

Three popular Telecasters from yesteryear get treated to Fender's American Vintage spec upgrades. Are they as good as their CBS-era originals... or are they even better?
by Dave Burrluck

Fine Vintage



FENDER AMERICAN VINTAGE TELECASTERS £1,919-£1,991
ELECTRICS





Fender American Vintage '69 Thinline, '72 Thinline & '72 Custom Telecasters **£1,991, £1,919 & £1,919**

What we want to know

- 1 Er, haven't we seen these before?**
Of course, but this is the first time these classic Teles have appeared in Fender's American Vintage series – as close as you can get to the 'real' vintage thing.
- 2 What makes them different from the Mexican Classic series?**
A lot. They use a modern nitro-cellulose finish, USA-made vintage-spec pickups and the Wide Range humbuckers have been re-voiced for a sweeter original-style sound. All three are light and highly resonant.
- 3 So they're just aimed at indie-rockers?**
No way. The most Tele-like '69 Thinline will appeal to any Tele fan wanting a lighter weight, different Fender flavour. The '72 Thinline's dual humbuckers create a darker, smoother tone that's at home with anything from older jazz/blues to modern retro rock. And the '72 Custom? Just ask Keef.

Fender's American Vintage series is the closest you can get to a vintage Fender guitar without buying the real thing from yesteryear or moving into the more elite Custom Shop. These three new additions are already available in lower-cost Fender ranges, but not at this quality or with this much vintage detail.

Our first, the '69 Telecaster Thinline, aims to replicate the original Thinline, which appeared in 1968 and lasted until 1971. Classed by Fender at the time as a 'semi-acoustic' it was offered initially with just mahogany or ash bodies with a natural finish. Semi-hollow construction aside, it retained the Tele's dual single-coils and master volume/master tone control layout. The second new addition, the '72 Telecaster Thinline, replicates the second generation Thinline, introduced in 1971. That guitar sported a pair of then-new Fender humbuckers (still with the single volume and tone control layout) along with a three-bolt micro-tilt neck joint and bullet truss rod adjuster. Thirdly, the new '72 Telecaster Custom was first introduced in 1972; a solidbody that marries a Fender humbucker at neck with a Tele single-coil at bridge and, importantly, a Gibson-like volume and tone control for each pickup.

'69 Telecaster Thinline

The historians tell us that the Thinline concept came about in an attempt to reduce the weight of the Telecaster. Here the solid slab body is machined from the back leaving a centre section that stops just after the end of the bridge surrounded by hollow 'wings'. A back is then added and a single f-hole cut on the top's bass side.

This lightweight American Vintage version uses mahogany for the body – there's no ash version – and we get either the two-colour burst or Olympic white, which is £72 cheaper. For a guitar that retails not too far short of £2k, it seems a miserly

colour choice reinforced by a complete lack of options.

The body and neck finish on all these models is 'gloss lacquer' (aka nitro-cellulose) applied to a high standard, although on this sample there's a light patch around the f-hole and a splodge of darker colour on the inside of the soundhole making things a little untidy. An original '69 Thinline would



Tone, volume, bridge, middle, neck. Anyone confused?



have been finished in polyester so, strictly speaking, this finish is inaccurate but few will have a problem. According to Fender's Neil Whitcher: "The finish is a more modern nitro-cellulose lacquer with a poly undercoat; we felt that this would be a tonally superior option to go with for the guitars."

All three guitars feature an all maple one-piece neck/fingerboard with a rear skunk stripe. This '69 Thinline is the only one of the trio that uses a body-end truss rod adjustment and the classic four screws and rectangular neck plate neck-to-body join. The 21-fret face is clearly lightly finished in a slightly orange-toned gloss. We get the original small fingerboard radius, small frets and a modern 'C' profile that most players should feel comfortable with. All three also sport 'F' logo tuners, with their distinct squared off buttons, while the two Thinlines have a single butterfly string tree – the Custom gets two – that increases the string angle behind the nicely cut synthetic

bone nut. It's nicely done but that gloss finish does look and feel a little bit cheap, and rather sticky too.

Spec'd with two American Vintage single-coils, one meg ohm volume and tone pots and the ubiquitous three-way lever pickup selector it's period correct business as usual save, of course, for that scratchplate, which holds all the electronic components plus the neck pickup. As usual the output jack is side-mounted and, of course, the bridge pickup is mounted in an old-style Tele bridge plate with three steel saddles.

