





Back On Track

Back in issue 443 we looked at what we thought were the new Les Pauls for 2019. But no: just in advance of this year's January NAMM show, Gibson – now under new management – set out another new-for-2019 range

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin

GIBSON 2019 LES PAUL STANDARD
'50S & '60S £1,999, LES PAUL CLASSIC £1,649
& LES PAUL TRIBUTE £999

1. A very common retrofit back in the day was to fit Grover tuners to your Les Paul. And that's what we have here on the Standard '60s model

2. The classic pairing of an ABR-1-style tuneomatic and lightweight aluminium stud tailpiece is used on all of our Les Pauls, with the exception of the Tribute



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You might say it's fitting that 60 years after producing what many believe to be the definitive electric guitar – the 1959 Les Paul Standard – Gibson, now under new management, has given its USA production range a makeover that hopefully signals a return to form. Plagued by business issues, wavering quality, some would say idiotic features... it's fair to say Gibson had lost its way. At this year's NAMM show back in January, however, a reorganised line was premiered that clearly addressed many issues from the old regime.

The new range splits the guitars into two collections, Original and Modern, replacing the previous Traditional and High Performance ranges. The former collection is where you'll find contemporary versions of guitars that many of us grew up with: the Les Paul Standard, SG, Special, Junior, Flying V and Explorer. Although they're not vintage reissues, there's no truck with modernism here. Rightly, however, Gibson has retained many features that have been accepted by players – for example, weight relief and expanded sounds – that now reside in the Modern collection. Here, we see the new Les Paul Modern, for example, alongside existing instruments such as our

Les Paul Classic and Tribute, the Studio and the start-up Les Paul Junior Tribute DC.

So, with a pair of Les Pauls from each collection, let's dip into 'new Gibson'.

Les Paul Standard '50s & '60s

'Don't mess with *the* standard' were words that fell on deaf ears in terms of Gibson's previous management. Thankfully, the new team has listened. Effectively now within the Original Collection, the previous Les Paul Traditional has been split into two and renamed Standard: in 50s and 60s flavours. The guitars are identical in build with one-piece slab sawn mahogany backs (with no weight relief), quarter-sawn mahogany necks (with short tenons), and mildly figured two-piece centre-joined maple tops. Our Tobacco Burst '50s has a stronger figure; the Heritage Cherry '60s is a little lighter in figure, and neither is seemingly bookmatched. Weights vary, too, with the '60s being the heaviest of our quartet (see 'Heavy Load', p87).

The major construction difference lies in the neck shape: the '50s goes for a bigger Vintage '50s profile, with a Slim Taper for the '60s model. The former features original-style 'Gibson Deluxe' tuners on the

correct 17-degree back-angled headstock (with a slight 16- to 15mm taper). The '60s emulates the popular retrofit Grover Rotomatics. Both use a modern fitting with a large hexagonal bolt on the front. The bridge and tailpiece are the same, too; likewise, the internal wiring (see 'Under the Hood', p89). Control knobs do differ, with the '50s using clear amber bonnet types and the '60s (and, indeed, the Les Paul Classic) going for the post-1960 metal-topped style you would have seen on the reissued Standard from 1968.

Pickups differ, too, with the '50s packing the Burstbucker 1 (neck) and Burstbucker 2 (bridge) of the previous Traditional, and the '60s showing off a Burstbucker 61R (neck) and 61T (bridge), presumably the same as the Classic's but with additional covers.

Classic

This Les Paul is unchanged from the previous version we looked at earlier this year, although it's now moved into the Modern strand of the new range, reflecting not so much the spec of the guitar but its more expansive PCB-mounted controls with their pull-push switch functions, and its nine-hole weight relief.



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3. Each of the Classic's four controls has an additional function via high-quality CTS pull-push switched pots

4. Like the Standard '60s, the Les Paul Classic uses Grover Rotomatic tuners; it also features the same Slim Taper neck profile

FIT FOR PURPOSE Should box-fresh instruments be perfect? Let's discuss...

In our earlier report of Gibson's then-2019 Les Pauls in issue 443, a reader complained that we had treated our 'Pauls to a quick bit of TLC. He expected the guitars to be perfect out of the case, especially for price. Our writer, Dave Burrluck, goes commando...

