

## FIRST PLAY



**FENDER AMERICAN  
PERFORMER JAZZMASTER**  
£1,049

**WHAT IS IT?** A stripped-down hot-rod version of a 60s surf icon



**FENDER AMERICAN  
PERFORMER MUSTANG**  
£999

**WHAT IS IT?** The underdog that became a pedigree champ

# The Other Guys

If you can't see past the Teles and Strats in the Fender catalogue, check out the latest in the Offset bloodline, with their vintage looks and modern playability

**Words** Ed Mitchell **Photography** Olly Curtis

**I**t's 1957. Fullerton, California. You're Leo Fender. Within the last decade you and your team have invented the Esquire, Telecaster, Stratocaster, Precision Bass and the Bassman amplifier. Your competition is floundering. Compared with the Gibson Les Paul and the Gretsch Duo Jet, your Stratocaster guitar looks like it was beamed down from a passing flying saucer. Business is brisk. But you're Leo Fender. The Strat is already three years old! You need to stay on top. The big question is: how do you follow a guitar like that?

Fender's response is the Jazzmaster. Released in 1958, the new model combines important Fender trademarks (bolt-on maple neck, six-on-one-side tuner layout) with a recent addition to the Fullerton factory's spec options – a rosewood fingerboard. The Jazzmaster is intended to be Leo's flagship model. He regards the Tele and Strat









## Running clean, you can see why the Jazzmaster's big single coils were so popular in early 60s surf music

as tools for the working musician. Now he wants to offer some luxury. The brief is a top-of-the-range looker that'll hook the jazz cats and studio aces.

Fresh from the drawing board, the Jazzmaster is a handsome bugger and that's no lie. The only problem is, no-one actually wants it. Where the Strat is lithe and lightweight, the Jazzmaster is a bit more cumbersome. The Strat has three pickups, its wiring loom is beautifully simple and the volume and tone controls fall easily to hand. That low-profile 'Synchronized' vibrato unit is a work of genius. By way of contrast, the Jazzmaster has two pickups, a complicated control layout, not to mention a spectacularly over-engineered vibrato unit and bridge setup. If Leo thinks the country jazz hotshots of the day are going to trade in their big hollowbody guitars for his latest flame, well, good luck with that.

Now, 60-odd years on, the Jazzmaster is still going strong, of course. While it never did capture the imagination of jazz players, it's a favourite of new wave and alternative heroes such as Elvis Costello and J Mascis of Dinosaur Jr, both of whom have Jazzmaster-based signature models. This latest version, the American Performer Jazzmaster, aims to widen the model's social circle with a simplified layout and modern playing experience. Likewise, the newest version of the much-loved Mustang, a guitar that was never intended to be anything more than a decent student guitar.



1. Classic and vintage reissue Jazzmasters come fitted with the 'love it or loathe it' floating vibrato, the same unit fitted to the Fender Jaguar. The American Performer has the simpler and more stable Strat-style Synchronized vibrato. Tuning stability here is excellent

2. Both guitars feature Yosemite single-coil pickups in different formats. The Jazzmaster has larger, brighter-sounding models than its sibling here

Both of these American Performer models are built around an offset alder chassis with a hard-wearing gloss polyurethane finish. The maple necks are bolt-on, of course, and while they share a comfortable 'Modern C' profile, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius and satin polyurethane coating, their scale lengths differ. The Jazzmaster is your classic 648mm (25.5-inch) scale; the Mustang is short-scale at 610mm (24 inches). Other similarities include 22 jumbo frets (vintage and reissue models only have 21) and a simple wiring loom. You get a master volume, 'Greasebucket' tone and a three-way pickup selector toggle switch.

Looking more closely at the Jazzmaster you'll discover that the big old floating vibrato and rocking bridge chiselled into vintage and reissue models ain't there. Fender has opted for a vintage Strat-style vibrato for the American Performer. It's not the first time Fender has put out a Jazzmaster in this format, but it still looks a little odd. Not having the old-school floating unit taking up all that body space leaves a hell of a lot of naked real estate behind your picking hand.

