

Dynamic Duos





Looking for a great-sounding, affordable electric with excellent playability?
Here are three rebooted 'student' models that deserve a place on your shortlist

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FENDER OFFSET SERIES DUO-SONIC HS, DUO-SONIC & MUSTANG 90 **£485 EACH**

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What You Need To Know

1 **Ah, guitars for children and girls, is it?**

The short-scale Duo-Sonics and Mustangs might have been introduced for smaller hands and tight budgets, but you'd do well to remember that Jimi Hendrix, Rory Gallagher, Kurt Cobain, Bilinda Butcher of My Bloody Valentine and Adrian Belew have all conducted business on these 'kids' guitars.

2 **Hang on, didn't Mustangs have whammy bars?**

Yes, these new Offset Series Mustangs are hardtail... and that technically makes them Duo-Sonics. Trainspotters irked that Fender has played fast and loose with the spec sheets should know that these guitars are not classed as vintage reissues.

3 **So I can have a rosewood or maple fingerboard?**

Well, the twin single-coil Duo-Sonic comes with a maple 'board, and that's it. The Duo-Sonic HS is for rosewood lovers only. Take the Mustang 90 home and you'll have resigned yourself to its rosewood 'board. Prefer a maple 'board? Get the regular twin single-coil Mustang.

While the new Mexico-made, short-scale Fender Offset Series is rounded off with the Mustang Bass PJ (£539) featuring – you guessed it – both Precision and Jazz pickups, the bulk of this new range centres around two Duo-Sonic models and a pair of Mustangs. For this review, we snagged the classic format Duo-Sonic with two single coils, the hot-rodded humbucker/single-coil Duo-Sonic 'HS' and the soapbar-loaded Mustang 90. We won't be looking at the more familiar Mustang packed with twin single coils, plus maple 'board and finish options in Olive, Olympic White and Black (£485). Spec-wise, that guitar is near as

dammit a big-headstock take on the regular (non-HS) Duo-Sonic.

Digging deeper, all of our Offset Series guitars are based around the same compact double-cutaway alder carcass. In case you're scratching your head, 'offset' refers to the guitars' body waist, which is, well, offset. That's to say, the body contours are not a mirror image like the waist cutouts on, say, a Les Paul.

Moving on, the spec is eerily similar across the range with each guitar sharing a string-thru body hardtail Strat bridge with a set of vintage-style bent-steel saddles. Flip the guitars over and you'll see six ferrules to anchor the strings.





2



3

1. With a vintage-spec output, the Duo-Sonic single-coil and humbucking pickups add lots of character
2. All three guitars reviewed here feature an alder body with a gloss polyester finish and three-way pickup selector toggle switch
3. The HS has a well-crafted maple bolt-on neck and features a special plate engraved with the Fender logo

The Doppelgänger vibe continues with a 610mm (24-inch) bolt-on maple neck with a modern 241mm (9.5-inch) radius fingerboard playing host to 22 medium jumbo frets, a slick satin polyurethane finish and a perfectly cut 'synthetic bone' top nut. There are some differences that are worth pointing out. The 90 features a classic 'Stang chrome control plate, pearloid scratchplate, black Jazz Bass knobs, and the big CBS-era 'Marmite' headstock. The Duo-Sonics have plain 'guards, chrome knurled 50s Tele flat-top knobs and the smaller pre-CBS headstock.

As we anticipate plugging in, a quick word about the various gloss polyester finishes on offer. As tasty as our HS's metallic Surf Green is, likewise the Mustang 90's Dave Hill of Slade's silver Lurex catsuit vibe, we reckon the Torino Red (presumably named after Starsky & Hutch's Ford cop car) will be most popular. It's pretty damn close to Dakota Red, the finish *everyone* wants to see on a vintage Duo-Sonic and Mustang.

The Duo-Sonic HS with its hardtail format and bridge humbucker is close to the spec of Cobain's Mustangs

Sounds

Switching between the two Duo-Sonics and our solitary Mustang, it's obvious that the feel, playability and low action is just about identical throughout. The shared 'modern C' neck profile has a bit of meat on its bones, yet doesn't compromise the user-friendly reputation of the short-scale Fenders. The chunky frets and 241mm (9.5-inch)

fingerboard radius make for a low, buzz and choke-free action.

Obviously, Duo-Sonics and Mustangs have form in grunge, punk and 60s garage rock. In fact, the Duo-Sonic HS with its hardtail format and bridge humbucker is close to the spec of Kurt Cobain's vintage Mustangs. The Nirvana frontman famously chiselled 'buckers into his pawnshop prizes and locked down the vibratos. Thanks to its coil-split mode, accessed via the pull/push tone control, the HS allows access to the same single-coil sounds as the regular Duo-Sonic, albeit a tad warmer thanks to its rosewood 'board. The overriding tone on a clean setting is 'glassy', just like a 648mm (25.5-inch)-scale Strat and Tele.

