





Signs Of The Times

It's barely four years ago that Fender replaced its long-running American Standard range with the American Professional. Now it's been refreshed. So, what's new?

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Neil Godwin



FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II TELECASTER & STRATOCASTER HSS £1,599 & £1,649

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What You Need To Know

1 **American Original, Ultra, Performer and now Professional II? I still play an American Standard Strat. What's going on?**

Keep up! If you're that vintage guy, you can head to the American Original series. More of a modernist? It's the American Ultra for you. And if you're, well, quite normal then the American Professional is aimed at you, while the American Performer trims the cost of the USA experience.

2 **Your Strat HSS looks like a 70s throwback, though...**

American ash, used by Fender since the early 50s, is now endangered. Fender has been looking into alternatives and has selected torrefied pine. It's been used by Fender before, and pine is already used by a few makers such as Novo and other boutique-style builders.

3 **What's going on with the Telecaster's finish?**

Fender is calling this Mercury, a sort of pared-back Silver Burst, one of the new colours in this range. It's all a part of the refresh concept.

Time flies and it only seems like yesterday we were writing about the new American Professional guitars, a reimagined overhaul of the previous long-running American Standard that produced some of the best playing and sounding Fender guitars – which we'd not hesitate to recommend to readers and friends alike. In some ways, then, it's a bit of a surprise that Fender has now replaced that line with these Mk II versions.

If you're expecting a completely new operating system, you'll be disappointed: the American Professional II is more like a firmware upgrade. Perhaps that's a little harsh, though, because there are numerous features that differentiate II from I. Obviously, there are different colours, some of which might be quite polarising, particularly to those of us who've grown up with the classic and custom colour hues. More fundamentally, lightweight ash is now



The single coils across the new range are Mk II versions of the mixed magnet V-Mods we saw on the original series. Note the easy adjustment of this Tele neck pickup



One of the drivers for the American Pro II range is to introduce the DoubleTap humbucker, previously seen on the Performer series. It's a very clever patented design

hard to source – certainly in the quantities that Fender consumes – and is replaced by roasted pine as used right back at the start of the Fender story (although it wasn't roasted back then) and for various limited runs over the years. Fender is playing catch-up a little here because pine is quite popular in the modding and DIY partscaster world, not to mention among some elevated boutique makers. Fender tells us that the timber offers a very focused bright tone and that the roasting stabilises the wood and can make it a little lighter.

We then get a raft of refinements to continue the already refined Am Pro vibe. The contoured heel, for example, is hardly new, but it knocks the old square edge off the treble side of the heel, something Leo would have probably done back in the day had he realised there was money to be made noodling around in those high-fret positions. Fender has sensibly retained the Micro-Tilt neck pitch adjustment here, too.

The other subtler changes are to the necks. Along with a 'smoother' satin back finish – coined 'Super-Natural' – and a rich but not overdone amber tint, there's a heavier rolling to the fingerboard edges. The deep C profile of the Am Pro I is retained, but all in, along with the narrow/tall wire on that everyman 241mm (9.5-inch) radius, it's hard to think how Fender could have improved things further.

These II versions are nicely polished, very everyman instruments with colossal appeal

The range of models, at least the initial releases, tick all the best-selling boxes, too: Strat, Tele, Strat HSS, Tele Deluxe (now with a larger 70s Strat-style headstock) and Jazzmaster. There's no Strat HH this time around; the launch range here seems very focused on the big-hitters. And why not?

American Pro II Stratocaster HSS

As with ash, which was only used on specific colours, here pine is employed for the Sienna Sunburst and Roasted Pine, which most of us would simply call natural because Fender tells us the finish here is basically just clear coats over a sanding sealer. The roasting process clearly deepens the colour, creating a very rustic furniture vibe that was all the rage in some homes back in the 70s. We're suckers for heavier contours that enhance the sculptural beauty of the best guitar design ever. Here, that top body edge is a little thick.

As for hardware, it's pretty much only the staggered-height modern tuners that

remain completely untouched. The two-post bridge now boasts a cold-rolled steel block that, says Fender, "increases sustain, clarity and high-end sparkle". Fender's Justin Norvell elaborates: "The previous blocks were cast. These are usually resin impregnated, which makes it musically less like a bell when you hit it. It's got mass but doesn't have the same resonance or musicality. We were actually using an improved style of cast block that was copper-infused instead of resin, so it was homogenous metal all the way through, but it was still a sintered block. Here, we still have the chamfered for extra travel, but it's milled out of cold rolled steel, which has long been what the aftermarket people with their upgraded hardware use. It's what we do on American Original and in the Custom Shop: it's the original recipe that Leo was using. So, again, it's just another tweak that adds musicality and enhances tone."

