

Fender Classic Player '50s & '60s Stratocasters both £499

The Custom Shop lends its magic to improve still further the range of Mexican-made Classic Strats by Simon Bradley



Our feature on Fender's Custom Shop in issue 273 proved once and for all that the facility produces some of the most desirable guitars available, and even though it would seem that the designs are only limited by imagination, it's often the beautiful recreations of specific guitars from the fifties and sixties that attract the

highest levels of acclaim.

The Custom Shop employs a small number of masterbuilders to apply their stratospheric skills to not only a selection of limited run guitars, but continuing output of Tribute models and custom-ordered one-offs. Stock and Custom Teambuilt guitars are pretty special in their own right, but to



run your hands over a Masterbuilt guitar is an almost religious experience, and that's the idea behind the new range of Classic Player Strats.

Settling within the Mexican-built Classic Series, these guitars benefit from having been overseen by no less than two masterbuilders: Dennis Galuszka, who designed the '50s Strat, and Greg Fessler, responsible for the '60s model.

We spoke to Justin Norvell, Fender's marketing manager for electric guitars and basses, to begin the story.

"Around the time I became the Fender marketing manager, senior masterbuilder Chris Fleming had been helping out with some general processes at our Ensenada factory, and was amazed at how impressive that facility had become, how knowledgeable the staff were, and what they were capable of." He tells us. "He ended up designing a guitar that he brought to me as a possible 'Factory Special Run' and from that spark we decided a small special run would be short shrift for such a great concept, and that it should be fleshed out into an actual line of instruments."

What's Jason's opinion of what the Custom Shop brings to these affordable instruments?

"When you buy a Custom Shop instrument, you are getting two things: the 'head' – the builder's expertise and knowledge, and the 'hands' – the actual building," he explains. "With these Classic Player instruments, you are getting the 'head', but it didn't stop there: this wasn't just a list of ingredients and components that was facelessly furnished to the factory to be built. The masterbuilders went down there and showed the people who would be building these instruments how to do things their way: finishing the custom shaped necks, softening some of the blends, and so on. It was a true collaboration from start to finish."

Although the question of exactly what the Custom Shop team brought to Ensenada has to be asked, Fleming is understandably reticent in spilling too



The Kluson tuners lock to ensure that the two-point tremolo stays in tune

'50s CLASSIC PLAYER	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ WE LIKED Great tones, vibe and feel	
■ WE DISLIKED Genuinely nothing	

The influence of the Custom Shop team is apparent even before you plug in and it's difficult to get across just how good these Strats are

many beans.

"I interfaced with the Mexico team to develop a 'thin skin' polyester finish," he says, "as well as working with the production crew to refine sanding of the body contours as well as transitions on the neck and fingerboard edges. We worked on this project for approximately a year from conception to the first production run."

What are the basic differences between these guitars and the standard Classic Strats?

"Just the addition of a more modern playability within the vintage aesthetic," explains Justin. "The two-point vintage bridge has previously

never been available outside the Custom Shop. Other features include refined contours and blending, flatter radii, bigger frets, and custom colours and electronics. It's basically like one of those makeover TV shows, where the experts come in and refine things."

The Custom electronics mentioned here refer to the '50s Strat, which, in position four on the otherwise standard five-way, combines the neck pickup with the bridge. Dennis Galuszka, the masterbuilder behind the '50s Strat, outlines this and other improvements.

"Coming up with anything new and inventive to do within the parameters of the Stratocaster is a challenge that surprises me every time we at Fender do it," he says with a smile. "With the Classic Player I wanted to incorporate the better parts of a Stratocaster, both old and new. Staying within the '50s vibe I kept the Kluson-style tuners that actually lock to ensure that the newer two-point tremolo will stay in tune with heavy-handed tremolo work. Vintage steel saddles were installed to maintain crystal clarity in the notes and keep all the attack, and the five-way switch has a new voice by allowing the neck and bridge pickups to be used together."

Although difficult to appreciate in print, there is a genuine Custom Shop vibe to these two guitars – not least

FENDER CLASSIC PLAYER '50s STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £499 (inc deluxe gig-bag)

ORIGIN: Mexico

TYPE: Solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH:

648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: White

plastic, 42mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple,

241mm radius (9.5-inch)

FRETS: 21, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Two-point vintage-style vibrato, Gotoh vintage-style

locking tuners, all chrome

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 52mm

ELECTRICS: Three

Fender US Vintage single

coils, five-way lever,

volume and two tones

WEIGHT (kg/lbs):

