

FENDER ROAD WORN '50S TELECASTER, '50S & '60S STRATOCASTERS £859, £889 & £889  
ELECTRICS

# Natural worn thrillers

Fender's Custom Shop Relics are among the world's most desirable guitars. Now Fender's Mexican factory has created its own aged guitars... for a third of the price! **by Dave Burrluck**

FENDER ROAD WORN '50S TELECASTER, '50S & '60S STRATOCASTERS £859, £889 & £889  
ELECTRICS







# Fender Road Worn '50s Telecaster, '50s & '60s Stratocasters £859, £889 & £889

## What we want to know

### 1 Hasn't Fender shot itself in the foot here?

You mean, who's gonna buy the USA Custom Shop Relics? These Road Worns are built to a price and are less vintage-specific than the USA versions. The ageing is less 'accurate' too, although all three samples here have a very strong 'old guitar' vibe.

### 2 So they're not really reissues?

The '50s and '60s names reflect a guitar in the style of that period. The two Strats here differ with rosewood fingerboard and mint green three-ply scratchplate on the '60s and all-maple neck and single-ply white scratchplate on the '50s. The Tele goes for a later single-ply white scratchplate and steel, not brass, saddles. It retains an ash body.

### 3 Who's going to buy these?

Well, us for starters! Any player who aspires to own an original vintage piece or a USA Relic but simply can't afford it should be looking at these.

**T**his writer has yet to file a two-word guitar review but in this case it got close. What two words?

Buy these! It really is that simple. Vintage Fender Strats, Teles, P or Jazz Basses, have to be among the most lusted after instruments for any guitar player. Yet escalating prices, not to mention the question of authenticity, have put many of us off. Fender's so-called Time Machine Series brought the illusion of a vintage Fender to many more people: a high quality guitar, as close to the real thing as you could get, without the worry about authenticity or insurance – you could keep your real one in a bank vault and gig the NOS, Closet Classic or Relic and only you would know. The trouble with that, however, is that for many of us £2k plus is still a lot of cash.

We got an inkling, however, that Fender was gearing up to do something about this dilemma when it launched the Joe Strummer Telecaster last year – the first, more affordable Mexican-made guitar that was aged and distressed. We heard more rumours that the Mexican workforce were taking all sorts of implements to their usually finely finished guitars. At the end of 2008 we were let in on the secret: Fender had been working on a mini-range of 'Road Worn' guitars, Mexican Relics to you or us. The wait is over.

## '50s Road Worn Telecaster

With its single-ply white scratchplate and unthreaded steel saddles this ash-bodied Tele is modelled more on a mid-fifties example rather than the early fifties Nocaster that's been the mainstay of Fender's Time Machine series for many years. It also uses the post-1967 wiring that offers each pickup individually or, in the centre position on the three-way switch, combines both in parallel: 'normal' to most of us.

It's not the lightest Tele we've ever encountered but it's far from back breaking; the neck is quite full but not over big and those mirror-like bigger Dunlop 6105 frets make it play smoothly and precisely even though the fingerboard radius is an old-school 7.25-inches.

But it's the ageing that really seems to have moved on from Mexico's first 'relic', the Joe Strummer Tele. The thin blonde finish is muted and gloss-less and sinks into the ash's broad grain. A cream undercoat is visible, and while there are numerous dings and scratches they all are sensibly placed. There's no belt-buckle

wear but with the nitro-cellulose finish additional dings will swiftly appear after a few gigs – if you want a heavier relic there's always the DIY route! But seriously, less is more. It looks, certainly from a few paces, very real indeed, perhaps with the exception of the more formulaised fretboard 'wear'. The early fifties-style logo, the aged hardware and the slight colouration of the white single-ply guard really do look old. Only the Made In Mexico and serial number decals on the back of the head really give it away.

As with the rest of the range, Fender is using its well-accepted Tex-Mex pickups, although these ones look correctly old and used. But even before we plug in there's evidence that these guitars are about more than just looks – the acoustic ring of the guitar is superb. In our book, that's always a great place to start.

