





# Back To The Source

Can't afford a vintage Fender? Neither can we. So until we win the lottery, the Vintera range aims to satisfy our lust. Let's jump on the offset train and go back in time...

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker



## FENDER VINTERA II '50S JAZZMASTER, '70S JAGUAR & '70S COMPETITION MUSTANG

£1,149, £1,229 & £1,049

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**T**he second collection of affordable vintage-era Fenders, the Vintera II range, was introduced last year and to say we were impressed with the '50s Telecaster and '60s Stratocaster we reviewed is an understatement. But could we get our hands on the new trendy offset models? Not until now.

While the first wave of Vintera offsets centred on the 60s, the second wave jumps either side with the 50s Jazzmaster and 70s incarnations of the Jaguar and Mustang and – as we reported in that previous review – style aside, the primary changes are the switch back to rosewood fingerboards from pau ferro, a pickup upgrade across all the models and, yes, a slight price increase.

Viewed today, it's quite remarkable how these offsets are not only cohesive designs but how different they are in looks, feel and sound, too. Plus, although we have a '50s Jazzmaster alongside a '70s Jaguar and Mustang, we're not comparing different decades or styles of manufacturing – a leveller that makes a contemporary comparison of 'vintage' Fender designs that much more interesting.

### Basic Style

So, while the Jazzmaster retains the classic 'long' Fender scale length of 648mm (25.5 inches) and fret complement of the Telecaster and Stratocaster, the Jaguar and Mustang both drop down to a shorter 610mm (24-inch) scale with an extra 22nd fret. It's a fundamental change that noticeably affects both the feel and sound, and aside from copies, we can't recall any other-brand electrics that use this scale length today. Historically, of course, the Mustang was also originally offered with the even shorter 572mm (22.5-inch) scale like the single-pickup Musicmaster and dual-pickup Duo-Sonic, although from the introduction of the Mustang in 1964 those models were also offered with the longer 610mm scale.

Viewed today, it's quite remarkable how different these offsets are in looks, feel and sound

Both the Jazzmaster and Jaguar, of course, share the same body outline, which is 42mm thick with its classic smoothly domed forearm contour, ribcage scoop and large edge radius. We can't see any wood – or how many pieces are used – through the opaque finishes of either. The Mustang scrapes into the offset category courtesy of its waist and slightly offset base, and is slightly thinner in depth, closer to 39mm, again with the heavily radiused edges, lighter contouring and those more, well, Fender-like body horns. It's little surprise, then, that the Mustang is the lightest of our trio at 3.66kg (8.05lb); the '50s Jazzmaster is only a little heavier at 3.78kg (8.32lb) and, although the same shape, the '70s Jaguar tops out at 4.04kg (8.89lb), something that actually reflects – we're sure unintentionally – the often lighter stock used in the 50s as opposed to the often heavier wood of that later period. If weight bothers you, it's worth checking.

Obviously, as era-correct replications there's no modern fashionable rounding of the body heel (it's square edged), and all use the classic neckplate and four-screw attachment. The actual neck pockets



appear pretty tight fitting, too. To be picky, there's some slight sideways movement of the neck on the Jaguar, but that's fixed with a quick tightening of those screws.

### Neck Work

We'd expect all the maple necks here to be slab-sawn where the end grain is parallel to the headstock face. In fact, both the Jazzmaster's and Mustang's end grain is diagonal, what Fender calls 'rift sawn'. Aside from the slightly larger 70s headstocks here, both the rosewood 'boards are slab-style and unbound, unlike the black-bound maple of the '70s Jaguar with its large black plastic block inlays. Interestingly, the Mustang's dots are slightly larger in diameter than the Jazzmaster's, and the dual 12th-fret dots are placed slightly closer together. All three use the original 'small' fingerboard radius of 184mm (7.25 inches), each has body-end truss rod adjustment, and each uses the same narrow-tall fretwire.

