



NEW VINTAGE

We've had the American Vintage, the Elite and the Professional – and now we have the American Original. New spins on the classics, for sure, but how do they fit into Fender's 2018 USA-made line-up?

50S TELECASTER **£1,549**

60S STRATOCASTER **£1,639**

60S JAGUAR **£1,639**

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Whichever way you spin it, there are really only three ways to present a new version of a decades-old classic – as a period-correct replica, a modern updated interpretation, or as something that sits somewhere in-between.

We've seen numerous Fender USA line-ups since the late 80s, but today's ranges are trimmed down and much more focused. And, in this ongoing rejiggery, 2018 sees another significant change. It's bye-bye to the American Vintage series, which was launched back in 2012, and hello to the new American Originals.

The American Vintage models were year-specific clones – or, as close as is possible with a modern build... These

new Originals, however, aim for a 'Best of Decade' vibe. So, for the 50s we get a Strat, Tele and P-bass; for the swinging 60s we have that trio in their 'grown-up' specification plus, obviously, a Jazzmaster, Jaguar and Jazz bass. The 70s – hardly Fender's golden decade – offers us just a lone, block-inlaid Jazz bass.

Meanwhile, southpaws aren't forgotten with a trio of guitars – 50s and 60s Strats augmented by a 50s Tele.

Price-wise the new Originals sit between the slightly lower-priced American Professionals and the only slightly higher priced remaining American Vintages starting at £1,549 for the 50s Tele, rising to £1,649 for the bound 60s Tele – the basses are slightly more dear, starting at £1,699.



1. It's like looking at a brand-new 'vintage' Tele – no enclosed or locking tuners here. Smooth and easy to string...
2. We get the same deal with the classic walled Tele bridge and brass rod saddles with no compensation unlike more modern designs
3. Here's the big change from the previous American Vintages – the fingerboard radius is slightly flatter-than-vintage at 241mm, while the frets are classed as 'vintage tall'



50s Telecaster

Available in just one nitrocellulose 'lacquer' gloss colour, Butterscotch Blonde (with untinted gloss nitro neck), this comes across – like most of the others in the line – as an almost Custom Shop-like take on a classic, like Fender has hopped into a time machine to fix the things Leo and team got wrong.

The truth is, the errors were few, but the modern 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius here is one significant 'fix', although it still comes with the original-style truss rod access at the base of the neck, which can be a right pain to adjust. That said, certainly here, the neck – classed as a '52 'U' – is a big ol' handful and it's married to a classic slab ash body, with small radius edges and none of the comfort contouring of its more famous sibling. Our sample not only feels chunky and business-like but it's on the weightier side too at 4kg.

Both the bridge, with its trio of (uncompensated) chunky brass saddles and the pickups again aim to clone the early release Teles (although the three-way lever pickup selector is wired to a modern, post-1967 spec). The pots are 250k CTS with a large Fender Pure Vintage wax paper 0.05 microfarad tone cap and, of course, evocative cloth-covered wire. This was, of course, never a wiring that Fender used in the 50s.

Likewise, the vintage tall fretwire is another fix that many of us prefer over the lower-height original vintage-style wire.

But if there are fixes a-plenty, there's are plenty of vintage details not least the five-screw black phenolic plastic single-ply scratchplate. Incidentally, all the screws are slot-head, not cross-head – a nice old-school touch maybe but do be careful if you're removing them – it's extremely easy for your screwdriver to slip off the screw head and leave a nasty mark.

60s Stratocaster

The same 'fixed' vintage-style is applied to this Olympic White Stratocaster within the broad changes of the new decade. So it's alder bodied with a 'round-laminate' rosewood fingerboard that was implemented in mid-1962. Unlike the conventional 'slab' rosewood 'board that was seen on Fender necks from the late 50s, the round-lam was curved to match pretty much the fingerboard radius. Early examples, of which this seems to emulate, saw a thicker piece of rosewood which became thinner during 1963.