'72 Telecaster Thinline

The original Thinline was in production for barely three years – and its successor is what we see here. It really was a point of change for Fender with the three-bolt micro-tilt neck (designed and patented by Leo Fender after he'd sold his company to CBS, but was retained as a consultant) and bullet truss rod adjuster that became symbols of the 'bad

All three feature an all maple one-piece neck/fingerboard. The '69 Thinline is the only one that uses a body-end truss rod adjustment

days' of the CBS guitars. In reality, done right, these features work in the favour of the musician. The three 'bolts' – actually two machine screws, as normally used by Fender, and one actual bolt that threads into a circular metal plate mounted on the base of the neck that also serves as a hard surface for the micro-tilt screw to bare onto – hold the neck securely. The micro-tilt feature means that slight neck pitch adjustments can be easily made without removing and shimming the neck as the four screw method requires. Secondly, a slight truss rod tweak is easily achieved without slipping the neck up out of its pocket to access the old-style adjuster at the base of the neck. Aside from those changes the neck pretty much mirrors that of the '69.

Likewise the body – although here only the bass-side is hollowed – which is natural-finished ash and you can clearly see the construction. Both back and top are three-piece spreads but the grain of the back really doesn't match the thicker top. The jointing is excellent but, again, at this price it seems a little untidy.

The major change to this Thinline came with its new Fender humbuckers – designed, of course, by the inventor of the Gibson humbucker, Seth Lover – still married to a single volume and tone, albeit here they're 250k ohm with a 0.022 microfarad capacitor. "The '72

humbuckers that are offered on the Classic Series '72 Telecaster Thinline and Custom (see Rivals) are not to the original spec," explains Neil Whitcher. "We wanted these vintage re-issue pickups to be voiced like the original Seth Lover-designed Wide Range models. The original polepieces are unable to be manufactured any longer as the material [Cunife] is unavailable, but these pickups were voiced and tested in a studio environment and, we think, sound fantastic, just like the originals." An even bigger scratchplate is necessary to mount both pickups on, and a non-vibrato Strat-style six saddle bridge replaces the classic Tele assembly.

'72 Custom

If the '72 Thinline was, on paper, a little too Gibson, the '72 Custom perhaps reflects more of a player-conceived middle ground. Certainly many players had already started modding their Teles – adding a Gibson PAF in neck position was one of the most common alterations, but the difference in outputs could be substantial, and with just the Tele's single volume and tone set-up there was little you could do. Enter the four-control Gibson-style layout, complete here with Les Paul-like shoulder mounted toggle switch. It's gloriously seventies, too, with those amp-style control knobs, an even bigger scratchplate and even an



The three-bolt micro-tilt neck works well when done properly



One reason why the Telecaster has survived is that it has graced every genre from country, jazz and blues through to modern rock and metal

The Rivals

As usual, the main rivals really come from **Fender's** vast catalogue. First of all we have the **Modern Tele Thinline** (£1,714) in the Telebration range – it's a sort of 'American Standard Thinline' in limited numbers. Then we have the **Classic Player Tele Thinline Deluxe** (£958). This Deluxe/'72 Thinline hybrid has more modern specs, such as a flatter 9.5-inch fingerboard radius and medium jumbo frets, along with dual Wide Range humbuckers and four-control layout. In the Classic series we get the same trio of Teles that are on review plus the **'72 Telecaster Deluxe** that's 'missing' from the American Vintage range. These are again vintage-specific with small radius and vintage-style frets and retail from £910 with a street price of approx £800. We reviewed the limited edition **Road Worn '72 Telecaster Custom** (issue 329), and although no longer listed in Fender's catalogue you should still find dealer stock (approx £800). Less heavily aged is the **Road Worn Player Series Tele** (£1,018, review issue 341) with a Seymour Duncan '59 'bucker in the neck position.

additional string tree for the G and D strings.

The major difference is, of course, the solid ash body; with the exception of that additional string tree the neck is identical to the '72 Thinline and again we get the period-correct 250k ohm pots and dual 0.022 microfarad tone caps.

Sounds

One reason why the Telecaster has survived all these years is that it has graced pretty much every genre from country, jazz and blues through to modern mainstream rock and metal. It's not always an easy ride: some swear by the bridge pickup (and swear at the neck pickup), others find an endless soul and funk groove from that middle, hollowed mix. There are even a few of us that actually like the neck single-coil for its smooth, jazz-edged voice.

On the '69 Thinline platform, and compared to an original solidbody '69 Tele, we have a different flavour. There's immediately less mid-range solidness to the sound, which makes that bridge pickup even spikier; conversely both the middle mix and neck pickup sound wider and fuller. Definitely more hollowbody sounding, it's a step towards, perhaps, a P-90-style ES-330, with of course more Tele-like spike and Fender-ness.

Plug in the '72 Thinline and, whoa, where's the high end



The new '72 Wide Range humbucker

gone? It's quite a dramatic difference, the spike of the '69 is replaced with a very rounded high-end, more mid-range thickness and smooth, almost too soft, bass – certainly on the neck pickup. But get used to it and anyone working in a bluesier/jazzier realm will appreciate this for its Kenny Burrell-like smooth attack.

