaltering standards. The neck is all maple and this time the finish is satin, for drag-free playability.

While Eric chooses vintage style medium fretwire, as a serious string bender he likes his fingerboards a little flatter than the 7.25-inch radius of early Fenders. This guitar's 9.5-inch radius is more Gibson-like and allows for the sort of fluid finger work that we expect from EC. The neck is shaped into a soft 'V' for that final element of luxury.

Hardware is traditional, with vintage-style tuners and the classic vibrato system. But as Eric doesn't use his vibrato bar, the bridge remains screwed down, with a block of wood wedged inside to prevent any movement.

ERIC CLAPTON STRAT TEST RESULTS

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

- **WE LIKED** Brilliant blend of features; superb build and great neck
- **WE DISLIKED** Exclusivity makes it expensive; some won't like skinny frets

On a plain white scratchplate – which refuses to lie flat on the body around the lower horn – sit a trio of Fender's Vintage Noiseless pickups, which replace the Lace Sensors of the older Clapton model. We've found these to be organic and natural sounding – ideal for sweet blues and as a basis for more overdriven excursions.

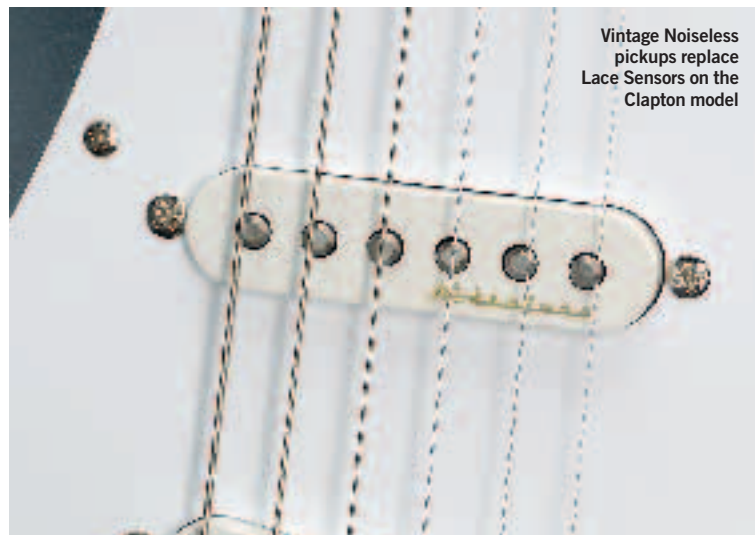
Eric's equal liking for humbucking and single-coil tones led to Fender developing an ingenious boost control that cranked up the mids by as much as 25dB. Eric has always run things from the guitar's volume pots, and so this rotary is used to dial in the exact amount of boost required. The middle of the three controls is the master tone, featuring Fender's TBX system; a centre-notched pot that allows both treble cut and boost.

This is a lovely guitar to play. The velvet smooth neck sits perfectly in the



The middle pot utilises Fender's TBX system for treble cut and boost

Winding up the Clapton's mid boost control offers an extraordinary level of extra gain, with the mids fattening out well and the amp's front end getting a serious fright



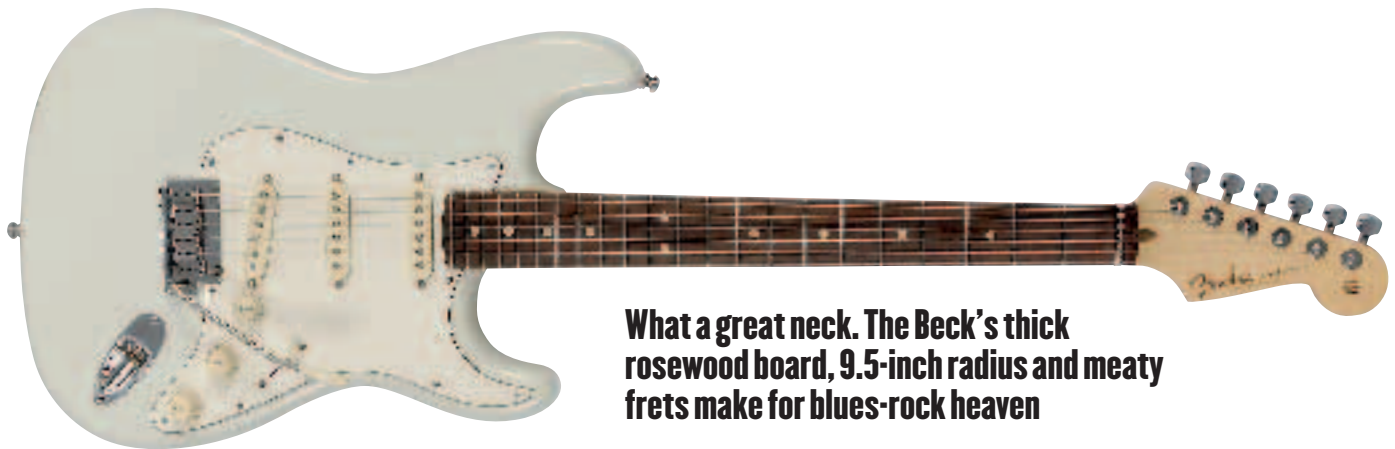
Vintage Noiseless pickups replace Lace Sensors on the Clapton model