Our three guitars advertise slightly different neck profiles – and dimensionally, though close, reflect some very subtle differences (see the Neck Dimensions chart on page 86). Still, probably due to the lightly

1. While the Jazzmaster pickup retains the slug magnetic rod polepieces of previous Fender designs, the large shallow coil was a big difference. At output, the DCRs are 7.82kohms in the bridge position and 7.98k at the neck

2. The dual-circuit concept was introduced on the Jazzmaster and still confuses many of us today. These thumb-wheel volume and tone controls comprise the 'rhythm' circuit, which only works on the neck pickup



3

3. Very different from previous Fender designs, the Jazzmaster's bridge rocks as the vibrato is moved. Consequently, it's not fixed to the body. It's also one reason why the Jazzmaster and Jaguar sound like they do

The Jazzmaster's mix sound is probably worth the experience on its own – the high-end detail transports us back in time in glorious fashion

tinted polyurethane gloss of the neck back, there's more commonality than you might think. The narrow tall fretwire (measured at 2.08mm wide by 1.09mm high) isn't particularly high, but the maple 'board of the Jaguar avoids that almost 'fretless wonder' feel of many from that period.

### Metalwork

Probably the most polarising aspect of the Fender offset is the bridge and separate vibrato of the Jazzmaster and Jaguar. Today, there's a whole industry of aftermarket 'fixes' for the original designs and, as we detail elsewhere in this issue, there are plenty of tricks in terms of how you can set them up. We can easily debate the failings of the original design, but for many players that's precisely the draw: the otherworldly resonance of the strings behind the bridge and the ability to bend them with some swoops from the light-feeling vibrato.

The lack of mass of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar bridge also plays its part in the offset sound here and many players actually prefer the sound and performance of the Mustang's saddles, which aren't individually height adjustable: the domed radius is created as the E-string pair has the smallest diameter, the G and D string pair the largest, with the B and A pair in between. These saddles also have quite a deep groove to hold the string more firmly in place. Then there's the vibrato's large string anchor block, which also provides more mass.

The 'trem-stop' of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar bridge, when set correctly, will prevent up-bend and also keep you in-tune (ish) should you break a string. The arms simply push-fit, whereas on the Mustang vibrato you can set the swing tension of the Mustang's arm, thanks to a small Allen key, or lock it in place.

## OFFSET NECK DIMENSIONS (in mm)

	'50s JAZZMASTER	'70s JAGUAR	'70s MUSTANG
Width at nut	42.07	42.4	41.8
Width at 12th fret	52	51.7	51.4
Depth at 1st fret	20.9	20.9	21.3
Depth at 12th fret	23.5	24.4	23.4

## UNDER THE HOOD Circuits? Let's take a look, Jaguar-style

If the Jazzmaster's wide and shallow single coil was meant to add depth and a more 'jazz-like' tonality, you could easily state that it was an abject failure. The Jaguar's pickups are more Fender-like with their narrower coils, but also the U-shaped sawtooth-sided metal surrounds (which increase inductance) subtly alter the magnetic field and, in theory, add some shielding.

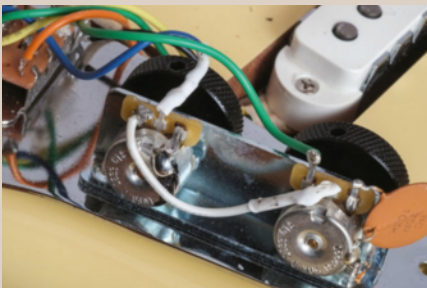
But the Jaguar also uses a slightly expanded version of the Jazzmaster's circuit. So we get 1meg-ohm audio taper volume and tone pots, and a large .01 $\mu$ F (103k) ceramic disc tone capacitor. The rhythm circuit uses mini-pots:

1meg-ohm for the volume and 50k (both linear taper) for the tone, with the same tone cap as the lead circuit. That strangle switch simply uses a .003 $\mu$ F (302Z) cap wired in series.