A major part of the first Am Pros were the mixed-magnet V-Mod pickups (see Mods For Rockers, later in this feature). Here we have V-Mod IIs: the "Stratocaster single-coil pickups are more articulate than ever while retaining bell-like chime and warmth", says Fender. The DoubleTap humbucker – again upgraded to II status – first appeared on the American Performer range and the bridge facing cream coil cleverly helps to ape the classic three-single-coil look, at least from

1. The rib-cage contouring seen here on the Stratocaster HSS leaves quite a thick edge to the bass side, but the roasted pine body is an excellent weight
2. The Tele's bridge plate looks pretty classic, but the lower side walls and domed ends of the outer brass saddles make it a lot more comfortable under the hand



THE RIVALS

As the most popular and therefore most imitated electric guitars out there, finding your Strat or Tele fit is far from easy. Working your way through the four Fender USA Production ranges is hard enough, and don't discount the Mexican-made Vinteras or Player Series.

Some highlights if you're looking for a viable HSS is the Ultra Strat HSS (£1,749) with its subtly more modern feature set, or the more affordable American Performer Strat HSS (£999), which uses the original version of the patented DoubleTap humbucker paired with two Yosemite single coils and a six-screw vibrato.

Apply that to the Telecaster and we have the Ultra (£1,899) and Performer (£1,049), and dropping down to the Vintera series there's the '60s Modified at £879.

Of course, if the name on the headstock (or the fact that it's the 'wrong' shape) doesn't bother you, then the sky's the limit. And then there's the used market...

a distance. Each Am Pro II also has a new-to-Fender push-push switch on the tone control. Again, far from new, it switches the full humbucker to its single-coil mode, although it's actually a little trickier than that (see Under The Hood, opposite).

American Pro II Telecaster

One of the new colours, Mercury, is shown off here on this muted-down Silver Burst Tele over its alder body – which pulls back the usual black edge to a dark grey pewter hue. It certainly looks very stage-aimed and showy. Again, this refresh also includes a smattering of new hardware and electronics. Most notably we have an updated bridge that uses a bridge plate with cut-down side walls. It can be top-loaded as well as through-strung, while the outer two saddles are slightly longer and have domed 'bullet' ends. The height adjustment screws are nicely buried – a great advantage of the Micro-Tilt – and the saddles are compensated as before.

So, again, we have V-Mod II pickups. The bridge has flush mount poles, while the push-push switch on the tone control voices both pickups in series when it is

pushed up and when the three-way selector is in middle position. Like the Strat we get the string tree from the Ultra (a pretty minor point) and we have dome-topped knurled knobs, not the flat-tops of the previous series.

Feels & Sounds

Both guitars come in pretty similar weight wise, neither feather-light nor far from heavy. The necks' 'deep C' profile is retained from the previous series, spec'd at 0.820 inches (20.8mm) at the 1st fret and 0.920 inches (23.4mm) by the 12th – pretty much the exact depths we measured. For the record, the Tele's neck is slab-sawn; the Strat's one-piece maple neck/fingerboard is rift-sawn. It's a very everyman shape, not too thin, not too thick, and along with that

There's no shortage of midrange bite, which really pushes the Tele-ness to the fore on the bridge pickup

UNDER THE HOOD A look inside the reimagined models

The modded vibe of these new Mk II American Professionals is very evident in their expanded wiring. Each model features at least one fast-action push-push switched tone pot that introduces the extra sound. On our Strat HSS it splits the DoubleTap humbucker, and on our Tele it combines the two pickups in series, when both are selected. On the three-single-coil Stratocaster we get the 'seven sound mod', which introduces the neck pickup to positions 1 and 2 on the five-way for two extra sounds: the Tele-like bridge and neck and all-three pickups – both link the pickups in parallel. Even the Jazzmaster gets a push-push switch, which apparently taps the hotter bridge pickup for a more vintage sound.

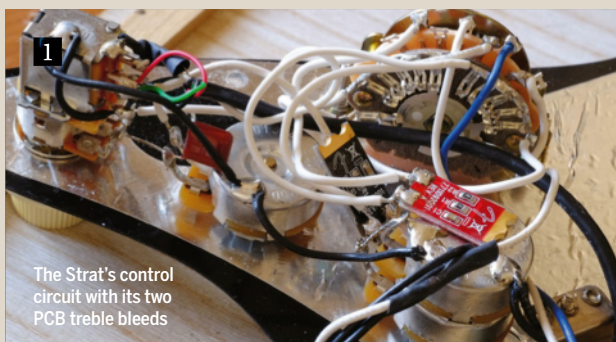
If these wiring mods are pretty mainstream, there's a little more going on with the Strat HSS [pic 1, below]. One trick, as with the original American Pro HSS, is the use of a ganged volume pot: two pots stacked on top

of each other but are controlled by a common shaft and a single knob. So the DoubleTap humbucker sees the 500kohms pot, and its single coils, the 250k.