crook of the hand, its soft 'V' the perfect mating of vintage and modern shapes. Old-style frets seem very thin when compared to today's tastes but, while you expect the strings to slip from under your fingers when bending, that's not the case. It's a smooth player, but not a guitar that runs away with you; it urges you to work for your vibrato and feel everything a bit more.

Jeff Beck Signature Strat

When Jeff Beck's first signature guitar hit the streets a decade and a half or so ago, eyebrows were raised at the audacity of both Beck and Fender to put out something so... weird. Apart from a pair of Lace Sensors joined together at the bridge, there was the neck: it was a monster! It actually felt deeper than it was wide, and the most common description was 'baseball bat'.

Big necks do mean big tone, but there has to be some compromise in order to make a guitar do that other important thing that's required of it – play! Some



What a great neck. The Beck's thick rosewood board, 9.5-inch radius and meaty frets make for blues-rock heaven

JEFF BECK STRAT TEST RESULTS

JEFF BECK STRAT	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** Delicious and usable vibrato system; playable neck; build quality
- **WE DISLIKED** Expensive compared to regular Artist model

people did find the original Beck model to their liking, and others struggled with it because they wanted to be like their hero; but the general consensus was that it was a lump too far.

So on this latest incarnation (and the later standard Beck models), out goes the huge 'U' of the old model and in comes a wholly manageable 'C' shape. Like the Clapton, Beck's guitar has 22 frets, but here Jeff has opted for a bit more meat. As a player renowned for his fretboard antics, it's understandable that he would want the extra bending and vibrato facility afforded by more metal under the fingers.

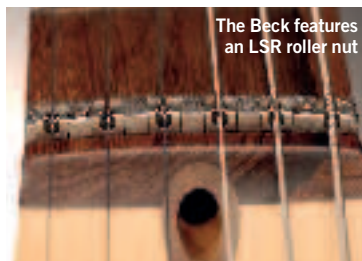
The Beck also features a select alder body and maple neck – this time capped with a rosewood board. Other differences include the modern, two-point floating vibrato with stainless steel saddles, locking Schaller tuners and an LSR roller nut; a system that provides virtually friction-free operation for Jeff's amazing whammy antics. One further concession to playability is a contoured heel area for extra top-end access.

Again, Lace Sensors have given way to Fender's 'stacked humbucker' Ceramic Noiseless pickups. Legend has it that, when asked what he'd like in his original signature Strat, apart from the big neck Jeff asked for fake pole-pieces to be painted on to the Lace Sensors of a Strat Plus. Doubtless he'll be pleased with the cosmetics of his latest model.

What a great neck. The thick rosewood board, 9.5-inch radius and meaty frets make for blues-rock heaven. Big bends, heavy vibrato and speed are all catered for superbly. The set-up is dead right, and this extends to the wonderfully in-tune vibrato system.



Schaller locking pegs should help keep the Beck in tune – whatever you get up to



The Beck features an LSR roller nut

Pull up and the top three strings give a semitone, tone and minor third respectively, making some interesting pedal steel effects possible, while pressing down on the bar allows the kind of control that Beck's playing demands. It's a stunning player.

Rory Gallagher Tribute Strat

Rory's brother Donal took his priceless guitar to LAX airport where the Custom Shop's Mike Eldred took possession of it. Mike, along with John Cruz and John English, then carefully dis-assembled the guitar, examined every facet, measured every detail and Cruz built the original prototype.

Only those very close to Rory would know just how much modification had been done to the original guitar, but it was certainly a work in progress. Under the scratchplate, wood had been removed and replaced; the tuners were a mis-matched group of five Sperzels and a Gotoh; one of the 12th-fret 'clay' markers had been replaced by a white

plastic dot; the selector switch's mounting screws were flat-heads out of character with the rest of the guitar; the scratchplate was cracked in places; and there are letters scratched into the neck, behind the nut.