The American Performer Mustang has the classic '65-style slab body. Fender didn't add body contours to the Mustang until 1969, along with 'competition stripe' graphics. The new model comes loaded





3. While both guitars feature bolt-on maple necks with Modern C profiles and 241mm (9.5-inch) radius rosewood 'boards, the Mustang is short-scale at 610mm (24 inches). The Jazzmaster has the classic 648mm (25.5-inch) Fender scale

with the same Marmite 'Dynamic' vibrato fitted on those vintage 'Stangs. The one concession to modernity is a plastic sleeve in the vibrato armhole to keep the wiggle stick from wandering off when you need to grab it. Not everyone loves the 'Dynamic'. It can suffer from tuning problems if not set up correctly. That's why Kurt Cobain famously had his Mustangs tweaked into hardtails. We actually like it. Tuning stability, on this guitar at least, is great, and the vibrato has a good range even if it's happiest providing a little shimmer. Why didn't the bods at Fender fit a Strat vibrato like they did with the Jazzmaster? Simple. The Mustang body isn't deep enough to support one. It was 'Dynamic' or nothing.

### Feel & Sounds

Despite the differences in scale length, these guitars feel quite similar. The 'Modern C' profile is a great one-size-fits-all option. It hits that magic sweet spot between fat and thin. Most would never consider the Jazzmaster and Mustang as lead guitars, but the big frets and modern radius 'boards make them as shreddable as any other guitar.

Where you do feel the difference is the string tension. Both guitars come strung with 0.009 to 0.046-gauge strings. While

The Mustang has less twang and sustain than its longer-necked brother... its pickups work best with effects

that works okay for the regular-scale Jazzmaster, they feel like wet spaghetti on the Mustang. You can practically pull off David Gilmour-style overbends on this guitar without any real effort. We'd suggest fitting a heavier set: 11s, 12s... or, at the very least, a set of 10s.

We like the satin polyurethane finish on the necks. Fender has been using this since the American Standard stuff landed back in the 80s. Yes, we'll always have a soft spot for the gloss nitro finish on old-school JMs and 'Stangs, but there's no denying the satin finish offers way less friction.

The 'Sounds' section of this review would be way longer if the American Performer Jazzmaster and Mustang had the control layouts of their ancestors. Allow us to mansplain. Original Jazzmasters had a lead and rhythm circuit. You could switch between a regular circuit with a volume,





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4. Our American Performer Mustang features the non-contoured '65-style body in a polyurethane Vintage White finish. This is Vintage White at its most 'banana milk'. The lack of contours is not a problem; the body is thin and easy to grapple with

There's enough vintage DNA in these models to make them cool, balanced with modern build quality and playability

tone and three-way toggle for the bridge and neck pickups, and a 'rhythm' mode with roller volume and tone controls that only fed the neck pickup. The idea was you could switch between two preset tones. As previously stated, the American Performer does away with all that kerfuffle.

Your classic and reissue Mustang features a pair of three-way pickup selector slider switches. These allow the single coils to be switched off, and run in parallel and out of phase. Not bad when you consider this model was designed for students. Like the American Performer Jazzmaster, this Mustang is running a much simpler setup.

Considering that the Jazzmaster and Mustang appeal to a similar crowd – indie kids, grunge throwbacks, alt-country types – you'd expect them to sound quite similar. In practice, the inch-and-a-half of scale length difference is crucial. Where the Jazzmaster is all twang and brightness, the Mustang has some low-end grunt. The former is like a Strat on helium; the latter is a grumpy Telecaster.

Running clean, you can see why the Jazzmaster's big single coils were so popular during the early 60s surf music craze. The top-end from the Yosemite

bridge single coil is spine-tingling, especially when you crank up the reverb. The neck pup maintains much of that treble response, but there's a bit more Duane Eddy-esque depth. Switch reverb for slapback echo and the Jazzmaster makes a credible rockabilly machine. Lest we forget, one of this model's earliest supporters was much-loved Johnny Cash sideman Luther Perkins.

Start piling on the dirt and the Jazzmaster goes all alternative rock. That sizzling top-end definition coexists beautifully with dirt and delay. You don't necessarily have to gaze down at your shoes, but that's the sound you'll get.

