



Words Ed Mitchell / Photography Neil Godwin

HIGH-SPEC MID-PRICE S-TYPES

If you're looking for a Strat-style electric, the world is your oyster. These affordable options will make you happy as a clam



It's hard to believe that the Fender Stratocaster is officially an old-age pensioner. Yes, it was 64 years ago that Leo Fender and his team unveiled the follow up to the Telecaster. The Strat was the result of feedback from Fender customers. In direct contrast to the two-pickup, hardtail, slab-bodied Tele, the punters wanted something with three pickups, a well-designed vibrato unit and a more comfortable contoured chassis.

The Stratocaster has been in constant production since 1954 and it made its presence felt in just about every music genre. It's the guitar that links Buddy Holly, Jimi Hendrix, Stevie Ray Vaughan and Simon

Neil of Biffy Clyro. It's also the most imitated guitar of all time. Practically every guitar manufacturer has been, ahem, influenced by its key features.

Now, in this group test, the latest incarnation of those original '54 guitars, the Mexico-made Fender Player Stratocaster, rubs shoulders with three similarly spec'd contenders. Like the Player Stratocaster, the Indonesia-born G&L Tribute Legacy and China-sourced Sterling By Music Man CT50 Cutlass are descendants of guitars designed by Leo Fender. Meanwhile, the Indonesia-made Chapman ML-1 Traditional sprung forth from the hirsute noggin of Brit guitarist and djent's outfitter, Rob Chapman. Let's plug in...



FENDER PLAYER STRATOCASTER

£559

The original. Still the best?

Nice looking guitar. Shame I prefer a slicker, satin-finish neck...

If that's your preference, then you're well in here. While the Player's headstock face and fingerboard are coated in a gloss urethane, the rest of the C-profile neck has a satin urethane feel. It's your classic 'best of both worlds' scenario. The neck has vintage spec good looks but your hand won't get stuck when your palm gets clammy...

Are these classic-sounding Fender single coils?

They are slightly higher gain than say 50s and 60s Strat pups but,



yeah, those iconic 'glassy' clean tones, and Jimi Hendrix *Little Wing* in-between sounds, are all present and correct with the Player. Fender has also tweaked this model to offer a dedicated bridge tone control.

What's the deal with the vibrato?

Unlike vintage six-screw Stratocaster models, the Player's vibrato has two pivot points, Floyd Rose style. Used on its US-made guitars for years, this arrangement gives the vibrato an ultra-smooth feel. While you don't get locking bits and bobs here, the Player's tuning stability is excellent.

CHAPMAN ML-1 TRADITIONAL

£429

Metalheads go old-school...

This thing looks too good to be true for less than 500 quid...

The ML-1 Traditional definitely punches above its price tag in the looks department. Allowing the ash top to shine through, and exposing its edges for a natural body binding effect, gives the guitar a boutique vibe.

Has it got the usual fire-breathing Chapman pickups?

Nope. Despite the ridiculous name, you have to admire Chapman's restraint here. These direct-mounted Venus Witch Zero things are proper vintage-voiced single coils. A smart move. There's no point



spec'ing an ash body if you're going to muzzle its natural voice with a set of overwound pickups.

How's the playability?

It's damn good. Big frets and lightly-rolled fingerboard edges make the neck incredibly easy to navigate. Given the brand's metal heritage we expected this Chapman to come with a super-flat fingerboard radius. Instead, it's almost identical in feel to the Fender. The bottom line with this Chapman? The ML-1 Traditional looks like a modern rock guitar but it has bags of old-school feel and charm...



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Alder body with gloss polyester finish, 648mm [25.5"] scale bolt-on maple neck, 241mm [9.5"] radius maple fingerboard with gloss urethane finish, 22 medium jumbo frets, 3 x Player Series Alnico 5 single coil pickups, 1 x volume, 2 x tone, five-way pickup selector blade switch
FINISH: Tidepool [as reviewed], Buttercream, Black and 3-Colour Sunburst, Sonic Red, Sage Green Metallic, Polar White **CONTACT:** 0845 305 1122 fender.com



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Offset solid ash body and figured ash top with gloss finish, 648mm [25.5"] scale bolt-on maple neck and 240mm [9.4"] radius maple fingerboard, 22 jumbo frets, 3 x Chapman Venus Witch Zero single coil pickups, master volume, master tone, five-way pickup selector blade switch, chrome two-point vibrato with brass block and saddles **FINISH:** Coffee [as reviewed] and Lunar **CONTACT:** chapmanguitars.com

G&L TRIBUTE LEGACY

£479

Leo's other great brand...

What's the sizzle on the Legacy then?

The basswood body has all the classic 50s contours, and the CLF-100 pickups are designed to take us back to that era too. Loaded with Alnico V magnets, these pups are the result of research by G&L's Paul Gagon. He studied Leo's old blueprints and some vintage Strats to voice these things.

The vibrato looks substantial...

That's Leo Fender's Dual-Fulcrum design. This much-loved unit floats so you can push its arm down to detune the strings or pull it



up to stretch 'em. Oh, and that robust-looking vibrato arm is fashioned from tough but lightweight aluminium.

What else do I need to know?

Well, the late Mr Fender was a relentless guitar tweeker – the Legacy also has a souped-up brother, the S500 – and the Legacy reflects that obsession with an expanded tone section. The onboard PTB [Passive Treble & Bass] circuitry offers a wider range of tones than the other guitars in this group test. This is also the only guitar here with an entirely glossy neck – but not everyone goes for the satin-coated look.

STERLING BY MUSIC MAN CT50 CUTLASS

£499

Try the V neck on...

What's the USP of this one?