"It's pretty alien to me to take out a brand-new never-been-played guitar without making sure it's as I want it. New strings, a little fingerboard and fret buff, then a tweak of the action and pickup heights – these are all things that 'soften' and personalise a box-fresh instrument. But this time around, with that reader's letter in mind, I took out the Les Paul Classic untouched: all I'd done were the weights and measures for our spec lists and dimensions panels for this review. I knew it was the lightest 'proper' LP on test, but that was all.

"As I was driving to what was to be a day-long rehearsal, it suddenly occurred to me I hadn't even plugged the Classic in... or brought a strap. Oops. No worries, though; there's a strap included as part of the case candy, as well as a rather handy multi-tool.

"Now, I'm a plain-top Cherry Sunburst kinda guy and I don't think I'll ever tire of opening a case and seeing one. Opening up the Classic's case after the load-in, I couldn't help but smile. As the rest of the musicians were setting up, I had a quick chance to give the Classic a once-over. I hope I'm not upsetting

"Some adjustments can help 'soften' and personalise a box-fresh instrument"

any more readers, but new strings need stretching before you can evaluate tuning stability, and a couple of minutes spent doing that and it's clear this Classic had been set up prior to us receiving these models for review. There's clearly some lube in the well-cut nut slots and, once stretched, the strings were coming back in tune with the exception of the D string, which was slightly binding in the groove. Adding a little pencil lead – the only

lubricant I had – and some more stretching and behind-the-nut bends just about cured it. Which was pretty timely, because the rest of the guys were waiting for me.

"In those first few minutes as you get used to the volume levels, your sound, the room sound – oh, and the actual song you've never played before – the last thing you need is an unfamiliar guitar. I kept it simple, just slightly rolled back the volumes and carried on.

"The feel, not least of the relatively low frets on that dry-looking 'board, reminds you that this is a new guitar and the relatively flat-backed slim D-ish feeling neck shape feels a little alien compared with the deeper and rounder profiles of most of my own gigging guitars. But the sounds I'm hearing are all right in the ballpark. Yes, I'd taken a backup, but I didn't use it. I felt completely at home. And listening back to the live recordings of the day's work – parts aside – I was really happy with the sounds. If the mark of a good guitar is that it makes you think, 'I might buy this...' even though you really don't need it, then this Classic is a good guitar."

GIBSON LES PAUL DIMENSIONS

(in mm unless stated)

| | STANDARD '50S | STANDARD '60s | CLASSIC | TRIBUTE |
|---------------------------------|---------------|---------------|--------------|---------------|
| Neck width (nut) | 42.95 | 42.73 | 43.05 | 42.07 |
| Neck width (12th) | 53.04 | 52.4 | 53 | 52.25 |
| Neck depth (1st fret) | 22.2 | 20.3 | 20.9 | 20.8 |
| Neck depth (12th fret) | 25 | 23 | 23.3 | 24.5 |
| Weight (kg/lb) | 4.02/8.84 | 4.37/9.61 | 4.1/9.02 | 3.27/7.2 |
| Bridge string spacing | 51 | 51 | 51 | 50.5 |
| Bridge PU DC resistance (kohms) | 7.95 | 7.77 | 7.75 | 7.99 |
| Magnet type/potting | Alnico II/no | Alnico V/wax | Alnico V/wax | Alnico II/wax |
| Neck PU DC resistance (kohms) | 7.52 | 7.78 | 7.82 | 7.7 |



STANDARD '50S



STANDARD '60s



CLASSIC



TRIBUTE



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5. Unlike the covered Burstbucker 1 and 2 units on the Standard '50s, the Standard '60s uses covered Burstbucker 61R and 61T humbuckers in its neck and bridge positions

6. Although the heel shape changed subtly over the years, today's heels seem pretty similar. All the neck joints are short-tenon style, too



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With those exceptions, it's virtually identical to the '60s model (albeit with a plain maple top and those uncovered zebra-coil Burstbucker 61R and 61T humbuckers). This is certainly something to bear in mind, because – along with its expanded wiring – it comes in £350 cheaper on the street. It's also the only guitar here with a chromed metal jackplate, which many would see as an upgrade over the ubiquitous cream plastic of the others. We also get larger – and more secure – strap buttons on both the classic and the Tribute.

Another plus here is its weight. Unlike the Classic we looked at earlier this year, this one comes in as the lightest of our 'proper' Les Paul trio, which, though no lightweight, is pretty close to bang on centre for a 'Paul. Even before we plug in, this Classic is edging ahead...