The neck profile here is classed as a 'thick 60s C' and, like the 50s model, the modern radius fingerboard boasts those slightly higher frets, which, without the finish build-up of our Tele, actually feel a little smaller and measure approximately 2.09mm wide and 1.1mm high.



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4. Unlike the modern two-post vibrato that you'll see on the American Professional Strats, the Original uses the class original spec vibrato

5. Again, on the Strat, we have the modern fingerboard radius and vintage tall frets, plus a more chunky feel to the neck classed as a 'Thick C' profile

The 'narrow' spaced pearloid dots at the 12th fret give us another period indicator – they changed from opaque cream-coloured 'clay' in early 1965, the narrow spacing having been changed in mid-63.

Again in a mid-60s style we get Pure Vintage '65 Gray-Bottom single coils on an 11-screw mint-green pickguard with aged white controls. Meanwhile, a concession to modernism is the second, lowest, tone control, which originally would have been for the middle pickup, but here works on both the middle and bridge pickups. Another modern inclusion is the ubiquitous five-way lever switch, which didn't actually replace the original three-way switch on the Stratocaster until 1977. Inside the pots are CTS 250k while the single tone cap, a large ceramic disc type, is valued at 0.1 microfarad as it should be for pre-1970 Strats along with the full-size shielding plate underneath the three-ply scratchplate.





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6. As with the original Jaguar specification the bass-side 'rhythm circuit' controls – roller wheel volume and tone – are engaged by the upper two-way slide switch

7. Along with the arcane string mute in front of the bridge, the Jaguar's vibrato is original spec and has a lighter feel than the classic Strat vibrato. Some love it, others don't

60s Jaguar

Depending on which side of the 'offset' fence you sit on, the Jazzmaster and Jaguar are either Fender's finest moments or a complete loss of direction. Whichever view you take it always makes for a great pub debate and our 60s Jaguar is a vivid reminder of the times with its abundance of chrome plates, string mute, top-mount vibrato and the rocking (as in laterally moving) bridge. Aside from all this dressing, the elongated body with its generous edge radius and comfort contours is still married to a maple neck – with similar profile to our 60s Strat, not to mention the round-lam rosewood 'board, which, to add some upmarket appeal, is of course bound (here in a bright 'teeth-whitened' plastic).

Fundamentally, of course, the Jaguar, introduced in 1962, differed with its shorter 610mm (24-inch) scale which with the same gauge strings gives a plinkier, less

sustaining acoustic ring compared to either our Tele or Strat.

Like the Jazzmaster that was introduced four years before, the Jaguar retains the dual lead and rhythm circuits – the latter voicing just the neck pickup with its own roller-style volume and tone control, while the lead circuit allows you to switch either pickup on or off and offers a high-pass 'strangle' switch – all accessed via a trio of small slide switches on the treble side of the body.

It was, and remains, a very different drive to any other Fender and despite its top-of-the-line original status back in 1962, today it appears the most archaic of all the classic Fender solidbodies.

Sounds & Feel

To continue the archaic observations, a vintage-style Telecaster never ceases to amaze – especially from today's



FENDER AMERICAN ORIGINAL SERIES DIMENSIONS

(in mm unless stated)



50s TELE



60s STRAT



60s JAGUAR

Nut width	42.06	42.7	42.62
Neck width (12th fret)	51.4	51.6	51.9
Neck depth (1st fret)	22.8	21.5	21.1
Neck depth (12th fret)	25.6	25	25
Bridge spacing	54	55	54
Weight (kg/lb)	4/8.79	3.84/8.44	3.97/8.75
Bridge PU DC resistance (kohms)	6.54	5.78	6.08
Middle PU DC resistance (kohms)	n/a	5.55	n/a
Neck PU DC resistance (kohms)	6.98	5.77	6.22

perspective. It's brutally simplistic and still seems like a working tool rather than an instrument to covet. The neck shape will definitely polarise opinion almost as if it's an unfinished, work-in-progress that got shipped anyway. Big neck, big sound? In this case, yes, even before we plug in there's a superb ringing sustain. As we said it's no lightweight either. Sophisticated? No. Raw rock 'n' roll? It's the epitome.