3.4/7.5

RANGE OPTIONS: Non-

Custom Shop designs

include the Classic '50s

and '60s Strats at £499,

while the Classic '70s

Strats start at £599. The

Custom Classic Strats,

begin at £1,649. The

Classic Player Baja

Telecaster is £499

LEFT-HANDERS: Not yet

FINISHES: Shoreline

gold (as reviewed),

two-tone sunburst

Fender GBI

01342 331700

www.fender.com

The rivals

'50s CLASSIC PLAYER

Fender Custom Shop '56

Stratocaster from £1,999

Fender US Vintage '57

Stratocaster from £1,299

Blade Texas Vintage 57

£599

The price of the '56

Strat is lower than you'd

expect considering the

sheer quality. The US

Vintage '57 Strat is

one of Fender's all-time

best sellers, and the

authenticity is second to

none, while the Blade's

playability is something

to write home about too.

FENDER CLASSIC PLAYER '50s & '60s STRATOCASTERS BOTH £499

ELECTRICS  CD TRACKS 2 & 3



FENDER CLASSIC PLAYER '60s STRATOCASTER
As Classic Player '50s Strat except...
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 305mm (12-inch) radius
HARDWARE: Fender Ping vintage-style tuners, all chrome
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: Three Fender Custom '69 single coils, five-way lever, volume and two tones
WEIGHT (kg/lbs): 3.5/7.7
FINISHES: Sonic Blue (as reviewed), three-tone sunburst

The rivals

'60s CLASSIC PLAYER
Fender Highway 1 Stratocaster £599
Blade Texas Vintage 62 £579
Vintage V6 Icon £249
The recently upgraded Highway 1 range remains great value and offers real player's instruments. Blade's sixties-flavoured S-type offers an 11 screw, three-ply mint green pickguard for extra authenticity. Trev Wilkinson has finally made Vintage a brand to be applauded, and the range of frighteningly authentic S-types is great value.

'60s CLASSIC PLAYER	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
■ WE LIKED The wonderful Sonic Blue hue and mint scratchplate	
■ WE DISLIKED We found the neck of the '50s Strat slightly more sumptuous!	

thanks to the finishes the team have used. Aside from the two examples here, both the '50s and '60s Strat are only otherwise available with a sunburst finish and we do applaud the resistance of the temptation to offer the usual rainbow of hues.

"We wanted to go with true vintage colours, and throw in some Custom Shop colours made especially for this run of instruments," Justin states.

The Sonic Blue finish's combination with a wholly authentic mint green scratchplate and aged knobs and pickup covers adds to the vibe of the '60s Strat. In addition, the Shoreline gold finish of the '50s guitar is gorgeous and faultlessly applied.

In addition to the range of cosmetic and spec concerns, the two guitars also offer different neck profiles and, therefore, playing experiences. The '50s Strat has a soft 'V' profile alongside a 9.5-inch radius and, if we had to state which guitar we preferred in this scenario it'd be this model. Even though the '60s possesses a shallow 'C' shape with a flatter 12-inch radius, we found we'd reach for the '50s Strat each time. It's all about personal inclinations, of course, and needless to say both are finished flawlessly.

SOUNDS: As well as the differences in switching, the '60s Strat is loaded with a trio of slightly hotter Custom '69 single-coils while the '50s features American Vintage pickups complete with another authentic touch: bevelled polepieces.

The '50s Strat is, therefore, a much mellower proposition. And with a




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Justin Norvell, Fender

touch of warming gain all five settings offer tones that are perfect combinations of crystal edges with genuinely toneful centres: as usual the further towards the neck you go, the smoother proceedings become. And the fourth position? It's a smoother, fatter version of a Telecaster's central selection: very useable and a nice surprise too.

Texas springs to mind when plugging in the '60s Strat, as you can revel in the higher output and associated increased aggression within the performance. We might personally prefer the profile of the neck of the '50s Strat, but the '60s version still offers a top-quality playing performance and it's pretty obvious to us that the magic touch of the Custom Shop masterbuilders has been efficiently transferred here.

Verdict
If, like us, you occasionally find yourself unable to see the wood for the trees when perusing the glut of Stratocasters made by Fender these days, the introduction of these two Classic Players has simplified the choice of a new guitar at a stroke. For us, the price of \$499 offers an almost unprecedented value and, in these days of increasing bills in all walks of life, that's a blessing.

The influence of the Custom Shop team is apparent even before you plug either in and, as we've said, it's difficult to get across just how good these Strats are. If you thought that the variations on the classic Leo-designed theme were becoming a tad tired, they prove otherwise.

If you've always hankered after a Custom Shop vintage-styled Strat but couldn't consider the likely four-figure price tag, then either of these should go straight to the top of your shopping list: they really are that good. 

Fender Classic Player '50s Stratocaster
Guitarist RATING ★★★★★
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