Tribute

Which brings us to the Tribute, the sort of down-spec'd Les Paul that over the years has gotten Gibson a bad name. Dropping £650 off the price of the Classic means that quite a lot has to go. Most obviously, the Tribute has a maple (not mahogany) neck. It's also a thinner-depth'd 'Paul. Whereas our Standards and Classic exhibit the classic dimensions (a shade over 61mm in overall depth with a rim depth of just over 49mm), our Tribute comes in closer to 56mm in overall depth and just over 44mm at the rim.

Finished in Satin Honeyburst, the pale caramel-hued satin nitro adopts a dull sheen that does look a little, err, hastily applied, not least on the plain maple top. There's no binding to the body or neck, and while Gibson could have employed PRS-

The Tribute's tune-o-matic is the slightly wider Nashville style, which gives more intonation adjustment range for each saddle



HEAVY LOAD Does a good LP have to be weighty? Not so, says our Tribute

One of the many myths that surround the Les Paul is that somehow its classic sound is directly affected by its weight. Some believe heavier is better, that it's crucial to the design's notoriously thick sound and legendary sustain. But weight alone doesn't paint the whole picture.

Of the 28 original 'Bursts weighed in *Beauty Of The 'Burst* (by Yasuhiko Iwanade, 1999), the weight range is between 3.7kg and 4.3kg (8.14lb and 9.46lb). These, of course, are all non-weight-relieved. By the late 50s, Gibson had considerable experience of guitar making on a large scale, and most makers and repairers who've studied a few or many of these instruments will agree on the quality of the mahogany used. That 'pattern grade' mahogany contributes to the mythical status of the Les Paul, but its scarcity has forced up prices as demand has increased. Alternatives to this prized south American mahogany come from all over the world and it's not all equal, not least in weight. For any production manufacturer, keeping weight within certain limits is far from easy.

Earlier this year, the non-weight-relieved Traditional sat comfortably within that range at 3.87kg (8.52lb). Our phase II 2019 Standard '50s and '60s Standards, also without weight relief, come in at 4.02kg (8.84lb) and 4.37kg (9.61lb) respectively, the latter only slightly out of that classic weight range.

Differing wood species, their densities and condition play a part in the sound

Yet sometimes things can get a bit excessive. The earlier Classic model we looked at in issue 443 (despite its nine-hole weight relief) topped the scales at a very tubby 4.72kg (10.39lb); our second Classic sample here, with the same weight relief, is a different proposition at 4.1kg (9.02lb). It's little surprise that the most chambered Ultra-Modern weight relief used on the earlier Standard and this second-wave Tribute

results in the lightest weight: 3.8kg (8.36lb) and 3.27kg (7.19lb) respectively.

Is weight important? Yes, if you prefer a lighter guitar or possibly have a medical condition that makes a weighty solidbody a no-go. With a good strap, it makes less difference than you might think, but played seated, even a relatively light Les Paul has a habit of body-diving off your leg.

But what about sound? That's a longer piece of string. The weight alone of an instrument is no indication of sound, simply because of differing wood species, their densities and condition. There's also the relationship between the body and the neck, 'board and often over-looked maple top...

Many people will voice an opinion about weight relief, too. If we took three Les Pauls all made from very similar condition woods, you might expect to hear a little more resonance, 'lightness' from the Ultra weight relief, while the solid version has a little more solidity and heft to that midrange area. And the original-style nine-hole weight relief? In our imagined context, well, good luck with hearing that.

7. These more vintage-style tuners are also used on the Standard '50s model. Note the quite sharp contours as the neck flares into the headstock

8. The covered 490 humbuckers use Alnico II magnets according to Gibson, but all the pickups here have very similar DCRs, despite the subtle differences



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UNDER THE HOOD

A close-up on the new range's wiring, pots and switches



STANDARD '50s CONTROLS



CLASSIC CONTROLS



TRIBUTE CONTROLS

Unlike the previous 2019 Les Paul Standard, the new Standard '50s, like the previous Traditional, offers little surprise with 500kohm Gibson-branded pots (wired to a shielding or grounding plate) with two large 'Orange Drop' 0.022 microfarad (223J) tone caps (223J). Actually, the surprise here is that, like the previous Traditional, the Standard '50s has what we call 'modern' wiring as opposed to 'vintage' or '50s' wiring. If you're handy with a soldering iron, it's a very easy swap. The Standard '60s control cavity and wiring is identical.