For a kickoff, this is the only guitar here spec'd with locking tuners. Then there's the rest of the neck. The Cutlass features the V neck profile found on mid-50s Fender Stratocasters. If you've never experienced a neck like this, it slots snugly into the V-shaped nook between your thumb and forefinger like a big maple Tetris piece.

How's the upper fret access?

Like the Chapman ML-1 Traditional, the Cutlass comes brandishing a sculpted neck/body join. So, yeah, making your way up to fret



number 22 is easy as pie. We also particularly like the fact that the neck is secured to the body with five big, wood screws. That ultra-stable union promises good sustain, as well as rock-solid tuning.

Does the vibrato float?

A. Nope. This is most definitely a one-way street. Many players prefer their vibratos to sit on the guitar's top when at rest. They reckon it provides better tone, sustain and tuning stability than a floating whammy. Your man, Eddie Van Halen, would certainly agree with that...



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Offset solid basswood body with gloss finish, 648mm [25.5"] scale bolt-on maple neck and 305mm [12"] radius maple fingerboard with gloss finish, 22 medium jumbo frets, 3 x CLF-100 Alnico V single coil pickups, master volume, PTB circuitry, chrome/nickel Dual-Fulcrum vibrato and die-cast tuners **FINISH:** Gloss Black [as reviewed], Fullerton Red, Surf Green, Natural Gloss [with swamp ash body] **CONTACT:** Andertons 01483 456777 glguitars.com



AT A GLANCE

KEY FEATURES: Offset solid basswood body with gloss finish, 648mm [25.5"] scale bolt-on maple neck and 305mm [9.5"] radius rosewood fingerboard with satin finish, 22 narrow frets, 3x single coil pickups, master volume, master tone, five-way pickup selector blade switch, chrome vintage-style vibrato and locking tuners **FINISH:** 3-Tone Sunburst [as reviewed], Fiesta Red, Olympic White, Black, Seafoam Green **CONTACT:** String And Things 01273 440442 sterlingbymusicman.com

HEAD TO HEAD

Melding old-school charm with modern features

It's no coincidence that these guitars find themselves embroiled in the same group test. Alongside the obvious similarities in pickup format and bolt-on construction, all four guitars share a common 648mm (25.5") scale length. This measurement is essential for the classic Strat snap in the top strings, and twang in the fatter ones. Upper-fret access is easier with the sculpted heels of the Chapman ML-1 Traditional and Sterling Cutlass, but we didn't have too many problems with the Fender and G&L guitars. It's worth noting that the Cutlass has vintage-style narrow frets. The others have medium jumbo efforts, which are easier to deal with when you're bending strings above the 12th fret.

Tonally, all four guitars live in the same postcode. Bridge pups are typically bright and twangy. The middle and neck units offer increasing levels of warmth, yet unlike muddy sounding humbuckers, you get loads of clarity no matter how heavy the overdrive. There are

THE G&L HAS SOME REAL FATNESS, WHICH WORKS GREAT FOR BLUES NOODLING

distinctions. The G&L has just a touch more warmth than the other guitars. There's some real fatness here, which works great for blues noodling. The Fender's pups sound like vintage classics with a bit more muscle. They push your dirty channel a bit further and there's crystal-clear clarity on every setting. We love the smooth vibrato unit, too. If you want to hear one of these twin-pivot 'floating' Fender whammy jobs at its best, Spotify Jeff Beck's *Where Were You*.

Regrets? Yeah, we have a few. The G&L's Dual-Fulcrum vibrato is stiff. It sticks wherever we park it, making tuning stability impossible. It's a shame as our previous experiences with this vibrato model have always been positive. The Chapman plays great but there are some sharp fret ends to contend with. Don't get us wrong, it's not like arm wrestling with Edward Scissorhands, but they're noticeable. Just make sure your ML-1 Traditional is fine before you part with your money.



Sterling By Music Man's vintage-style vibrato provides tuning stability



Chapman ML-1 Traditional: a modern guitar with old-school charm

FINAL VERDICT

Choosing the mid-price S-type for you

At the age of 64, the Fender Stratocaster is almost as old as The Rolling Stones, and in much better shape. Each one of the guitars in this group test owes a huge debt to Leo Fender's second oldest solidbody, yet they also have attributes of their own. Even if it didn't show its vibrato off to the best effect on this occasion, the G&L Tribute scores big points for its vintage-voiced pickups. The tonal tweaks available are also pretty

impressive. Likewise, the Sterling Cutlass. The pickups have that crystal-clear delivery we expect from classic single coils. We also loved this guitar's V-profile neck. It might sound weird to the uninitiated but this old-school 50s shape is something you have to try. The Chapman ML-1 defines that old saying 'bang for the buck'. Again, we like the vintage warmth on offer. The sharp frets ends are annoying but we'll wager not all ML-1 Traditional's are like this.

That leaves the Fender Player Stratocaster. Ironically, this guitar has less of a vintage voice than the other contenders. The pickups offer hi-fi versions of classic Fender tones. Yes, you can get all the trademark Strat tones. There's just more presence and that extra touch of grunt works well for dirty settings. They add up to this guitar's status as the best all-rounder here. No matter what music you like, the Player can handle stuff its 64-year-old granddad couldn't have dreamed of...

FENDER PLAYER STRATOCASTER



CHAPMAN ML-1 TRADITIONAL



G&L TRIBUTE LEGACY



STERLING BY MUSIC MAN CT50 CUTLASS



SUMMARY	FEATURES	★	★	★	★	★
	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

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	SOUND QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	VALUE FOR MONEY	★	★	★	★	★
	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★

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	BUILD QUALITY	★	★	★	★	★
	PLAYABILITY	★	★	★	★	★
	OVERALL RATING	★	★	★	★	★