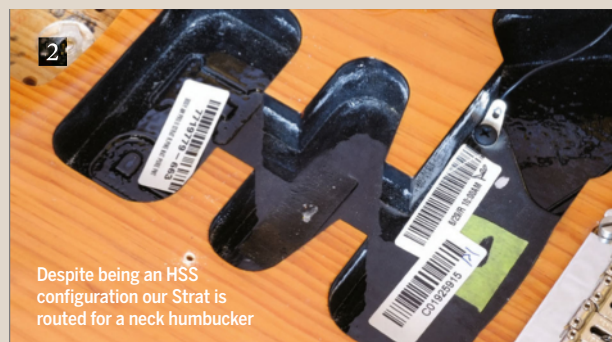
Removing the scratchplate there's certainly quite a nest of wiring: the five-way switch is a four-pole type as opposed to the standard two-pole style, the single tone cap is a 250V 223k code (.022 microfarads). You also notice two treble bleed circuit boards, one for each of the different value stacked volume pots. Each uses three surface mount components: two resistors and a single capacitor, for which we couldn't ID. The first series American Pros initially used standard components and changed during their run to these PCBs. Originally, then, the treble bleed on the humbucker's 500k pot was a 1,000 picofarads capacitor and a 270kohm resistor; on the 250k pot a 1,200 picofarads cap was used in parallel with a 150kohm resistor and a 20k resistor in series.

With the scratchplate off you can also see the body is routed for HSH pickups [pic 2], and there's a large and quite deeply cut 'P II' [pics 3 & 4] in the neck pickup cavity, leaving you in no doubt about which series guitar you have. And while we're investigating you'll see a 'P2' stamped into the side of new cold-rolled steel vibrato block [pic 5, 'P2' not shown].

Our Tele is a little more regular [pic 6], again using the same tone capacitor and a regular three-way two-pole switch plus the same single coil-style treble bleed for the 250k volume pot. Fender has long offered a four-way lever switch that links the two pickups in series specifically in position 4 (furthest towards the neck). This Am Pro II is no different in terms of that extra sound, but while it takes two moves (selector switch to mix position then push the tone switch), many will prefer this setup as not everyone enjoys the series position on that four-way switch being where the neck single coil usually is. We are creatures of habit!



The Strat's control circuit with its two PCB treble bleeds



Despite being an HSS configuration our Strat is routed for a neck humbucker



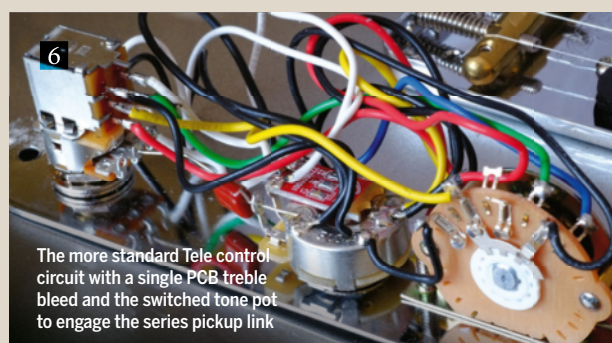
P II is routed into the neck pickup cavity for obvious ID



The Strat's neck pocket showing the Micro-Tilt feature – no shims are necessary



The cold rolled steel vibrato block is chamfered like the previous Am Pro vibrato



The more standard Tele control circuit with a single PCB treble bleed and the switched tone pot to engage the series pickup link

3. All the new American Pro II models use a push-push switch on the tone controls to introduce more sounds. On this Tele we get both pickups in series

4. The V-Mod II single coil pickups use different magnets on the treble and bass side with a vintage/modern stagger



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COLOURS & WOODS

With a major range like this, you'd expect a broad colour choice, and combined with the two body woods – roasted pine and alder – plus maple or rosewood fingerboards, the actual choice becomes quite staggering. There are 15 Stratocasters, 10 Stratocaster HSS models, 11 Teles, five Jazzmasters and six Tele Deluxe models!

So, the three-single-coil Stratocaster with a roasted pine body is available in its natural finish, called Roasted Pine (with both maple and rosewood fingerboard options), and Sienna Sunburst (maple only). All the other colours are over an alder body: Mercury with rosewood-only fingerboard, and Miami Blue and Black with maple only. The remaining colours – Miami Blue, Dark Night, Olympic White and Mystic Surf Green – are all available with both fingerboard woods.