Now part of the Modern range, the Classic retains its 'LP STAND REV.2' PCB, onto which are mounted four high-quality CTS pull-push pots.

Connections from the pickups, three-way toggle switch and to the jack output are all push-fit. The large yellow caps 0.01 microfarad (103k) create the 'tap' function; the tone caps are smaller brown 0.022 microfarad (223k).

Each of the pull switches introduces a different sound when pulled up; the volumes offer the 'tap' (previously referred to as a 'tuned tap'). Unlike a coil-split that takes the output at the junction of the two coils and grounds it, effectively shutting off one coil, this same output is filtered through a 0.01 microfarad cap to ground creating a secondary, more single coil-like sound. The neck pickup tone switch is simply a phase switch that only works with the pickup toggle in its central

both-pickups-on position. However, with the neck pickup alone selected and the tap function engaged, if the neck tone control switch is down then the neck's inner slug coil is primarily voiced; pulling up the neck's tone control chooses the outer screw coil – a very subtle difference. The bridge pickup's tone control switch is a 'pure bypass' that connects the bridge pickup directly to the output jack.

Another PCB awaits us inside the Tribute model (the only visible ID being E-2 940V-0). Here, then, we have standard Gibson pots with rectangular blue 0.022 microfarad tone caps. Again, connections to and from the board are all Quick Connect.

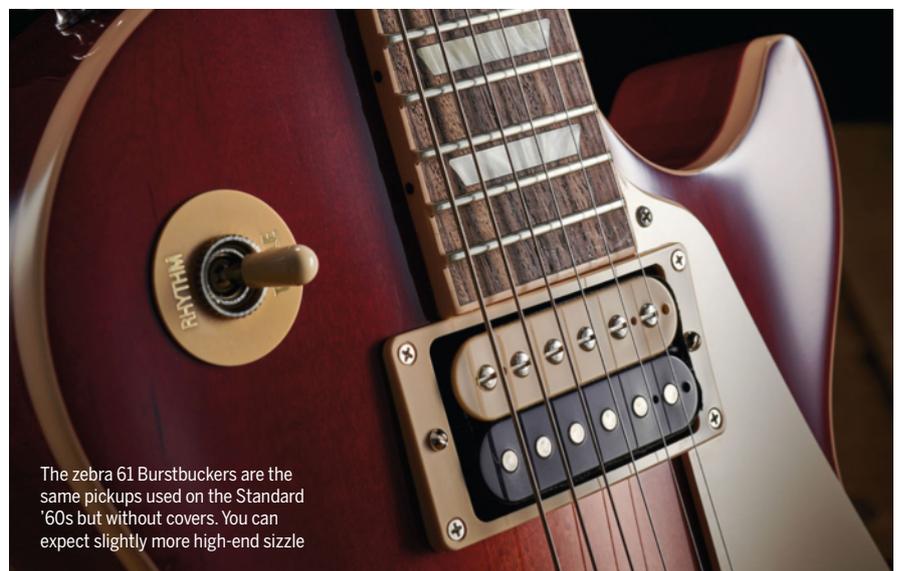
Many of us get hung up on neck shape, and if 'big' is essential to you then the '50s ticks that box

like faux binding by masking the edge of the maple, it hasn't. In numerous places, the craft seems less refined: the neck-to-headstock shaping, for example, and the razor-sharp headstock edges. There's a slight ledge on the treble side of the neck where the maple neck meets the unbound rosewood fingerboard. And why the toggle switch ring is in the case, not on the guitar, is beyond us. Speaking of cases, the Tribute comes in Gibson's Premium Soft case, while the others all have the classic brown form-fitting hardshell case.

The differences continue with the covered 490R (neck) and 490T (bridge) humbucking pickups with Alnico II magnets, while the Ultra Modern weight relief brings it in at a very light weight. Hmm, a dark horse?

Feel & Sounds

There are a few minor issues, from rather sharp edges to the (Graph Tech TUSQ)



The zebra 61 Burstbuckers are the same pickups used on the Standard '60s but without covers. You can expect slightly more high-end sizzle

top nuts, very dry and light-coloured fingerboards, and the odd groove in the nut that just needs a couple of strokes of a fret file. Frets fall into a medium size, approximately 2.28mm wide with a height that's around 1.15mm. It certainly gives all our 'Pauls quite a classic feel. All four are nicely set up with between 1.4mm and 1.5mm string height on the top E, and 1.8mm on the bass side, all with a slight fingerboard relief of 0.152mm (0.006-inch).