Another unique feature that's not on the Jazzmaster (or any other guitar this writer has ever seen) is an extra 56k resistor on the lead circuit tone control whose purpose is debatable. In the absence of an explanation from Fender, Bare Knuckle Pickups' Tim Bartle offered: "[It is] adding a secondary variable series resistor that is controlling the amount of signal that gets to the tone control between the output of the pickups and the master volume and tone

controls. It's kind of like a quasi-tone control and, of course, the circuit is all working together interactively." In short, it's a simple addition that has quite a complex effect.

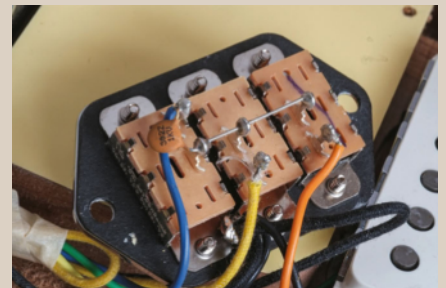
The Jaguar's tone certainly works in a different fashion to the Jazzmaster's, which acts as a normal tone control would. On the Jaguar, as you turn the control down it thins the sound a little, but even fully off we don't get the extreme treble drop-off. Then, a little like a 50s-wired tone control, as you pull the tone back up it seems to subtly increase the volume, too. It also seems to work slightly differently with the strangle switch engaged.



The rhythm circuit of the '70s Jaguar – with its old-school jazz feel – uses side-mounted mini pots



The lead circuit's 1meg-ohm pots are full size – plus, note that added resistor on the tone control



Here, you can see the three two-position slide switches with the small capacitor for the strangle function

None of the three bridges is fixed to the body, either. To allow them to 'rock' as the vibrato is moved, each has two legs that sit in circular metal ferrules sunk into the body and pivot on a sharp pointed screw that passes through each of those legs.

Each of our trio also uses split-post tuners, the 70s models with the 'F' logo backs, while the Mustang's have plastic buttons. They use a single 'butterfly' string retainer on the top two strings, although, oddly, there's no spacer on the Mustang's tree, which means those top strings are pulled down behind the nut at a much steeper angle.

### Control Chaos

The Jazzmaster introduced the dual 'rhythm' and 'lead' circuit concept that has befuddled us guitarists for the past 66 years. It is, in fact, not that complicated and can be quite useful. The key lies with that two-position slide switch at the top tip of the one-piece scratchplate: pushing it in towards the neck you have the 'lead' circuit where the three-way toggle selects either or both pickups, and the volume and tone work as we all know. Easy. Move that slide switch away from the neck and you introduce the 'rhythm' circuit: the neck pickup only with its two thumb-wheel controls for volume (the upper wheel) and tone.

The later Jaguar uses pretty much the same dual-circuit concept, but instead of the lead circuit's toggle switch we get

Although the Jaguar was very similar to the Jazzmaster, one difference is the pickup switches for the 'lead' circuit. Here, we get an on/off slide switch for each pickup, plus a third one for the 'strangle' function





4

4. Plenty of players enjoy this vibrato, not least its smooth light travel that's perfect for those evocative shimmers. It top-loads onto the body, of course, requiring no rear-routing for any springs, like the Stratocaster

5. These narrower single coils are more Fender-like, and one reason for the sawtooth metal side and baseplates was to reduce the hum pick-up of the Jazzmaster's single coils. Measured at output, the DCRs read 6.14kohms (bridge) and 6.36k (neck)

6. Still a two-piece design, the Mustang's vibrato has a faster feel that takes some skill to match the languid action of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar. Nevertheless, many players prefer the bigger, solid saddles of the Mustang

individual pickup on/off switches and the lower-placed 'strangle' switch, effectively a high-pass filter that attenuates the low-end. It also introduces the four-piece scratchplate where both circuits' controls are mounted on chrome-covered metal plates, as are those three lead circuit slide switches, leaving the more central piece as a plastic laminate. Style over substance? Well, the Jaguar's metal control plates do mean it's easy to investigate any wiring issues without removing the entire scratchplate and bridge as on the Jazzmaster, plus experiments with things such as capacitor types and values is loads easier. Something to bear in mind if you like to tinker.