## '50s Strat

It's possibly due to the stronger contrast between the black edge of this Strat's two-tone 'burst against its alder body but, compared to the blonde-on-ash Telecaster, it looks more heavily aged and because of that, slightly contrived. But if you like that more bashed about and abused look then it'll be love at first sight. Again, from a few paces it really does look accurate, although it'll never fool a vintage expert. But that's not what this series is about: it's about that special vibe that an old, used guitar imparts and overall it captures it very well, especially with the nicely aged neck – there's

Before we plug in there's evidence that these guitars are about more than looks – the acoustic ring of the Tele is superb



a lot of dirty raw wood – and another great fret job. Profile-wise the neck goes for quite a pronounced 'V' and the reduction in the shoulder does tell your hand it feels skinnier than it actually is. There certainly might be players who'd prefer a little more meat.

As on the Tele the metal parts are convincingly aged; likewise the plastic parts, although the first tone control does look a little over done. Thankfully, unlike certain Custom Shop Time Machine guitars, we don't have the old-style three-way pickup selector; the five-way is a much better idea although, as on the original circuit, neither tone control is connected to the bridge pickup.

### '60s Strat

The similarity in finish and wear, albeit a three-tone 'burst with the added red, illustrates that the guitars are aged to a basic guide template. Yes, you'd expect wear on that forearm contour and similar belt-buckle wear but the 'random' dings on the top edge being replicated on both guitars

looks a little, well, suspicious, and you can't help thinking that maybe it's a little over done. Mind you, like the other two there's no mistaking that old vintage feel and, for this writer at least, there's something a little special about this one. It's a great weight, there's the fuller shouldered neck profile, a rosewood 'board (which doesn't have to be aged) and although we hear slightly less acoustic resonance, with it comes a little more tonal firmness.

Aside from the rosewood fingerboard and the three-ply (again very accurate-looking), slightly green scratchplate it's identical in spec to the '50s Strat – and that includes a cosmetically aged vibrato. It uses a die-cast alloy block, however, not steel as you'll find on an original or Custom Shop Relic.

### Sounds

If the look and feel of the three guitars is old and worn, the sound is a little less specific, which might have vintage guitar forums



The whole range uses Fender's Tex-Mex pickups

## The Rivals



### Vintage V6 Icon £259

Cheeky Strat Relic rip-offs from Vintage they may be, but if you don't mind the wrong name on the headstock this is the cheapest way to the aged arena – apart from doing-it-yourself. Wilkinson parts and pickups ensure good performance and credible sounds.



### ESP GL-56 £1,599

Modelled on a guitar owned by George Lynch, the Japanese-made GL-56 is an h/s/s, alder-bodied, hot-rodded axe with a very worn sunburst finish, Sperzel tuners and Duncan Pearly Gates humbucker. The less accurate Chinese-made GL-256 clones the same guitar but is much cheaper at £499.



### Fano Alt de Facto JM6 with Bigsby £1,699

As reviewed elsewhere in this issue, this Fano is USA-made and the guitar has certainly impressed us with its aged Jazzmaster vibe and P-90s plus Bigsby combination. Read the full review on p90.





FENDER ROAD WORN '50S TELECASTER, '50S & '60S STRATOCASTERS £859, £889 & £889  
ELECTRICS



The Rivals



**Fender USA Custom Shop Time Machine Relic £2,879**

Dangerously close to the real thing, much higher-grade wood choice than the Road Worn, more original hardware and USA-made Custom Shop pickups.



**Gibson Faded Series From £500**

These cheap and cheerful USA-made Gibbos might not be the most refined guitars the company has ever made, but the worn finish adds a relic'd vibe.

