

Ring In The Old





More Relic fun from Fender for 2016! How about a heavily aged Limited Edition Strat and a rather less battered Custom Tele from the regular Time Machine range?

Words Neville Marten **Photography** Neil Godwin



FENDER 2016 LIMITED EDITION 1956 RELIC STRAT & 1962 RELIC TELE CUSTOM

CONTACT **Fender GBI** PHONE **01342 331700** WEB **www.fender.com**

What You Need To Know

1 Who wants a bashed-up guitar?

A lot of people! Relics make up a major proportion of the Fender Custom Shop's output, as it's a lovely feeling to wear a 50- or 60-year-old instrument round your neck, but since the genuine article is unattainable to most, aged guitars offer a great 'second best'.

2 What's actually 'custom' about a Custom Telecaster?

Aside from special colours and the single-pickup Esquire, until 1959, the Telecaster had remained unchanged. But with the new rosewood 'board, Fender probably saw the opportunity to create a classier looking version. Other than body binding, the Custom is identical to a regular model.

3 Are flatter fingerboards better?

Not necessarily. Fender's original 184mm (7.25-inch) radius with fine frets is very comfortable to play, especially for barre chords, and the convex shape makes string bending easy. The downside is that large bends can choke off at the upper frets. The flatter 'board, typically 241mm (9.5-inch), relieves this problem.

The artificial ageing of guitars divides opinion between those who get it, and others who think those souls that do are deluded fools. Well, we love both shiny new, heavily worn and all points in between and – luckily for everyone – Fender does, too.

So, here we have two levels of Relic'ing – there are five in total, from 'hidden under the bed all its life' to 'worked half to death' and all points in between. Our duo up for review comprises a Limited Edition, heavily worn Strat that debuted at Winter NAMM in January, and a lightly aged Tele from the regular 2016 Custom Shop line. Both are built to incredible levels of vintage detail and each is going to set someone's heart racing.

Sonic Blue: it's one of those colours that you either love – or you probably love! It's got that 'ice blue jeans', mega-cool rock 'n' roll 50s vibe written all over it. That said, a good portion of this Strat's nitro finish has been removed in an effort to evoke 60 years of hard graft, revealing a finely figured lump of ash (well, two actually, although we can't discern any join) lurking beneath. The body has been shaped with the classic deep belly cut and forearm chamfer of early Strats, while the edge radii blend seamlessly into top and back surfaces.

On the mild V-shape neck – the rear playing area of which is all but devoid of finish – the maple is elegantly shaped where it fairs into the headstock, leaving an attractive 'point' as the different surfaces collide. Artificial wear reveals a player who favoured the top three strings and the fingerboard's lower reaches, venturing to

the dusty end for occasional forays, usually in the key of A. Of course, this mythical player is exactly that, but these days, Fender achieves wear and tear with great panache. In fact, you'd be hard pressed to tell that 1,000 gigs weren't the culprit, and not the talent and abrasive tools of a Fender craftsman. Hardware is chrome, appropriately dulled and rusted in all the right places.

Electronics-wise, our Strat features a trio of hand-wound Custom Shop Relic pickups and the usual array of controls, with the exception that the bridge single coil has its own tone pot. This is the most sensible of all Stratocaster mods as it tames the slanted pickup's sometimes-vicious top end; we feel it should be standard on all Strats.

Onto the 1962 Custom Tele Relic – surely Fender's most attractive adaptation of the Telecaster theme, the addition of off-white double binding lends easy sophistication to this otherwise simple but elegant design. Coming in at a more acceptable level of wear for many, this instrument seems to have worked all its life, but been cared for by one conscientious owner. Thus, there are light battle scars – some lacquer checking and a small area of buckle wear on the back. Overall, it's a great-looking package, although we reckon a parchment coloured pickguard would have been a better choice than this rather-too-obvious green one.

Custom Teles emerged in 1959 and so alder is the period correct timber – again, a two-piece spread with no obvious sign of a join – and the three-tone 'burst reveals typical light grain, with maple neck and a deliciously dark slab rosewood 'board.



