

FENDER '65 PRINCETON REVERB REISSUE £839
GUITAR AMPS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY PHILIP SOWELS

Fender '65 Princeton Reverb Reissue £839

Fender goes back to the archives again for a retake on one of the most legendary amps ever to come out of Fullerton – how does it compare to the original? *by Nick Guppy*

What we want to know

1 What is 'blackface'?
The term is used to distinguish Fender amps made roughly between 1963 and 1967, although not all models existed for all this time period. It refers to the cosmetic styling, specifically the black screen printed aluminium control panel. Some people also use the term to refer to amps made before Fender was bought out by CBS in 1965 although blackfaces were made post-CBS.

2 What is a valve rectifier?
The electricity that comes out of the wall is AC – Alternating Current. The electricity inside your amp is DC – Direct Current. It's the rectifier's job to change AC into DC. On most modern amps this is taken care of by silicon diodes, but on vintage amps and reissues you're more likely to find the job being done by a valve.

3 Who is this amp for?
Any player who loves great tone with vintage looks and doesn't need modern high gain or channel switching.

As with Fender's wonderful Deluxe, the Princeton was one of the very first amps Leo made under his own name – dating all the way back to 1946 – and one of the few model names to remain in more or less continuous production, seeing out Fender's less well-known 'Ivy League' amps, the Yale and Harvard. Everyone has their own favourite version of this wonderful small

amplifier, and at the risk of offending some of the tweed fanatics out there, we reckon that with this reissue of the reverb-equipped 1965 variant Fender has probably picked the one that's garnered the most praise over the years. It combines the classic good looks of the pre-CBS 'blackface' with the mis-named Vibrato effect and that great spring reverb.

Originally intended as a smaller, more portable combo for practice and beginners, the Princeton Reverb quickly found its true calling in the hands of studio players and, along with the tweed Deluxe, is probably one of the most recorded amps of all time.

Like the original, this re-issue has a smart, perfectly proportioned cabinet covered in thick black Tolex, combined with a silver sparkle grille cloth and black control panel with six skirted control knobs for volume,

treble, bass, vibrato speed and intensity and depth for the reverb effect. It's the classic 'blackface' style and looks undeniably handsome – less vintage than tweed maybe, but classier; the amp for dinner dates and cabaret as well as those down-home blues or country pickin' gigs.

Also just like the original, this reissue sports a small but solid steel chassis, to which all the valve bases are directly bolted for strength, reliability and easy changeovers. Inside the chassis, the electronics are all PCB mounted on single-sided boards which are not through-plated – there are two small boards for the input jacks and rotary controls

and one large one for everything else, with connections to the valve bases made by short flying leads. This is quite a bit different from the originals, which used eyelet board construction, where components are soldered into small brass rivets which are in turn strategically hammered into a vulcanised fibre baseboard. This traditional way of building the Fender amplifier survived up until the mid-eighties when the Fullerton production line closed, and is now restricted to Custom Series models like the Tweed Deluxe reissue we reviewed a year ago (issue 294).

The Princeton's component values appear to be similar, however, the PCB layout is of necessity substantially different from the AA1164 circuit used on original Princetons of this era. The rectifier valve has also been changed, from what would have been a 5U4 to a 5AR4, which is actually not a bad thing for the amp overall as the latter is more efficient and kinder to output valves because of its controlled slower warm-up time, gradually building up the high plate voltage. By comparison a 5U4 would lower the voltage a little and reduce

The Princeton is good value, as long as you can live without the bells and whistles of a flashy modern design



The rear control panel houses the speaker outputs and reverb input and output

The Rivals

Rivera's Venus 3 1 x 10 combo (£1,166) combines vintage good looks with luscious Class A tone and superlative build quality that's arguably the best in its class. As always you pay for what you get and this is top-level stuff. **Vox's AC15H1TV** 1 x 12 combo (£895) proves it can do the reissue game as well as anybody and the AC15 is a tantalising recreation with a few modern twists thrown in. Reverb? Huge. Tremolo? Massive. Vintage retro cool looks and tone to match? We're talking about the **Supro Tremoelectric** 3 x 10 combo (£1,475). It ticks almost all the same boxes as the Princeton – although it is bigger and louder and way more expensive. However, Bruce Zinky knows good tone and how to get it.





The six classic skirted control knobs

output accordingly. However, if you're tempted to experiment with a 5U4 we'd say don't – despite the forbidden promise of more 'sag' at a slightly reduced output, a 5U4 will draw higher filament current which the reissue power transformer probably wasn't intended to handle.