	'50s Tele	'50s Strat	'60s Strat
<b>Neck</b>			
Width, nut	42.7	42.1	42.3
Width, 12th	52.02	51.9	52.2
Depth, 1st	21.6	21.2	21
Depth, 12th	23.4	22.26	22.75
Fret size (w/h)	2.3/1.3	2.3/1.3	2.3/1.3
<b>String Spacing</b>			
Nut	34.5	34	34.5
Bridge	55	56	55
Strings	.010-.046-inch	.010-.046-inch	.010-.046-inch
<b>Pickups</b>			
Bridge (k ohm)	7.63	6.9	7.17
Middle (k ohm)	N/A	6.19	6.23
Neck (k ohm)	5.65	6.14	6.32
Weight (kg/lb)	4.3/9.5	3.9/8.5	3.6/8

buzzing but for the majority of players the pickup choice and the overall sounds are eminently useable. The Tele is, as ever, the most muscular sounding here, blending its trademark stringy and steely bridge pickup with a thick, very useable neck pickup and that timeless dual-pickup voice that's such a great rhythm tone. It might not be 100 per cent historically accurate but it's definitely the most useable switching configuration and, combined with a great volume control taper that enables easy swells and a tone that tames down the highs if you need before becoming a little too woolly, it's dead simple and so direct to use. There are plenty of microphonics, no hum-cancelling and a very vintage-y dry and woody resonance, which all combine to make the aged illusion more than skin deep.

That theme continues with the '50s Strat, although played after the Tele the neck does feel a little skinny. But adjustments made, again, we can't fault the sound.

There's plenty of twang and bite to the bridge pickup, the neck is thicker and creamier yet with oodles of high-end sparkle and the middle pickup is – as it should be – a well-balanced halfway house. Again it's not vintage accurate, but those classic in-between sounds from the five-way lever switch are such an intrinsic part of the Strat's arsenal that it would have been daft to fit this with a three-way switch. Like the Tele, the mix of a solid, balanced pickup set with some 'old guitar' resonance makes it hard to put down.

The same is also true of the '60s Strat. The fuller neck and rosewood 'board yield a slightly fuller mid-range, making things a little more 'rock' if you like, but not at the expense of that almost acoustic-like high-end detail and tremendous explosive attack. Both Strats are hum-cancelling in the combined pickup position but both are wired, control-wise, as the originals without a tone control for the bridge pickup. It's not a deal breaker and really depends on your style but feeding the bridge pickup to the second tone control is a simple DIY mod.


To be honest, we're in a quandary. These are such good guitars, that really do capture such a vintage feel and tone, that your main dilemma is going to be deciding which one to buy!

The Verdict

That 'which-to-buy' quandary is, of course, balanced by the price: you could buy all three of these for the price of one Custom Shop Relic. And while the latter, depending on model, might be more vintage-accurate with more subtle ageing, higher spec wood and hardware and USA-made pickups, to be honest Fender might really have shot itself in the foot here. Not all of us can justify



The hardware is suitably aged, too

the necessary £2k plus on a Relic, however much we want one, but aside from the most professional of situations we feel these Road Worns are going to be the answer for most of us mortals struggling through the credit crunch. And don't forget, Teles and Strats are the easiest guitars in the world to mod: you could easily swap hardware or pickups if you want to be more vintage specific or if you feel those Costalot 'boutique' pickups are really worth it. But our advice would be to live with what you have here, at least for a while. Yes, we've played Teles and Strats that are lighter/heavier, have bigger/slimmer necks, are darker/brighter and so on but Fender has achieved a very balanced tonality here that few players should object to. In short, these are genuinely very, very good guitars. 

The Bottom Line

Fender Road Worn '50s Telecaster

**We like:** Accurate old look, feel and vibe; big biting bridge pickup and thicker neck voice; improved playability  
**We dislike:** It's weighty and colours are limited  
**Guitarist says:** Captures the essence of an old guitar in looks and feel with a modern, yet classic, range of sounds

Fender Road Worn '50s Stratocaster

**We like:** Old look, feel and vibe; very balanced vintage-y tones; improved playability  
**We dislike:** A little more meat to the neck wouldn't go amiss; ageing contrived in places  
**Guitarist says:** Quite simply a great Strat. It looks and feels like it's already had a life and is ready for much more

Fender Road Worn '60s Stratocaster

**We like:** Old look, feel and vibe; very balanced vintage-y tones; great neck and weight  
**We dislike:** Again, the ageing is a little contrived in places  
**Guitarist says:** This one has it all – feel and sound, a great neck and firm tonality. A Strat to love and cherish!