1. Heavily tinted pickup covers, control knobs and switch tip contrast beautifully with a 50s-style single-ply white pickguard. Note judicious rusting of the steel bridge saddles and the convincing heavy ageing of the Sonic Blue nitro finish



2. After 60-plus years, those double horns still evoke passion in the souls of guitarists everywhere! You couldn't fit a cigarette paper between neck and body, so perfect is their fit. Fender's craftspeople have really nailed their maple fingerboard ageing – this is superb



3. The guitar's rear features more heavy ageing of the finish. Again, American black walnut is used for the truss-rod fillet, while the chrome-plated four-bolt neck plate proclaims the guitar's Limited Edition status



4. As expected, we see the classic 50s' small Strat headstock with 'spaghetti' logo. Note the nice lacquer tint, the deep dishing behind the genuine bone nut, an American black walnut truss-rod plug and pre-'butterfly' string retainer





Post-1967 Tele wiring with master volume and tone controls, plus a three-way selector, complement the standard layout of bridge-mounted rear pickup and chrome-covered neck single coil. As an aside, it's surprising that Fender hasn't developed a shallower version of its metal Tele jack socket. It would be so easy and would look identical, but would allow the use of the more appropriate right-angled jack, which at present it can't accommodate.

These are different beasts when it comes to playability. The 648mm (25.5-inch) scale and modern 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius are common to both, but from there, the two diverge somewhat.

The Strat's lightly V-shaped neck feels like a more slender handful than it actually is. The lack of timber mass on its shoulders lends an airiness that belies its depth, which comes in at just under an inch at the 12th fret and a little less at the 1st. This, combined with larger 6105 frets on the flatter 'board, provides a satisfying mix of comfort and fightback – the .010-gauge strings, as fitted, offering perfect weight and balance for bends and vibrato.

With its C-shaped lump of maple pushing slightly towards a D profile, the Tele offers a slightly different playing prospect. The extra meat on the shoulders allows over-the-top-thumb players a tad more to pivot against, so string bends become second nature and, again, finger vibrato feels supremely natural.

Sounds

Sound-wise, you get exactly what you expect from both instruments. With its tone pots wide open, the hand-wound pickups of the Strat are spanky and evocative. Neck position is pure SRV, while the in-between tones – courtesy of a RWRP middle pickup – provide vowel-y Knopfler voices devoid of hum. Flipping to the bridge and experimenting with its tone control reveals a range of sounds from super-bright Eric Johnson-style chordal chime, to his

acclaimed 'violin' tone with a ladling of fuzz and the pot backed right off.

Contrary to popular belief, Telecaster bridge pickups are darker than those of most Strats, and ours is no exception. Even wide-open, it doesn't sear the brain, but back off the tone and crank the gain and we're in LP Junior territory. Knock the top-hat selector knob forward a notch and we hit Funky Town: clean, it's everything you could want for Motown and Stax, while piling on a bit of grunt lands you squarely in *Stairway*... territory. The neck single coil could be described as 'Strat Lite', with a sweet voice that favours Hendrix or Curtis Mayfield-style rhythm licks or Mike Stern and Jim Mullen-toned jazzy leads.

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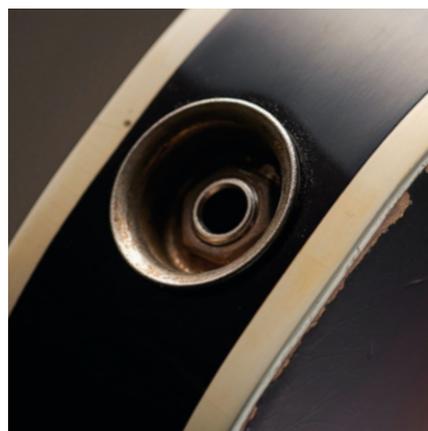
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8

5. The Telecaster's Faded 3-Color Sunburst finish features only mild wear, with the exception of this belt-buckle damage. Body binding extends around the guitar's entire perimeter and the inscribed Custom Shop neck plate completes the picture

6. As well as being, in Fender's words, "sorted for light weight", the Tele's rosewood fingerboard is also selected for its dark colour. Speaking of which, we feel the laminated mint-green pickguard looks a tad obvious, and that the guitar might suit parchment better