The Custom combines the spike from that Tele bridge pickup with the width and smoothness of the neck humbucker – and it's all a little firmer and more solid-sounding than either of the Thinlines. But it's the pickup mix that's the real draw here – it's like two guitars playing in perfect sync. It's not a particularly Strat-like, or indeed a wider Tele-like, hollowed mix at all. Instead there's that beautiful high-end single-coil break up, yet with a low output humbucking warmth underneath that sounds really big; it's a tremendous roots rock rhythm tone, really three dimensional, while re-tuning to open G gives you instant Keef. Used



individually the pickups are quite well balanced, but the tonal spread is almost too wide. We can't stress enough just how good that mix sounds though... from Motown rhythm, to sixties power-pop, alt-country, and even quite higher-gained classic rock, it does it all – just use those volume and tone controls to match your tonal aim. Then, of course, you have two wildly different lead tones, both referenced in the past, to switch too.

But the more we play all three it's the classic old-style tonality, especially of the more unusual low-output humbucker-equipped guitars, that impresses. The '72 Thinline, for example, is hugely versatile – plugged into a clean Fender amp, it's just such a good jazz sound. But switch over to a



gained H&K Statesman with some front-end gain boost and it's way more contemporary rock with a decidedly fashionable retro flavour. Yet then we miss the bridge pickup of the '72 Custom: it's nasty, edgy and very rock 'n' roll for some hugely attacking rhythm tones or wiry leads and, back into the clean Fender amp, still does a pretty good jazz sound on that neck pickup or the appealing mix. Yet both guitars remain very Fender and Tele-like.

Verdict

These guitars were originally conceived at a time when Fender began to lose its way. However, 40 years on the guitars have been elevated into Fender's top drawer thanks to numerous often left-field players who wanted a piece of 'vintage' Fender but simply couldn't afford the high-value classics. Although these guitars have been available for some time in both Mexican- and Japanese-made guises, these American Vintage guitars improve on both those and the originals with their lightweight build and lacquer finishes. Features such as the three-bolt neck joints and bullet truss rod adjusters (when done properly) make a lot of sense, too. The small frets and fingerboard radius, not to mention the lack of a rosewood 'board option on the Custom, or the paltry colour choice, won't endear them to all, but with street prices already around £1.5k these updated blasts from the past remain a powerful draw. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Good build; light weight; vintage tonality; versatility; they look absolutely great!

We dislike: Small fretwire/ fingerboard radius may impede playability; lack of colour options; no rosewood fingerboard option

Guitarist says: The best-yet production versions of three now-classic Teles with excellent vintage detail and sounds. Our only dilemma is which one we want...



Fender American Vintage '69 Telecaster Thinline

PRICE: £1,991 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway semi-hollow electric
BODY: Mahogany, semi-hollow with f-hole
NECK: Maple, modern 'C' profile, gloss lacquer, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42.5mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple (neck face), black dot inlays, 184mm (7.25-inch) radius
FRETS: 21, vintage-style
HARDWARE: Vintage-style bridge with three steel saddles, vintage 'F' logo tuners – all chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54.5mm
ELECTRICS: Two American Vintage single-coils, three-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.84/6.25
OPTIONS: See finishes
RANGE OPTIONS: See Rivals
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Two-colour sunburst (as reviewed), Olympic white (£1,919)
Fender GBI
01342 331700
www.fender.co.uk

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender American Vintage '72 Telecaster Thinline

PRICE: £1,919 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway semi-hollow electric
BODY: Ash, semi-hollow with f-hole
NECK: Maple, 'C' profile, gloss lacquer, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42.3mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple (neck face), black dot inlays, 184mm (7.25-inch) radius
FRETS: 21, vintage-style
HARDWARE: Vintage-style bridge with six bent steel saddles, vintage 'F' logo tuners – all chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54.5mm
ELECTRICS: Two Fender Wide Range humbuckers, three-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3/6.75
OPTIONS: See finishes
RANGE OPTIONS: See Rivals
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Natural (as reviewed), Candy Apple red

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fender American Vintage '72 Telecaster Custom

PRICE: £1,919 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Ash, semi-hollow with f-hole
NECK: Maple, 'C' profile, gloss lacquer, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42.6mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple (neck face), black dot inlays, 184mm (7.25-inch) radius
FRETS: 21, vintage-style
HARDWARE: Vintage-style bridge with three steel saddles, vintage 'F' logo tuners – all chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54.5mm
ELECTRICS: American Vintage single-coil (bridge), Fender Wide Range humbucker (neck), three-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.5/7.75
OPTIONS: See finishes
RANGE OPTIONS: See rivals
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Black (as reviewed), three-colour sunburst (£1,991)

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★