





PRS CE 24 £1,869

Always a cult favourite, the PRS CE makes a comeback for 2016 in a highly affordable guise. How do they do that? We find out...

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What You Need To Know

1

PRS CE? We've seen that before, haven't we?

Indeed, we have. It was originally called the Classic Electric (until Peavey objected to the name and it changed to CE) and first appeared back in 1988 as a more Fender-like alternative, with alder body and bolt-on maple neck, compared to the more Gibson-like construction of the set-neck mahogany/maple Custom and all-mahogany Standard.

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What happened to that?

There was some confusion in the market, which simply wanted a more affordable PRS guitar. So a black head-face was added, along with rosewood fingerboard, bird inlays and maple top.

3

Then what?

By the mid-90s, the model featured a maple-topped mahogany body, and a 22-fret version was added from '94. It was retired in 2008 when the CE 24 and 22 Alder (re)appeared. By the following year it was gone, again. Why? Read on...

Let's look at the facts. At full retail, the start price of PRS's 'full-fat' USA-made Core-line Custom 24 is £2,939. PRS's more economically made S2 version, constructed in PRS's USA factory, is a lowly £1,375. That's quite a gap, and for many of us the former is out of reach and the latter is, ahem, not quite PRS enough. Enter the all-new 2016 CE 24, which drops in comfortably under the £2k mark.

PRS is purposely *not* calling it an S2 guitar, although some of its features (neck construction-style and hardware) are the same. But unlike the S2 Custom, for example, the CE is loaded with the USA-made, uncovered 85/15 pickups that grace the current Core Custom 24 and the body is a very close cousin to that Core model, too.

Whatever the backstory, pulling the new CE from its gigbag, not hard case, is a little like meeting up with an old friend. On its introduction in 1988, along with it being the cheapest PRS guitar, it was the first to feature a bolt-on maple neck and seemed to signify a more rock 'n' roll workhorse, gigging PRS. So, what's changed?

First, it's the first PRS bolt-on to use a slab-sawn three-piece, as opposed to quarter-sawn one-piece maple neck: a more economical use of more easily available wood with a separate piece for the headstock and heel-piece. As always, the neck here has a nitrocellulose finish; it's slightly toned in colour and has a satin finish that'll quickly burnish up to a glossier sheen with playing. Importantly, it's much faster to apply than a standard gloss finish.

Second, while the body looks like a standard Core Custom, on closer inspection

you see some subtle – and cost-saving – differences compared to the Core body. There are no carved indents under the controls and toggle switch, and there's less rise to the top carve. Also, in overall depth, the CE measures 44mm, pretty much the same as the S2. The mahogany back is around 31mm thick, leaving the maple top at around 13mm thick – a mahogany-to-maple ratio of pretty much 70:30. By comparison, the Core Custom is around 49mm thick with a 28.5mm-to-20.5mm mahogany-to-maple ratio of 60:40. However, the actual rim depths of both are pretty similar: cleverly, to the eye, things appear more similar than they actually are.

PRS's glued-in or bolt-on necks are virtually identical in the way they fit into the body. The neck's heel extends under the neck pickup where it's glued or, as in this case, screwed tight via four machine screws through a metal neck plate. There are no options and that includes neck shape: here it's PRS's Pattern Wide profile – in old money, a Wide Thin – which is new to this S2-style neck. That translates to the same width at the nut and top fret as a Pattern (Wide Fat) of 42.9mm and 57mm, but a slimmer depth: 20.9mm deep at the 1st fret and 23mm at the 12th. Standard size fretwire is used, as opposed to the bigger wire we're seeing more of in the Core line, and the fingerboard edges are subtly rolled to feel like a well-played guitar; fretting and setup are as crisp as ever.

On the un-faced headstock, eagle-eyed PRS fans will notice that the raised Paul Reed Smith logo is smaller than those placed on the head face of the current S2s,



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modern 'partial tap' circuit that doesn't entirely switch off one coil, leaving some of the 'dumped' coil in play. We also have a small treble-bleed cap on the volume control to retain some highs as the volume is reduced. Incidentally, both plastic rear coverplates, for the control and vibrato spring cavities, sit on top of the wood, S2-style, unlike those on the Core models, which are recessed flush.

Sounds

The 'old friend' appearance we mentioned translates to the feel, too, certainly in comparison with the chunkier McCarty thickness models (pretty much all of the current Core double-cuts with the exception of the Custom) or guitars such as the S2 Standard Singlecut Satin we looked at in our last issue. There's some of that skeletal 'super-model' feel, along with a light weight (as here), that made early PRS guitars feel so different. The neck shape, again compared with the pattern, does feel skinnier, but not in a bad way. Although the 24-fret neck seems to stick out more from the body than, say, a Stratocaster, strapped on, it takes only moments to adjust.