Our 60s Strat, like its 50s incarnation, still signifies a huge leap in design and manufacture compared to the Telecaster. We defy anyone who opens a case and sees one of these beauts not to have an 'OMG' moment. The guitar that launched thousands of dreams back in the day still impresses 64 years on.

While the Jaguar here trims a little depth and some of the shoulder compared to the Tele, it still gets big enough as you move up. But, as we say so often, a slight dimensional and shape change means a lot to your left hand and this one feels immediately more comfortable over the Tele's almost industrial feel. That perception, of course, is mirrored by the body shaping and contouring, and again although our sample is slightly heavier than we'd like, it's a way more comfortable piece.

So the Jaguar should have continued the progression. It didn't and today it still feels odd – although that's exactly the appeal to many players. While the neck shape is quite similar to the 60s Strat, its larger body contributes to the heaviest

weighted guitar of our trio – yet it produces a shorter unplugged sustain and initially, on our sample, a nasty unmusical rattle as you strum... Luckily, the fix was simple – inside the posts of the tray bridge are two pointed screws – the pivot points that allow the bridge to rock as you use the vibrato – which just needed tightening with the correct Allen key. Rattle gone.

The string mute? Well, unless you're in a 60s rabbit hole, good luck. For the record,

Our 60s Strat
signifies a huge
leap in design.
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it's easily removed. But it's not only the sustain of the Jaguar, the slightly relaxed feel to bends and its more muted response, it just seems a little un-Fendery lacking the twang of the longer-scaled Tele or Strat.

If you're used to more modern-style Teles, actually even an American Professional, this Original Tele sounds and feels (certainly that neck) like you've stepped back in time. These are two big lumps of wood and, with the Tele's single coils, there's more than

a little lap-steel to the sound. Having no treble bleed on the volume control tames that a little when reduced, but if your gig rep centres on 50s and 60s standards then there's not much you can't cover.

The bridge pickup and soulful mix will do it for you, and, as long as you're not after Santana-like sustain from the neck pickup, it's a keeper. Even the neck shape grows on you, although we were tempted to scrub away the slightly sticky-feeling gloss.

It still remains a surprise when you plug in the Strat after a Tele and this one has a little more sonic beef and thickness, which certainly benefits the bridge and middle mix. It comes, however, with an overly thick, as in lower midrange, colour on the neck/neck and middle mix. It doesn't drive our amps quite as hard as either of our reference Strats either, but that's easy to compensate for with additional preamp gain or a stomptbox. As our play time continues, with the fuller voicing, not least for rockier excursions, it begins to win us over. The feel of the bigger neck, the feel of the 'board and those slightly higher frets add up to a player that recalls vintage, but it's a bit easier, slinkier, with appealing body.

Plugging in the Jaguar we're met with a cool jazz sound and realise we're on the rhythm circuit (neck pickup only). Switch to the lead circuit and voice the neck and there's a touch more high-end clarity, or chop. The mix sounds thicker and a little more nasal than either of the Strats and narrower than the Tele, while



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8. The Jaguar's treble side 'lead circuit' switch panel allows each pickup to be switched on or off while the lower switch engages the 'strangle' switch – a bass cut

9. Note the curved top of the Strat's rosewood fingerboard: an instant way to identify a 'round-lam' fingerboard

Kick in a fuzz, distortion or juicy overdrive and you immediately hear its alt-rock credentials

the bridge has a punkier, almost cheaper-sounding honk. Engage the 'strangle' switch and it noticeably trims the already trim bass response.

Kick in a fuzz, distortion or juicy overdrive, however, and you immediately hear its alt-rock credentials – there's just a nasty (and, again, nasal) quality that is visceral in comparison to the altogether more classic rock voices we hear from the Tele's trebly punch and the slightly thinner Strat's bridge.