Essentially this is the Relic to end all Relics, but otherwise it's a stock early sixties-style Strat, with small headstock, three-ply scratchplate, a trio of specially designed single-coil pickups and the original three-way selector switch (not the five-way stated in Fender's spec sheet).

Like both Clapton and Beck Strats, the Rory Tribute is made from select alder, while the neck is a sixties-style maple affair with a deliciously dark 'slab' rosewood fingerboard.

In places the ageing does look a little affected: the individual 'islands' of sunburst seem too clean-cut around the edges, and where bare wood meets finish at the heel of the neck it seems obviously sanded away. But that's being very picky. In every other sense it's an astonishing piece of work, and even from a couple of feet away is utterly convincing.

Silky smooth and as drag-free as the Clapton, this guitar also has the modern 9.5-inch fingerboard radius, even though Rory's would have originally have been 7.25 inches. This simulates the neck planing that happens when a guitar is refretted – and Rory's had a few of those over the years! These large →

FENDER JEFF BECK SIGNATURE STRAT

As Clapton except...
NUT/WIDTH: LSR roller/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood with white plastic dots and 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
FRETS: 22, medium-heavy

HARDWARE: Fender twin-post floating vibrato system with stainless steel saddles, Fender/Schaller locking tuners, angled jack receptacle; aged chrome

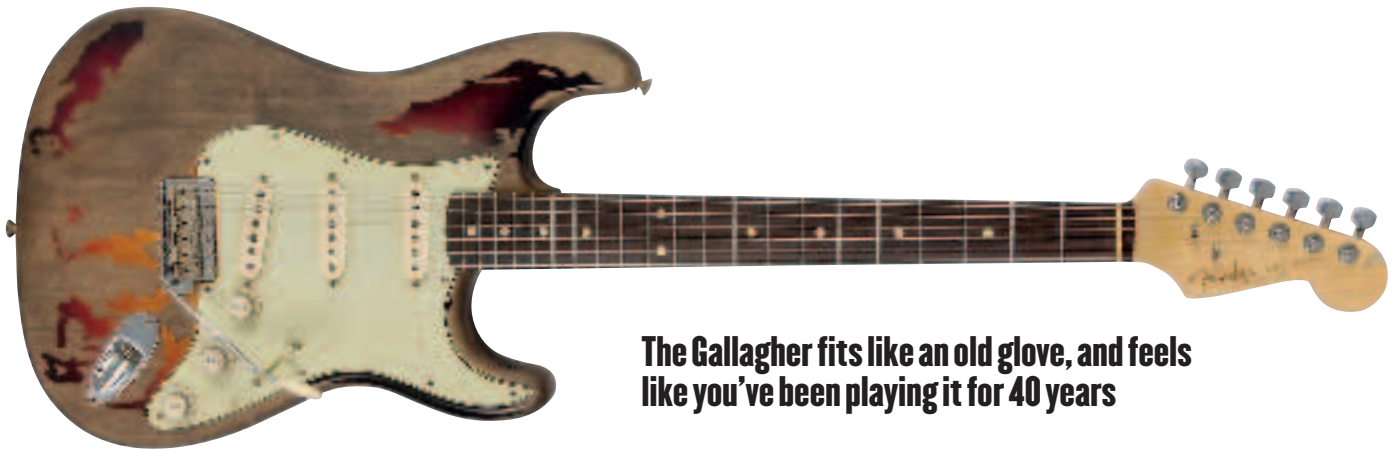
ELECTRICS: Three Fender dual-coil Ceramic Noiseless pickups, master volume, two tone controls (neck, middle and bridge) and five-way selector

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.35/7
RANGE OPTIONS: See Clapton. The standard non-Custom Shop Jeff Beck Strat costs £1,299.

Others in this standard Artist range include the Buddy Guy (£1,499); a cool Mark Knopfler (£1,499) with '57 ash body and '62 rosewood neck; the brand new Eric Johnson (£1,549), with lightweight body, specially wound pickups and thin nitro-cellulose finish; scalloped-neck Yngwie Malmsteen (£1,399), and the SRV (£1,399). Some of these are offered in the Mex-made Artist series too: the Buddy Guy 'polka dot special' (£499), the Robert Cray (£499) with hardtail bridge and the Jimmy Vaughan Tex-Mex Strat (£599)

LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Olympic white and Surf green

ELECTRICS



The Gallagher fits like an old glove, and feels like you've been playing it for 40 years

RORY GALLAGHER TRIBUTE STRAT

As Clapton except...