If the drive is familiar, the modern sound of the PRS is getting that way, too. There is a very vintage-y output here that's clean and clear, which results in almost bell-like chime that seems to lack the midrange hump of older PRS pickups. Now, the guitar's voice (its acoustic resonance) is going to be different here compared with the 30th Anniversary Custom, and there's something that the maple neck puts into the stew, a subtle upper-mid attack and percussion, that this writer has always found extremely valid lending a small amount of 'Fender' to the taste combined with plenty of thunk and a *soupeçon* of clarity from the body.

Along with the excellent in-tune vibrato and the whole way PRS has squeezed every ounce of resonance from its instruments, the ring and clarity for cleans or crunch tones is quite exceptional. Okay, we don't have that huge low-end of a Core Singlecut, but again, that seems to suit the halfway-between-Gibson-and-Fender vibe. There's plenty of classic-rock power from the 'buckers, but no lack of balance, while

and is chrome, not gold-coloured. The CE logo on the black truss-rod cover seems slightly off-centre on our prototype, but that's been fixed on the production models.

If there's a whiff of economy about the guitar in its USA-designed, Korean-made parts and that top carve, then the USA 85/15s provide a balance. These uncovered versions of the covered 85/15s have distinctly square-edged bobbins, a proprietary design like the low-profile cream pickup rings and the multi-flanged 'lampshade' control knobs. Unlike the Custom's current five-way lever pickup selector, here, we have what's known as the 'McCarty electronics': a Gibson-like three-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone, the latter with a pull/push switch to simultaneously coil split both pickups and voice, primarily, the screw coils of each. Typically, it's PRS's

The Rivals

A bolt-on neck with maple top and twin humbuckers is a rarity. MusicMan's single-cut Axis SuperSport (£2,034), with vintage-style vibrato option, has a basswood back with thin maple top and dual DiMarzio 'buckers, and a great neck. Fender's new American Elite range, previously the Deluxe, doesn't feature a dual 'bucker Strat but the HSS Shawbucker (from £1,389) has broad sounds via that bridge Shawbucker and S-1 switching. The new CE's main competition might be older examples of the PRS CE or the set-neck Custom: they might not match 2016 specs, but they're still great guitars



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1. The 85/15 'buckers are the uncovered versions of PRS's latest USA-made 'date' series pickups. They are apparently based on a humbucker used by a very famous guitar player... but we're not supposed to know that
2. Note the slightly smaller, chrome signature on the unfaced headstock
3. One of the few PRS bolt-on guitars, here the maple neck is three-piece – with separate piece for the headstock and heel. It's also slab-sawn, not quarter-sawn wood, unlike all other PRS bolt-ons
4. Slightly slimmer-deeped than the Core Custom body, the CE body is more carved than the cheaper S2 and uses the standard polyester basecoat (rather than the Core's V12 finish) with the S2's acrylic topcoat



5. PRS's vibrato, combined here with top-locking tuners, has been used on thousands of instruments. This version is Korean-made, like those used on the SE and S2 guitars. It works perfectly

the lower output single-coil voices lend another flavour. It's not a dead-ringer for a Strat or Tele, but simply another texture that really suits older styles along with country or Americana; add a little amp grit and it's power-Fender tone, with a bit more balls, and perfect for modern country styles. There's a very balanced output string-to-string, which is not always the case with traditional single coils with their numerous variants of pole piece heights. Seriously, these split voices aren't to be sneezed at. In trying to listen to as many different sounds as possible during our test time, we were in split mode at least half of the time.

Verdict

Whichever way you look at this new CE – as an up-spec'd S2 or down-spec'd Core model – it's a cracking guitar that distils the essence of PRS, the detailed build, intonation, resonance and style, into simply a very pro-spec instrument.

It might be seen as a much more affordable Core-line Custom 24, but to our ears, it's not just about that: there's a character here that leans just a little towards a good Fender, a percussive edge or subtle flavour that is what attracted many of us to those original CEs over the Custom or Standard. Welcome back, my friend. **G**

Add amp grit and it's power-Fender tone, with a bit more balls, and perfect for modern country



PRS CE 24

PRICE: £1,869 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody

BODY: Mahogany, carved maple cap

NECK: Maple, Pattern Thin profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")

NUT/WIDTH: 42.9mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, old-style bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 24, medium

HARDWARE: PRS-designed vibrato, and locking tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: 2x uncovered PRS 85/15 humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (with pull/push coil-split)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.45/7.6

OPTIONS: None

RANGE OPTIONS: The only other PRS bolt-on is the Brent Mason signature (£2,590). The S2 Custom 24 (£1,375) has S2 HFS & Vintage Bass pickups; the 2016 Core Custom 24 (from £2,939) has 85/15 'buckers

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Vintage Sunburst (as reviewed), Amber, Dark Cherry Sunburst, Grey Black, McCarty Tobacco, Ruby, Trampas Green, Whale Blue

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9/10

PROS Price, build, sound, vibrato, intonation. A cracking workhorse

CONS Limited colours and no options, so you're stuck with one neck profile... and those birds!