Our Stratocaster HSS is slightly more limited: the roasted pine body is only available with a maple fingerboard in Roasted Pine and Sienna Sunburst. The alder body models come in 3-Color Sunburst and Olympic White with both fingerboard options; Mercury, Miami Blue and Dark Night are only available with rosewood; and Mystic Surf Green is only offered with a maple 'board.

There are three Telecasters with a roasted pine body – Roasted Pine, Sienna Sunburst and Butterscotch Blonde – all with a maple-only 'boards. The alder-bodied models, like our Mercury, and Mystic Surf Green, Dark Night and Olympic White come with rosewood 'boards only; 3-Color Sunburst comes with both fingerboard options and, finally, Black is only available with maple.



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standard radius and narrow/tall frets there's little change over the previous models.

However, that increased fingerboard edge rolling is welcome and the radiusing seems slightly more on the maple fingerboard face of the Strat than the separate rosewood fingerboard of the Tele. Is this 'Super-Natural' finish to the neck back a game-changer or even noticeably different from the original American Professional? No, but it does feel super smooth – this is good craft. As is the setup, which pairs 0.009s with string heights on both treble and bass sides at the 12th fret of a shade over 1.5mm.

First impressions of the Strat played clean is that there's plenty of breathy crispness. There's no doubt what you're listening to, but we're reaching for the tones to pull them back whereas our reference Strats remain fully open. Not for the first time both tones here act like a 'decade' control: fully open there's that almost post-EQ zing; backed off we get to more of those classic 'analogue' sounds. As you'd expect, there's no shortage of fast attack and the voice is pretty vibrant.

The push-push switch voices the screw coil of the bridge humbucker, which matches the response from the single coils

rather well. In full 'bucker mode it's well balanced and certainly not over thick, a welcome gear change with a little more power. Again, pulling back the tone here smooths out the quite strident attack and while the treble bleed circuits really keep things pristine, as you pull the volume back, many of us like that softening of a non-treble bleed. Like so many guitars, the key here is to use those tone controls.

Keeping things pretty clean, the Tele works its magic, more strident and steely. The neck pickup is far from rounded or muted, though; it really isn't a million miles away from the Strat's neck in terms of voicing just with a subtler smoother attack. The highs do seem a little more rounded here and there's no shortage of midrange bite, which really pushes the Tele-ness to the fore on the bridge pickup.

Played clean, there's plenty of breathy crispness... The more we played this Strat, the more we liked it

MODS FOR ROCKERS

The patented Fender DoubleTap humbucker is a little different to a regular humbucker, for example, with a standard coil-split, which effectively just dumps one coil, or most of it, to ground. Firstly, the DoubleTap has mismatched coils: the screw coil is wound to a measured DCR of 5.17kohms and that's the coil that's voiced in the split mode. The slug coil measures 3.88k. However, that screw coil is tapped at a measured DCR of 3.92k (very close to the slug coil), and in humbucker mode it's that portion of the screw coil that is linked in series to the slug coil. Why? Well, there's less difference in output between the two modes reflected in the DCRs of the full humbucker (7.75k) and its single coil (5.17k), which is pretty close to the DCRs on the middle single coil (6.10k) and the neck which measures 5.83kohms [pic right, top].

"We really like the V-Mod pickups," says Justin Norvell, "so the V-Mod IIs are just a varying of the recipe – winds, wire, bobbins, stagger – just to the point that we felt we'd enhanced them a little bit. There's a pickup engineer we have, Steven Casado, who's been in the pickup business for a long time, and he took Tim Shaw's original designs and created a slightly different take."

The original V-Mod pickups used a mixed magnet concept that's retained on these MkII versions [pic right, bottom]. So, the Strat's neck pickup uses Alnico II on the bass side and III on the treble; the middle pickup uses the same bass-side magnets with Alnico V on the treble and the bridge single coil of the standard Strat uses Alnico V for all six magnets. The Tele swaps it around so the bass-side magnets are Alnico V and treble side are II.

The Tele is hum-cancelling, too, in both mixed positions (parallel and series). The Strat's single-coil mixes are hum-cancelling and of course so too is the bridge DoubleTap when it's in humbucking mode.