Considering we're missing a clear inch-and-a-half off the classic Fender scale length with the Offset Series, we're taken aback by the sheer amount of twang boinging off the Duo-Sonics' bottom strings. You're getting so much of the big brother Fenders' tone here with easier



4. The Mustang 90 is the most modified guitar in the Offset Series thanks to a pair of P-90 single coils. They look a bit odd in that small body, but the tonal range is excellent

5. The Mustang 90 comes with 'deluxe' appointments including a chrome control plate, black Jazz Bass knobs and a pearlloid scratchplate

6. The Duo-Sonic and Mustang models come equipped with a 610mm (24-inch) scale neck, the same as the Fender Jaguar. This shorter scale makes fretting and string bending a cinch

7. The Mustang's big love-it-or-loathe-it CBS-era headstock

fretting and string bending. All the Offset Series guitars come fitted with 0.010 to 0.046 gauge strings – a sensible option, but we'd probably go a gauge higher.

Sticking with the Duo-Sonic HS, that bridge humbucker comes into its own when you start dishing the dirt. It's not that it's particularly more powerful than the single-coil option, it just adds some harmonic thickness to the tone. You can play metal on this setting, if you can live with the guitar's cutesy looks, but the HS feels more at home with fuzz-fuelled garage riffs: think Count Five's *Psychotic Reaction* and Black Keys-flavoured punk blues. Flick to the middle and neck positions and you get those chunkier blues tones, with greater note definition and sustain than you'd expect from a short-scale guitar.

The Mustang 90 builds on those blues credentials with a pair of fat-sounding P-90 single coils. Used in conjunction with the rosewood fingerboard, the tone exudes more warmth than the Duo-Sonics put out. Okay, it's true that you'd never confuse it

in a blindfold test with a Les Paul Junior, but the Mustang reacts beautifully to a bit of old-school overdrive. We especially enjoy the neck position, which works wonders for sweet Chicago-style blues licks. You can see why Jimi and Rory liked short-scale Fenders – although we can't shake the feeling that soapbars look a bit odd crammed into that little body, the tone speaks for itself.

Verdict

Scoff all you like at these short-scale 'kids' guitars. You might not get off on the whole Kurt Cobain/grunge back story, but we all like guitars with good pedigree and faultless playability. The build quality is excellent and you're good to go as soon as you take it out of the box.

What really blew us away here is the consistency. These guitars are virtually interchangeable in regards to feel. All you have to do is pick the tonal palette you want. In fact, you could say it's child's play... if you'll pardon the pun! **G**





FENDER OFFSET SERIES DUO-SONIC HS

PRICE: £485
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Short-scale solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome string through-body Strat hardtail bridge with vintage bent-style saddles and die-cast tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: 1x Duo-Sonic humbucker (bridge), 1x Duo-Sonic single coil (neck), master volume, master tone with pull/push coil-split, 3-way pickup selector toggle switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.8/6.14
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See the other review guitars plus the Mustang with 2 single coils, maple fingerboard and finish options in Olive, Olympic White and Black (£485); Mustang Bass PJ with rosewood fingerboard in Olympic White, Sonic Blue and Torino Red at £539
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Surf Green (as reviewed), Black, Daphne Blue



9/10

PROS Beautifully put together with flawless playability and some extra crunch in the bridge position, this is the update the Duo-Sonic deserves

CONS Shame there are no lefties!



FENDER OFFSET SERIES DUO-SONIC

PRICE: £485
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Short-scale solid body electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome string through-body Strat hardtail bridge with vintage bent-style saddles and die-cast tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: 1x Duo-Sonic single coil (bridge), 1x Duo-Sonic single coil (neck), master volume, master tone, 3-way pickup selector toggle switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.8/6.13
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See Duo-Sonic HS
LEFT HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Arctic White (as reviewed), Capri Orange, Torino Red



9/10

PROS More twang than you'd expect from a short-scale guitar; fantastic playability straight from the box

CONS Can we have a Road Worn Dakota Red Duo-Sonic, please?



FENDER OFFSET SERIES MUSTANG 90

PRICE: £485
ORIGIN: Mexico
TYPE: Short-scale solid body electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Chrome string through-body Strat hardtail bridge with vintage bent-style saddles and die-cast tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: 1x Mustang MP-90 (bridge), 1x Mustang MP-90 (neck), master volume, master tone, 3-way pickup selector toggle switch
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.2/7.1
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See Duo-Sonic HS
LEFT HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Silver (as reviewed), Olympic White, Torino Red



9/10

PROS We like the fatter tone of the soapbars and you get the same great playability as the Duo-Sonic models

CONS Considering the small body, the P-90s might look odd to some