It's similar with the vibrato performance. The Jaguar feels sloppier, less responsive, as if it's the bastard child of Fender and Bigsby. The Strat's vibrato feels stiffer even though only three springs are fitted. The Jaguar's lock feature stops up bend and, if set correctly, could get out of an embarrassing string-break moment where normally you'd go very sharp with an up-tilted Strat vibrato set-up.

Effortlessly beautiful after all these years, the Telecaster's headstock, with a single string tree for the top two strings, still takes some beating today. Note the steep transition from the fingerboard to the headstock face



Verdict

Compared to Fender's remaining non-artist, USA-made series, the Elite and Professionals, this re-organisation of the previous Vintage series feels a little unsubstantial. In essence, aside from the best-of-decade, as opposed to year-specific, models, the only real change is the fingerboard radius and slightly taller fretwire. You'll find these 'fixes' on many Fender Custom Shop models, of course, but while these don't come with any ageing or relic'ing they are significantly cheaper.

Yet, viewed from a 2018 perspective, it gives Fender's USA models a rare unity, a vintage nod to the escalating modernism of the Professional and ultra-tweaked and posher Elites. If you hanker after a new USA-made production Fender and want the most vintage-spec possible, this is now it. Vintage-inspired, yes, but with the fixes that many players will embrace. **G**



FENDER AMERICAN ORIGINAL 50S TELECASTER

PRICE: £1,549 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Ash
NECK: Maple, '1952 U' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT: Bone
FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, vintage tall
HARDWARE: Vintage-style strings-through-body, Tele bridge with brass barrel saddles, Pure Vintage 'Fender Deluxe' tuners – nickel/chrome plated
ELECTRICS: 2 x Fender Pure Vintage '52 single coil pickups, three-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume and master tone with knurled dome-top knobs
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: 60s bound Tele with rosewood fingerboard (from £1,549)
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, at £1,549, in Butterscotch Blonde only
FINISHES: Butterscotch Blonde only (as reviewed) – gloss nitrocellulose

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8/10

PROS: Has an early Tele vibe but with more modern playability

CONS: A bit weighty, and the neck won't suit all



FENDER AMERICAN ORIGINAL 60S STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £1,639 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, modern 'Thick C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT: Bone
FINGERBOARD: Round-lam rosewood, pearloid dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, vintage tall
HARDWARE: Pure Vintage six-saddle synchronised tremolo, Pure Vintage 'Fender Deluxe' tuners – nickel/chrome plated
ELECTRICS: 3x Fender Pure Vintage '65 Gray-Bottom single coil, five-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone 1 (neck), tone 2 (middle and bridge) with aged white plastic knobs
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: 50s Stratocaster with maple fingerboard, £1,609
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, at £1,609, in White Blonde only
FINISHES: Olympic White (as reviewed), Candy Apple Red, Three-Colour Sunburst – gloss nitrocellulose



9/10

PROS: Same deal as the Tele but with 'better' neck shape and beefy versatile sounds

CONS: Again, our sample is a little weighty



FENDER AMERICAN ORIGINAL 60S JAGUAR

PRICE: £1,639 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Alder
NECK: Maple, 60s 'C' profile, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 610mm (24")
NUT: Bone
FINGERBOARD: Bound rosewood, pearloid dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 22, vintage tall
HARDWARE: Vintage-style floating tremolo with lock button and push-in arm, Pure Vintage 'Fender Deluxe' tuners – nickel/chrome plated
ELECTRICS: Two Pure Vintage '62 single coils with on/off slide switches, two-position bass-cut 'strangle' switch, lead circuit volume and tone, rhythm circuit volume and tone
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: Not in the American Original series
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Surf Green (as reviewed), Candy Apple Red, three-colour Sunburst – gloss nitrocellulose

8/10

PROS: Again, the modern playability on the vintage-style platform

CONS: Weight and a few more Johnny Marr-like improvements wouldn't have gone amiss