The five terminals on the base of the DoubleTap humbucker allow its unique wiring



Note the grey fibre bases of the V-Mod II single coils here



Pretty much the only things unchanged are the staggered height tuners we see here. As ever, truss rod adjustment is made from behind the bone nut. These are very easy guitars to adjust

The series sound is certainly thicker – the biggest sound here – and humbucker-like, with the well-voiced treble bleed on the volume. Pulling it back retains clarity but cleans things up, a sort of 'home' sound we'd suspect for many who need a deeper, wider voice than you'll usually find on a Tele. Again, using both volume and tone really pull out the guitar's potential, even though, oddly, it took a while to settle, despite some pretty heavy string stretching.

The well tried-and-tested Strat vibrato has a light, responsive feel with a pretty standard range of around a semitone up-bend on the high E and just over a tone on the G. Stability for light use is excellent, although as with any brand-new guitar there's a sense that it all needs to settle in a little. The push-fit arm is a very snug fit, making subtle shimmers very responsive. The more we played this Strat, the more we liked it – and the Tele, too.

Complaints? For all the effort that's gone into the new Tele bridge, at setup or even post-purchase, notching the saddles wouldn't go amiss as the strings can drift making the string spacing slightly uneven. Mind you, we've put up with that for years. There's very little not to like here.



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Is roasted pine the new ash? Impossible to say... but it's definitely in the right ballpark

Verdict

Is roasted pine the new ash? Impossible to say on the evidence of a single guitar, but listening to this Strat in comparison with both alder and light ash references, it's definitely in the right ballpark and perhaps sits between the two. Obviously, you're not just hearing a body wood, but what we're hearing overall is extremely good. The pine does look different: we are so used to ash under blonde finishes or just natural that anything that looks different will always have its detractors. Despite the high-gloss finish, there's a rather rustic vibe here that not everyone will enjoy.

The Tele looks more showy and just expands on the first version in both feel and sounds and, with a couple of minor exceptions, it's difficult to see how Fender could have improved these further. They do feel like subtly modded versions of the first range with added attention to feel and detail. We're big fans of the first American Pros and these II versions are simply nicely polished, very everyman instruments with colossal appeal to players everywhere. A superb job. **G**

5. The rounded corner of the heel brings a more modern element to the Am Pro IIs, which still use the very handy Micro-Tilt neck pitch adjustment



FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II TELECASTER

PRICE: £1,599 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Alder

NECK: Maple, modern 'deep C' profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.25mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, white dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius

FRETS: 22, narrow tall

HARDWARE: Nickel/chromed-plated strings-through-body or top-load Tele bridge with three compensated brass 'bullet' saddles and six-screw mounting, Fender standard cast/sealed staggered tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm

ELECTRICS: 2x Fender V-Mod II single coil Tele pickups, 3-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume (with treble bleed) and master tone with knurled dome-top knobs

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.65/8.03

OPTIONS: See 'Colours & Woods' box

RANGE OPTIONS: The roasted pine-bodied Telecaster costs £1,649, the same price as the new Tele Deluxe

LEFT-HANDERS: We can expect a left-handed Strat, Tele and Jazzmaster early 2021

FINISHES: Mercury (as reviewed).

See 'Colours & Woods'. Gloss urethane body and headstock face, 'Super-Natural' satin urethane neck back



PROS The subtle changes make a noticeable difference – very neat new bridge; the push-push switch series pickup link is very welcome. A great middle-ground Telecaster

CONS Notching those saddles wouldn't go amiss



FENDER AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II STRATOCASTER HSS

PRICE: £1,649 (inc case)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Roasted pine

NECK: Maple, modern 'deep C' profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/43.2mm

FINGERBOARD: Maple, black dot markers, 241mm (9.5") radius

FRETS: 22, narrow tall

HARDWARE: Nickel/chromed-plated 2-point synchronized vibrato with bent steel saddles and pop-in arm and cold-rolled steel block, Fender Standard cast/sealed staggered tuners

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Fender V-Mod II DoubleTap humbucker (bridge), V-Mod II single coil Strat (middle & neck), 5-position lever pickup selector switch, master volume (w/ treble bleed), tone 1 (neck & middle), tone 2 (bridge) w/push switch coil split and aged white plastic knobs

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.45/7.59

OPTIONS: See 'Colours & Woods'

RANGE OPTIONS: With an alder body the Strat HSS costs £1,599. The standard three-single-coil Stratocaster follows the same pricing as the HSS

LEFT-HANDERS: As left

FINISHES: Roasted Pine (as reviewed). See 'Colours & Woods'. Gloss urethane body and headstock face, 'Super-Natural' satin urethane neck back



PROS Superb neck feel and very dialled in setup – superb musical tool with relatively modern voicing that's hard to put down

CONS Not everyone will get the roasted pine's appearance, but there is plenty of choice besides that