



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA SERIES STRATOCASTER



£1859

Has Fender refined the contemporary Strat to perfection here?

How does a guitar company innovate while protecting the very things people loved about its instruments in the first place? It can be a fine line – remember Gibson's embrace of Robot Tuner models in 2015? Gibson probably wants to forget it too. Fender is approaching things in a more measured way – creating regularly revised lines for its iconic models built in Mexican and Corona to suit different budgets and tastes. And looking at the specs across the American-made Ultra Series, it's undoubtedly Fender's most contemporary. Does that make it the pinnacle of what a modern Fender can be too?

heard that before because the Ultras are the only Fender Series that has it. While the Elite had a C-D profile with 9.5"–14" radius, this is 10"–14". The idea is it gets flatter as you go up. To us it doesn't feel like a deep D profile and isn't jarring if you're used to a C-shape. The radius taper is also subtle and that nod to aiding comfort and speed is complemented at the back too.

There's a sleek 'Ultra Satin' finish to the neck and the maple is nicely toned with bevelled edges to add a played-in familiarity to the buttery feel. Go up the neck and you're in for a nice surprise. The curved heel joint and contouring around it was seen on the Elite

THE ULTRAS ARE ESSENTIALLY A REFRESH OF THE ELITES

First, we need to go back to get to the future. In 2016 Fender launched the Elite Series, and the Ultras share a lot of the same traits. This series is essentially a refresh of the Elites with updates and refinements. And the features here are significant.

Combined, they suggest this is an instrument for people who play guitar a lot and need enhanced tonal versatility and comfort from their Fender. But that could just as well apply to any of us who can afford the entrance fee. The Strat arguably benefits the most from that too. So let's break down what we have here and how it adds up.

The neck profile here is a Modern-D – you may not have

before and is something of a revolution for the Strat design. If you do spend time in the highest ranges of the fretboard this is a big selling point because it's a real success for freer access.

Comparing our Ash American Ultra Strat to one of the alder models finds this to be a little heavier, but it's about average for a Strat, weighing in at 8.2lbs, while the Plasma Red Burst is something Fender tested on a run of its Rarities series and it's vibrantly delivered here. The transparent reflection of the ash grain is certainly different and it won't be to some traditionalist tastes, but then, that's what the Ultra is all about to us.

1 TRUSS ROD ADJUSTMENT

The Elite series Strats had a rotary truss rod adjuster at the bottom of the neck but feedback from users influenced Fender's decision to return to tradition

2 S1 SWITCHING

Pressing a subtle switch on the volume control activates S1 switching that adds the neck pickup into series when activated in positions 1, 2 and 3; position 1: bridge and neck, position 2: bridge, middle and neck, position 3: middle and neck

AT A GLANCE

BODY: Ash
NECK: Maple, modern 'D'
SCALE: 648mm (25.5")
FINGERBOARD: Maple (10–14") compound radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
PICKUPS: 3 x Fender Ultra Noiseless Vintage Strat
CONTROLS: 5-position pickup selector switch, master volume control (with S-1 switch and treble bleed), tone 1 (neck & middle), tone 2 (no-load pot)
HARDWARE: Bone nut, 2-point Deluxe synchronised vibrato with pop-in arm, Fender Deluxe rear-locking tuners
CASE: Deluxe moulded hardshell included
LEFT HANDED: No
FINISHES: Plasma Red Burst (as reviewed) Ultraburst (alder), Texas Tea (alder) Burst, Plasma Red Burst (ash), Arctic Pearl (alder), Cobra Blue (alder), Aged Natural (ash)
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Noiselessness

Are these pickups really single coils?

Fender's Ultra Noiseless pickups make a huge difference to tackling hum, but how? Well they're stacked single coils. Fender introduced the idea in 1998 with two single-coil pickups stacked on top of each other with the lower there to cancel out interference noise. The Ultras are technically the fifth iteration of the design and by the fourth generation, found on the Elite series, shielded wire was used for even more effective noise reduction, along with higher output Alnico 5 magnets, replacing the 3rd generation's mix of Alnico 2, 3 and 5 combo for the Strat's three pickups. Noiseless pickups are not 'true' single coils but there's plenty of the attack and character here with a lot less hum.

The S1 Switching found on the Elite Strat before has been simplified. It has different implications across the range for Tele, Jazzmaster and HSS Strat but here it brings the neck pickup into series with the middle and bridge pickups on positions 1, 2 and 3. It adds three new voices to the already versatile Strat armoury.

Blending the neck adds a bottom-end presence that mellows the more trebly end of the Strat spectrum somewhat. The middle and bridge pickups here aren't as spanky as some other 'Vintage' Strat single coils anyway, and the



The S1 switch makes this Strat an ultra-versatile workhorse instrument



Ultra Noiseless pickups (see above) have more contemporary fullness to their punch for us that makes them ideal for rockier, less bluesy territory too. They're also as quiet as you'd realistically hope.

The volume control itself has a treble bleed capacitor to retain high end when rolling off – and Fender has even thought of including tactile soft touch rubber edges to the knobs here. It's a great feature for any guitar and highly effective here – especially if you're controlling gain to clean up from the instrument. These tools at your disposal add up to a really

impressive and versatile Strat, and that's the standard we'd expect for this money to be honest. But the balance found here is harder to nail; this feels like that old familiar friend from Leo's brilliant mind, given a very well considered modern overhaul. For that it lives up to the Ultra name.

Rob Laing

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

ALSO TRY...

FENDER DELUXE STRATOCASTER

£799

This series offers Noiseless pickups with a switch for middle, neck and bridge pickups in position 4, or a combination of the Neck and Bridge pickups in position 5.



G&L USA FULLERTON DELUXE S-500

£1399

Another link to Leo Fender with his Magnetic Field Design pickups, this USA-made model features a mini-toggle series switch for neck and bridge or all three pickups together.



FENDER AMERICAN ULTRA STRATOCASTER HSS

£1859

If you need a 'bucker and Ultra specs this offers an S-1 Double Tap switch for a single-coil mode.