Fender Road Worn '50s Telecaster

**PRICE:** £859 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Mexico  
**TYPE:** Single-cutaway, slab-bodied solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Ash  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5-inch)  
**NUT:** Cream melamine  
**FINGERBOARD:** Maple (face of neck), black dots, 184mm (7.25-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 21, medium (Dunlop 6105)  
**HARDWARE:** Vintage-style three-saddle (steel) bridge, vintage-style split post tuners (aged), single-ply white scratchplate  
**ELECTRICS:** Two Fender Tex-Mex single-coils, three-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Along with this '50s Tele, the Road Worn series includes the '50s and '60s Strats, as reviewed, plus '50s Precision Bass and '60s Jazz Bass – The Tele is £859, the Strats are £889 and the basses range between £1,049 – £1,139: contact Fender for further info  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Blonde (as reviewed), two-colour sunburst – aged nitro-cellulose  
**Fender GBI 01342 331700**  
**www.fender.com**

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender Road Worn '50s Stratocaster

**PRICE:** £889 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Mexico  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, contour-bodied solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5-inch)  
**NUT:** Cream melamine  
**FINGERBOARD:** Maple (face of neck), black dots, 184mm (7.25-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 21, medium (Dunlop 6105)  
**HARDWARE:** Vintage-style Synchronized vibrato bridge, vintage-style split post tuners (aged), single-ply white scratchplate  
**ELECTRICS:** Three Fender Tex-Mex single-coils, five-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck), tone 2 (middle)  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See Tele  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Two-colour sunburst (as reviewed), black – aged nitro-cellulose, £859

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender Road Worn '60s Stratocaster

**PRICE:** £889 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Mexico  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway, contour-bodied solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5-inch)  
**NUT:** Cream melamine  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, 'clay' dots, 184mm (7.25-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 21, medium (Dunlop 6105)  
**HARDWARE:** Vintage-style Synchronized vibrato bridge, vintage-style split post tuners (aged), three-ply mint green scratchplate  
**ELECTRICS:** Three Fender Tex-Mex single-coils, five-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck), tone 2 (middle)  
**OPTIONS:** None  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See Tele  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Three-colour sunburst (as reviewed), Olympic white – aged nitro-cellulose, £859

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★







The typically three-piece alder Road Worn Strat bodies receive final hand-sanding

# Remaking the past

Fender is no stranger to aged guitars. We tell the Relic story and catch up with the man behind the Road Worn series

**Words by Dave Burrluck**

PHOTOGRAPH BY MATT YORK

It's been 14 years since, in 1995, the first Fender Relic appeared from Fender's USA Custom Shop. Although Fender has always downplayed the association, this writer was on a dealer and press visit to Fender when John Page, the then head of the Custom Shop, announced the aged guitars. As Tony Bacon recounts in *50 Years Of Fender*: "Keith Richards told the Shop that some replicas made for him for a Stones tour looked too new. Bash 'em up a bit and I'll play 'em, suggested Richards." That's certainly how this writer remembers Page's intro but, whatever the official line, the Relics soon became the Custom Shop's biggest selling models. Initially there were two fifties-

style guitars: a Nocaster (the unnamed transition between the Broadcaster and the Telecaster) and a 'Mary Kaye' Strat – others swiftly followed.

From 1998, the Relic concept was expanded into what would become the Time Machine Series with three levels of ageing: NOS (New Old Stock) was as if you were buying a new vintage Fender back in the day; Closet Classic was very lightly worn while the Relic remained the bashed up model.