The all-important loudspeaker is a Jensen C10R – a reissue of an original type that was one of several used by Fender on its small amps and so quite authentic, as is the supplied footswitch, which toggles the reverb and vibrato effects.

Sounds

If the tweed Deluxe created the legend of Fender's giant-killing small amps, it was the Princeton Reverb of the 1960s, along with its slightly bigger brothers the Deluxe Reverb and Vibroverb, which cemented it into history and inspired many players and at least one other renowned amp builder to a higher creative plane. Classic blackface tone is less mid-range-biased than the earlier tweed amps, with a shimmering treble and powerful bass that pushes out of the speaker. Helped by a big dose of reverb, this should expand to build an illusion of solidity – almost as if the notes are hanging in mid-air. The reissue Princeton does a very good job of delivering this tone and with the volume controls wound up you begin to understand why this was another amp that became so popular among blues and rock players, with a fat, toothsome overdrive and rich, harmonic-laden sustain. It is also very loud for an amp that's rated at a mere 15 watts. But it's in that elusive 'nearly clean' distortion area that the Princeton rules, with a seductive touch sensitivity that lets you make the guitar growl or bark on demand, while a gentler attack returns you to the subtle chiming clarity these small amps are known for.

The reverb is good – actually very good compared to a lot of

other amps in this price bracket – though we feel it's a touch too crashy and bright compared to an original. The vibrato circuit is superb, with just the right edge to the waveform and a nicely judged range of speed and depth, taking you from a Leslie-style fast wobble to slow, atmospheric pulses which combine with the reverb for some stunning, almost ethereal effects. Oh yes – we mentioned that the effect is misnamed. Vibrato in musical terms means modulation of pitch, whereas the Princeton's circuit modulates volume. It's actually tremolo, but Vibrato is what Fender has always called it so who are we to disagree?

Overall, the Princeton Reverb's tone is pure retro Americana, and if you're quick you can catch a video of it being put through its paces on the Fender website by none other than the great and criminally underrated Jim Campilongo. Campilongo is a master of tone, using pick position, the guitar's controls and sheer brute force on the neck to constantly create all kinds of subtle shifts as he plays, and no other player gets a bigger tone from a Tele and Princeton than Jim does. Fender couldn't have picked a better player to demonstrate what this amp – and the entire 'blackface' legend – is really all about.

Verdict

Beyond any doubt, the original Princeton Reverb was a classic and it's hardly surprising that

even an indifferent original will now set you back well over a thousand pounds. This reissue compares well, although we'd have to say that given the amp's historic status we're surprised not to see it alongside the '57 tweed Deluxe in the Custom Series, albeit glad that it exists in the more competitively priced Vintage Reissue section of Fender's catalogue. It's hard to find genuine competition for amps like this – if you want you can spend two or three times as much on equivalents from the boutique builders, or take a risk on the second-hand market, which is riddled with fakes and poorly converted USA voltage versions. For the same money there are amps that come close to the Princeton's soulful tone and spacey reverb, but very few have the extra ingredient of Vibrato. So we reckon the Princeton is good value for money if you're after a vintage amp with modern reliability, as long as you can live without the bells and whistles of a flashy modern design. Grab yourself a very toneful piece of history.

The Bottom Line

We like: Great tone, great looks and the Fender badge
We dislike: The reverb could do with being a touch warmer
Guitarist says: A great retro combo at a reasonable price



Fender '65 Princeton Reverb Reissue

PRICE: £839.99

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: All-valve, single-channel combo with valve rectification

OUTPUT: 15 watts RMS

VALVES: 3 x ECC83/12AX7, 1 x ECC81/12AT7 preamp, 2 x 6V6GT power amp

DIMENSIONS: 400 (h) x 500 (w) 240mm (d)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 13/28

CABINET: 15mm ply

LOUDSPEAKER: One Jensen C10R 10-inch

CHANNELS: One

CONTROLS: Volume, treble, bass, reverb, speed, intensity

FOOTSWITCH: Supplied two-button switch toggles reverb and vibrato functions

ADDITIONAL FEATURES: Dual inputs with high and low sensitivity, dual speaker outputs

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The Princeton Recording combo is based on the Princeton and includes a 1U effects 'rack' comprising overdrive, compression and a speaker attenuator for £999

Fender GB 01342 331700

www.fender.co.uk

Test results

Build quality	★★★★★
Features	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★