As we expected, the Mustang offers less twang and sustain than its longer-necked brother. It's typically typecast as a strummer's guitar, but there's more to it than that. Its single coils definitely work at their best with effects. A touch of overdrive, some reverb and delay – that all works wonders. Combining the pickups actually works great for some sweet Curtis Mayfield and Hendrix doublestops. The shorter scale adds some fluffiness to the bottom-end that would be a problem for other guitars. Here, that slight lack of definition comes across as extra warmth.





## Verdict

If this review was a double feature down at your local classic picture house, the Fender Jazzmaster would be Sir Sean Connery and Sir Michael Caine's 1975 ripping yarn, *The Man Who Would Be King*. The Fender Mustang is the 1959 Peter Sellers' satire *The Mouse That Roared*. Neither are all-conquering blockbusters like the Telecaster and Stratocaster, but they're not B-movies either. More like cult classics.

Fender has really shown its offset throwbacks some love in the past few years what with its Mexican-made hardtail Mustangs, and the recently released Vintera Jazzmasters, Jaguars and Mustangs. These American Performer versions aren't quite as cute as the vintage-spec models, but they are easier to play. After all, it's the mad design quirks that make the original JMs and 'Stangs so adorable, but not everyone wants that stuff.

In the end, there's enough vintage DNA in these models to make them cool, balanced with a level of modern build quality and playability to make them accessible to all types of player. A guitar for everyone, if you will. As it happens, that's all Leo Fender set out to achieve in the first place. **G**

5. The Mustang has regular Strat-esque Yosemite single-coil pickups. Unlike their vintage ancestors, these American Performers come spec'd with simple control setups



## FENDER AMERICAN PERFORMER JAZZMASTER

**PRICE:** £1,049 (inc gigbag)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Offset solidbody electric guitar

**BODY:** Alder

**NECK:** Maple with 'Modern C' profile, bolt-on

**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic bone/43mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with white dot inlays, 241mm (9.5") radius

**FRETS:** 22, jumbo

**HARDWARE:** Nickel/chrome

Vintage Strat Synchronized vibrato,

Fender Classic Gear tuners

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 53mm

**ELECTRICS:** 2x Yosemite Jazzmaster

single coils, master volume,

'Greasebucket' tone, 3-way pickup

selector toggle switch

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.8/8.5

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** The American

Performer range kicks off with the

Telecaster and Stratocaster at £999.

The neck humbucking Telecaster

Hum and the HSS Stratocaster are

the same price

**LEFT HANDERS:** N/A

**FINISHES:** Penny (as reviewed),

3-Colour Sunburst, Satin Lake

Placid Blue, Vintage White – gloss

polyurethane body, satin neck

# 8/10

**PROS** Modern playability; hi-fi vibe of the big single-coil pickups; this thing is easy on the eye, too

**CONS** The Synchronized vibrato doesn't have the curb appeal of the classic Jazzmaster whammy



## FENDER AMERICAN PERFORMER MUSTANG

**PRICE:** £999 (inc gigbag)

**ORIGIN:** USA

**TYPE:** Offset solidbody electric

guitar

**BODY:** Alder

**NECK:** Maple with 'Modern C' profile,

bolt-on

**SCALE LENGTH:** 610mm (24")

**NUT/WIDTH:** Synthetic bone/43mm

**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with

white dot inlays, 241mm (9.5") radius

**FRETS:** 22, jumbo

**HARDWARE:** Nickel/chrome

Mustang bridge and vibrato,

Fender Classic Gear tuners

**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 53mm

**ELECTRICS:** 2x Yosemite Mustang

single coils, master volume,

'Greasebucket' tone, 3-way pickup

selector toggle switch

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.4/7.6

**OPTIONS:** None

**RANGE OPTIONS:** See Jazzmaster

**LEFT HANDERS:** No

**FINISHES:** Vintage White

(as reviewed), Penny, Satin Sonic

Blue, 2-Colour Sunburst – gloss

polyurethane body, satin neck

**Fender Musical Instruments EMEA**

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# 8/10

**PROS** It couldn't look cuter if it was wearing an Easter bonnet; the killer playability and punchy pickups mean it's not just a pretty face

**CONS** Seriously. Nines on a Mustang? Have a word