"In the old days we'd just do the Relic," confirms the Custom Shop's Mike Eldred when we spoke to him last year, "and we'd have people coming to us and saying I don't want it so beat up and others saying they wanted it really beat up. So that's how we

settled on doing the same guitar but in the three finishes. Then we'd get maybe a couple of dealers asking if they could get some guitars that were really beat up. We actually went to a couple of vintage shops up in LA and took pictures of what they'd consider to be really bad-condition guitars. On the vintage market a guitar like that would be worth less than a more pristine instrument so we got to look at quite a few. So, we did what we now call the Heavy Relics for a couple of dealers first – we were doing them [Heavy Relics] back in 1998/99 to be honest, just one-offs I guess."

Heavy Relics are increasingly common these days from the Custom Shop as it moves away from just the NOS, Closet Classic

and Relic into more limited runs of themed guitars.

But as successful as they undoubtedly are, the Time Machine series guitars were never cheap. Enter the Road Worn series, a project that has been ongoing for a while, says Justin Norvell (marketing director at Fender Electric Guitars): "I'd say for about two years, but it was evolutionary. We have been doing wear on Relic amps for some time in Mexico, then we did the Joe Strummer Tele. The last piece of the puzzle was being able to work with a gloss lacquer [nitro-cellulose] finish. Once we got that last element in place we were on our way."

Fender's Mexican factory, in Ensenada, started to produce guitars back in 1991 (although it would be rebuilt in 1994 after a serious fire). It used wood parts made in Fender's USA factory, in Corona, which were shipped the couple of hundred miles south of LA. Here the Mexican workforce finished the necks and bodies and assembled them. "By late 1997," says Tony Bacon, "Mexico would be assembling some 150,000 Fender guitars a year, compared to



Finished Road Worn '60s Strats all display similar ageing



Once sprayed, the necks are sanded back



Final play test for a '50s Precision



A worker displays a finished '60s Road Worn Strat body

some 85,000 at Corona, with a workforce of around 1,000 at the Mexico factory and 700 in Corona." Over time Mexico has started making wood parts too and for the Road Worn series, "the necks are currently made in Corona, while the bodies are made in Mexico," confirms Norvell.

As with instruments like the very well received Classic Player Series, the Custom Shop again has considerable input with the Road Worns. "This project had Custom Shop Master Builder supervision. It's a great collaborative thing," says Norvell, and the ageing definitely seems to have moved up a notch from the previous Joe Strummer model. "They are all a little different," continues Norvell, "but to keep them looking as realistic as possible and 'Custom Shop approved' there is a kind of guide or template. That way the wear looks perfect; otherwise if it were more of a free for all, you may end up with exaggerated wear on some, or wear in the wrong places. There really is quite an art form to doing it well – it's a careful and deliberate process."

And although Norvell admits the Road Worns are based on the



Racks of sanded bodies

Mexican Classic Series replicas – same neck shapes and hardware (albeit aged) – production takes a while longer because there's the "finish, frets, pickups and cosmetic wear, which actually makes just about everything different," says Norvell. "The primary time addition is the curing time for the lacquer, which takes days longer than urethane or polyester. There are several more steps to do the actual ageing process too, but a lot of that has been efficiently set up to run pretty smoothly."

With only decade-specific names, Fender isn't claiming these are slavishly accurate vintage copies. "The philosophy of these guitars is that they are vintage-



Even the screws must be aged!

style pieces that have been revved up a bit, much like a vintage guitar you may find in a store: smaller changes on a vintage platform. We went with taller frets to help with bends on the rounder radius fingerboard."

All three of our guitars use Tex-Mex pickups. "They've been around for several years – they featured on the Jimmie Vaughan Signature Strat among others," says Norvell. "They are modelled on the Custom Shop Texas Specials except they are wound on a plastic bobbin, use enamel wire



Justin Norvell, marketing director

and are made in Mexico. Texas Specials were created to achieve the fatter sound of slightly overwound, early sixties Strat pickups favoured by Texas blues players. The Tele versions came a bit later and they followed the same concept."

Fender no longer releases the number of guitars it produces but if the Custom Shop Relics are anything to go by, we sincerely hope Fender's Mexico factory can keep up with the demand that these Road Worns will undoubtedly attract. **G**