7. By the early 60s, the Tele's brass bridge saddles had given way to threaded-steel ones – these are suitably rusted to mimic years of playing. We found it all but impossible to discern the two-piece alder body's join

8. You can tell it's a slab 'board by the convex-shaped line behind the Tele's bone nut – on round-lam 'boards, it's concave. The guitar's simple headstock design looks perfect with its spaghetti logo, dulled chrome Kluson tuners and rusted 'butterfly' string tree



The Rivals

There's no shortage of other brands that are employing relic'ing techniques – from Gibson's magnificent creations by Tom Murphy or the more standard old-looking VOS treatment, to many lesser brands, ageing guitars in the Far East by people that have probably never seen an original. Go figure! In this issue's NAMM 2016 feature we round up some new relic'd guitars but the reality is, if you want an old Fender you either have to buy an original or go to the Custom Shop. A third option, however, is Fender's Mexican-made Classic Series Road Worn models, like the '50s Strat and Tele (from £929). Ideal modding platforms, you can add Custom Shop pickups and relic them yourself. Fender's American Vintage range has unaged, nitro-finished, highly detailed vintage-spec repros; prices from £1,319. Gig 'em hard and you'll have your own relic in months!





Verdict

“Another Strat, another Tele,” as Leo Fender famously once pronounced – hence his G&L ASAT’s moniker! But when today’s Fender Company builds them as convincingly as this, we can only bow in appreciation. As lovers of both models, the *Guitarist* team’s approbation is evenly divided between the two. But with five grand in the pocket, we’d probably plump for both.

And there’s the rub: the Strat’s Limited Edition status kicks it over the £3,000 mark, although realistically, this should be a few hundred less at the checkout. Whichever way, it won’t deter the army of fans who will flock to buy one. The Tele, too, should street at more like £2,499, in line with many others out there. And as examples of their ilk, these are as good as it gets without shelling out four or five times as much for an original. There’s little not to like here – price notwithstanding. And if you’re a Strat or Tele fan in the market for something a bit special, hand on heart, we couldn’t point you in a better direction. **G**



FENDER 2016 LIMITED EDITION 1956 RELIC STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £3,179 inclu blonde Tolex Fender case
ORIGIN: California, USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Solid 2-piece ash
NECK: Solid maple, mild V-shape with walnut skunk stripe
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Genuine bone, 42mm (1.650")
FINGERBOARD: Maple, integrated with neck, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, Sanko 6105 medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Aged chrome-plated vintage vibrato, Kluson-style 6-a-side tuners, strap buttons
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm (2.165")
ELECTRICS: 3x hand-wound Fender Custom Shop Relic single coils; master volume and 2 tone controls (1 on bridge pickup); 5-way blade selector
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.175/7lbs
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Faded Sonic Blue (as reviewed), Faded Shell Pink, Faded '55 Desert Tan, Faded Foam Green, 'Wide Fade' 2-Color Sunburst

8/10

PROS Ultimate vintage vibe; incredible tones and playability

CONS Limited-run status licks it over the £3,000 mark



FENDER 1962 RELIC TELECASTER CUSTOM

PRICE: £2,859 inclu brown Tolex Fender case
ORIGIN: California, USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Solid alder, 2-piece
NECK: Maple
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Genuine bone, 42mm (1.650")
FINGERBOARD: Slab-style, 9mm thick, specially selected dark rosewood with 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, Sanko 6105 medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Aged chrome-plated Tele vintage bridge with 'ashtray' cover, Kluson-style 6-a-side tuners, strap buttons
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm (2.165")
ELECTRICS: 2x machine-wound Fender Custom Shop Relic Telecaster pickups; master volume and tone controls; 3-way pickup selector with modern wiring
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.175/7lbs
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: None
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Faded 3-Color Sunburst, Red Sparkle, Gold Sparkle, Blue Sparkle

8/10

PROS Fabulous looks: the best Tele version ever; tones; playable neck

CONS Mint green 'guard looks slightly artificial; a bit pricey