Pickup heights are a little more random in places, but nothing that a quick adjustment with a screwdriver doesn't fix. All are shipped with 0.010s, too (rather than the 0.009 to 0.046 of the previous wave), and overall, all four are just slightly tidier and more dialled-in compared with the prior trio we looked at earlier this year.

Many of us get hung up on neck shape, and if 'big' is essential to you then the '50s ticks that box (see the Dimensions chart

9. The Standard '50s tuners ape a more vintage style, but in terms of fitting are more modern with a larger-diameter mounting hole and a threaded bolt on the headstock face

10. Gibson states that the Burstbucker 1 in the neck position on the Standard '50s uses slightly offset coil winds and an Alnico II bar magnet



9



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on p86). Both the '60s and Classic have flatter-backed, thinner-depth'd more D-like shapes, the Classic slightly fuller front to back. It's quite a different feel to the '50s. The Tribute? It almost feels like a Fender, slightly thinner in width in lower positions but filling out in depth to almost a similar girth by the 12th as the '50s. It's the only one without binding, and though a far-from-classic feel for an LP, its C shape and slightly textured finish feel good in the hand.

Listening acoustically is quite revealing. The '50s has a vibrant if slightly brash

bump 'n' grind shape-throwing rock set from the last few decades.

There's no doubt the '50s is the statelier choice, wrapped in a rich low-end and slightly pulled back on the sizzle. The '60s has a slight kick, and the Classic just adds a little attack – they are perhaps the closest-sounding pair. That subtle high-end presence of the Classic is easily tamed by the volume controls – it's there if you want it. And, of course, we have the expanded sounds: the tuned taps, slightly hollowed with a hint of cocked wah about them,

As we begin plugging in, the finer details get a bit lost in a huge raft of sibling similarity. There's a lot of crossover to be found here

voice; the '60s is a little softer in a good way with subtly more depth of tone. The Classic, too, sounds very similar to the '60s with marginally less zing if anything. The Tribute continues to impress with a very similar lively and brash response, like the '50s but with less depth.

As we begin plugging in and swapping between our foursome, the finer details get a bit lost in a huge raft of sibling similarity. There's a lot of crossover to be found here, and even the Tribute with its relatively trim low-end makes up for it with a brash, punky attitude that'd get you through any

providing more of a textural difference than, say, a more contrasting humbucker-to-single-coil split. The out-of-phase option with both pickups on – again, with some dirt and crunch – is cleaner and very textural. It gets you some way to that bluesier Peter Green or even BB King-esque voicing. The direct output option for the bridge maximises the cut and should slice through any mix. There's little doubt that if you need to create more sounds and textures, the Classic does it extremely well, which makes for a very tempting proposition with its price and weight.

Verdict

So, with two Collections that now make a whole lot more sense and prices that are notably trimmer than the earlier 2019 range, it seems that Gibson is definitely heading in the right direction, even at this early stage.

Things don't change overnight and these Les Pauls don't feel or sound particularly different to any samples we've played over the past couple of years. All could do with a little bit of love, as we've described, but there's certainly nothing major. If you're particular about weight, however, especially if you're buying online, make sure you ask. As ever, nothing beats trying out a selection in person, especially as in this quartet where, even with subtly different specifications, there's quite a bit of crossover.

Which is 'best', then, is really a pretty personal decision. Like the Traditional before it, the Standard '50s is the obvious choice if you're chasing a more vintage-y specification. Neck shape alone, however, might have you going for the '60s Standard, but the Classic is virtually identical, cheaper, and has some useful additional sounds should you need them. It's a lot of guitar for the money and, with the right name on the headstock, this model makes quite a few clones in a similar or higher price-point now look a little irrelevant. Which leaves the Tribute model as the grab 'n' go jam session 'Paul, a perfect backup spare or a seriously good slide guitar. **G**



GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD '50S

PRICE: £1,999 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cut, solidbody electric
BODY: 2-piece mahogany with carved maple top
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, Vintage '50s profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")
NUT: Graph Tech
FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood, Acrylic Trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece, vintage deluxe tuners w/ keystone buttons – nickel plated
ELECTRICS: Gibson Burstbucker 1 (neck) and Burstbucker 2 (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.02/8.84
OPTIONS: Also available with dual-P-90 single coil in Gold Top only
RANGE OPTIONS: Other Les Pauls in the Original Collection include the Special (£1,199) and Junior (£1,299)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not listed
FINISHES: Tobacco Burst (as reviewed), Gold Top, Heritage Cherry Sunburst – gloss nitro-cellulose

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS A return to more the classic Les Paul Standard specs; big neck; good detailed build; most classic voicing of the bunch

CONS Vintage-style wiring would seem more suited to the style, although that's a simple fix



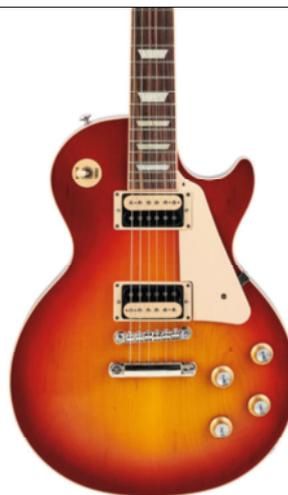
GIBSON LES PAUL STANDARD '60S

PRICE: £1,999 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cut, solidbody electric
BODY: 2-piece mahogany with AA carved maple top
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, slim taper neck profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")
NUT: Graph Tech
FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood, Acrylic Trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece, Grover Rotomatics w/ kidney buttons – nickel plated
ELECTRICS: Gibson Burstbucker 61R (neck) and Burstbucker 61T (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, individual volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.37/9.61
OPTIONS: None
RANGE OPTIONS: See Standard '50s (left)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not listed
FINISHES: Bourbon Burst (as reviewed), Ice Tea, Unburst – gloss nitro-cellulose

8/10

PROS Slim neck option to the Standard '60s specs; good detailed build; slightly hotter voicing

CONS Again, some might prefer vintage-style wiring; not everyone will enjoy the style of the 'retrofit' Grover Rotomatic tuners



GIBSON LES PAUL CLASSIC 2019

PRICE: £1,649 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cut, solidbody electric
BODY: 2-piece mahogany with carved maple top w/ 9-hole weight relief
NECK: 1-piece mahogany, Slim Taper neck profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")
NUT: Graph Tech
FINGERBOARD: Single-bound rosewood, Acrylic Trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: ABR-1 tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece, Grover Rotomatics with kidney buttons – nickel plated
ELECTRICS: Gibson Burstbucker 61R 'Zebra' (neck) and Burstbucker 61T 'Zebra' (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, 2 pull-push volumes (coil-tap), 2 pull-push tones (pure bypass/phase)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 4.1/9.02
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: Other Les Pauls in the Modern Collection include the Tribute (on review), the Modern (£2,299), the Studio (£1,199), and the double-cut Special (£869) and Junior Tribute DC (£799)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not listed
FINISHES: Trans Cherry, Heritage Cherry Sunburst (as reviewed), Honeyburst, Ebony – gloss nitro-cellulose

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Basically a Standard '60s Les Paul but with uncovered pickups and expanded sounds if you need them; its price

CONS Not everyone enjoys the PCB-mounted controls and push-fit connectors you'll find here



GIBSON LES PAUL TRIBUTE 2019

PRICE: £999 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cut, solidbody electric
BODY: 2-piece mahogany with carved maple top w/ Ultra Modern weight relief
NECK: 1-piece maple, rounded neck profile, glued-in
SCALE LENGTH: 624mm (24.6")
NUT: Graph Tech
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, Acrylic Trapezoid inlays, 305mm (12") radius
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Aluminium Nashville tune-o-matic bridge, aluminium stopbar tailpiece, Vintage Deluxe w/ keystone buttons – nickel plated
ELECTRICS: Gibson 490R (neck) and 490T (bridge), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone for each pickup
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.27/7.2
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: See Les Paul Classic (left)
LEFT-HANDERS: Not listed
FINISHES: Satin Iced Tea, Satin Honeyburst (as reviewed), Satin Tobacco Burst, Satin Cherry Sunburst – satin nitrocellulose

Guitarist CHOICE 9/10

PROS Pared back but competent build; light weight; energetic voicing; its price

CONS The bare-bones finish and lack of fine detailing might not appeal to everyone, nor the maple neck. Until you plug in, that is...