PRICE: £2,699 (inc hard case)

BODY: Alder with heavily aged nitro-cellulose finish

FINGERBOARD:

Rosewood with white clay dots (one mis-matched plastic dot at 12th fret) and 241mm (9.5-inch) radius

FRETS: 21, medium-heavy

HARDWARE: Vintage-style vibrato, five Sperzel and one Gotoh tuner, angled jack receptacle, slot-head screws in selector switch

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Three Fender Custom '60s single-coil Strat pickups, master volume and two tone controls (neck, middle), three-way selector switch

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.35/7

FINISHES: Highly worn three-tone sunburst

The rivals

Fender American HH Hardtail Strat	£849
Fender American Deluxe Strat	£999
Fender 'Closet Classic' 1960 Strat	£1,999

Want a Strat that does something similar to these Artist models but without the signature?

Well, if you have no need of a vibrato but, like Eric, want more power and mids, the twin-'buckered American HH Hardtail should do the trick. Need some whammy action and a bit of Beck-like beef? The American Deluxe was one of our top guitars of 2004, with its tuneful vibrato system and versatile S-1 switching. If you're more of a traditionalist, then it has to be the 1960 Closet Classic in three-tone sunburst – a mildly aged vintage-style Strat that looks just like Rory's did when he bought it all those years ago

→ frets help you to squeeze every ounce of feel from the guitar, and you rarely miss the extra fret of the other models. The Rory fits like an old glove, and feels like you've been playing it for 40 years.

SOUNDS: All three guitars were resonant and open sounding when played acoustically, but all have distinct characteristics when plugged in.

The Clapton is livelier than an old Strat, but less glassy than the Lace Sensor-equipped model of yore. It seemed most at home with the TBX control at its centre detent position – things got a little too scary with it cranked right up, but nicely 'woman' tone-ish when backed off. Super clarity is the order of the day on all the expected Strat tones, but winding up the mid boost control offered an extraordinary level of extra gain, with the mids fattening out well and the amp's front end getting a serious fright. Our Marshall/Fender combination responded instantly, giving back long, liquid lines so typical of Clapton.

Beck's guitar runs on the same juice, but without the extra oomph of the Clapton's active circuit. It also doesn't have the TBX control, so sonically it's a straightforward Strat with woody sounding Ceramic Noiseless pickups. It adores being cranked through a high-gain amp for those searing Beck tones, but then back off the volume control for sweetly expressive passages.



Some of the Gallagher's ageing seems a little too precise

RORY GALLAGHER STRAT TEST RESULTS

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

- **WE LIKED** Attention to detail; great neck; classic Strat sound
- **WE DISLIKED** Ageing looks a little obvious

of exclusivity – and their price. Remember that you don't need to play blues or hi-tech instrumental rock to own one: each is as versatile as any normal Strat – the Clapton, with its excellent boost circuit, even more so than the Beck – and so can tackle any musical style. They're both among the best Strats we've played.

Rory Gallagher is one of the most sadly missed of all guitarists. He was a charming and talented man and the work that's gone into his Tribute model shows the love and respect that's felt for him by Fender. His Strat is a fabulous player that sounds close to the real thing. And even though some of the ageing seemed a little obvious, this is a guitar that will elicit gasps of astonishment as you lift it from its case.

But, you're asking, which one would we choose? Well, as an artefact it would clearly be the Rory Tribute. As a player though, we'd take the Beck, but fitted with Clapton's mid boost system – the 'Jeff Clapton' Signature Strat... now there's a thought! 📺

The Gallagher has the weakest output of all three models, but this is no bad thing. These are true vintage sounding Strat pickups, but there's a twang here that's often lost as a guitar ages. Through our mildly driving Marshall the guitar's raison d'être became quickly apparent: to milk the thing for all it's worth, pulling – as Rory did – every ounce of tone from every winding. Rory was a treble pickup man and this one is wiry and musical, but flip to the middle or neck – or lodge the three-way between settings – and each sound is right in its expected ballpark.

Verdict

These guitars are made for true fans of Eric, Jeff and Rory. In the case of the Clapton and Beck models, their Custom Shop heritage means they're that much closer to the instruments used by these great players than those in the 'regular' Artist series. It also means they're built to more exacting standards and this shows in their resonance, their slickness as players, their general feel



Keeping it real: the Gallagher comes with five Sperzels and one Grover