Our Mustang has just one circuit and is the epitome of Leo Fender's modular approach to guitar manufacturing. Unlike the other two offsets, the pickups are suspended on the plastic scratchplate, as opposed to direct mounting to the body, and the bridge doesn't sit over it. Here, the two slightly angled black-covered single coils are each controlled by their own three-position slide switch. In the centre position the pickup is off, both outer



5



positions are on, but if you engage the upper 'on' position of the neck pickup with the lower 'on' position of the bridge – or vice versa – they're out of phase.

Finally, there's another chromed metal control plate to hold the volume, tone and output jack, slightly smaller than the one used on the Jaguar. While the Mustang's metal and plastic 'plates line up perfectly, the Jaguar's rotary control plate is slightly misplaced and doesn't quite fit into the tortoiseshell as neatly as it should.

### Feel & Sounds

While many contemporary offsets simply borrow the outline, there's a lot more to these original recipes when it comes to their sounds. The Jazzmaster here is almost a shock after our reference Strats and Teles. It's definitely a Fender voice, but it's possibly excessively bright until you dial it in a little and pull back the metallic smash of the attack. Pulling back the volume and tone certainly rounds things out a little and there's some welcome depth to the attack, but it's all underpinned by not only the seemingly shorter sustain (which adds

## Our Mustang has just one circuit and is the epitome of Leo's modular approach to manufacturing

to the plunk) but the original fingerboard radius – and those pretty small frets make things less fluid than we're used to. The mix, the only hum-cancelling position on the guitar, is probably worth the experience on its own: definitely more Tele-like, but the high-end detail, not to mention a few light shimmers from the vibrato and with some added lashings of reverb, transports us back in time in quite glorious fashion. The rhythm circuit does nod towards the instrument's name, pulling back those highs a little more on the neck pickup only – but lounge-smooth it ain't.

Strapping on the Jaguar, it initially feels like a toy. We pretty much kept volume and tone full up (see Under The Hood on page 87) and it's certainly got a darker voicing

that's more Gibson-esque, if you like, but we have that different sustain and a fuller neck profile in higher positions, not to mention the slippery gloss feel of the fingerboard, which widen the differences. Here, though, the rhythm circuit really hits the old-school jazz mark, whereas on the Jazzmaster it's still a little scooped in the midrange in comparison.

The longer we play, the more the Jaguar works its magic, even though quick pickup changes require some dexterity and thought. If only we had that toggle switch! The extra 'strangle' switch is relatively subtle, too; it does clean up the low-end a little, but it seems more for occasional use than an essential feature.

Onto the Mustang and strapping on this model is even more odd than the Jaguar because, in combination with the shorter scale, its smaller body and lighter weight enhance the toy-like feel. To be honest, though, although the pickups are far from hot, if you live in a Tele and Strat world then the voicing here is more familiar. Selecting pickups is harder than on the Jaguar, and there's plenty of chance you'll accidentally





7



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7. One unique aspect of the Mustang is this pair of pickup-dependent slide switches to allow you to mute either, or (with both on) flip the phase. You can't do that on the Jazzmaster or Jaguar

8. Much more Fender-like than either of the other offsets, these are effectively flush pole single coils. They do give a more recognisable Fender voicing, albeit with the shorter scale playing its part. Measured at output the DCRs are 5.62kohms (bridge) and 5.6k (neck)

mute the guitar or put the pickups out-of-phase. Still, while the sound is thinned, kick in something like an MXR Phase 90 and it's a beautiful shimmery voice; with some blunderous fuzz or some even quite metal distortion, it has bags of attitude, too.

The more we play, the more we get used to the feel and scale length. We preferred it in that regard to the Jaguar, even though the Mustang's vibrato is very different: a light waggle here brings fast pitch change and you really have to use it carefully unless you're keen to alarm your audience and bandmates. Also, if you lose the necessary Allen key, or worse the grub screw drops out (the only way to keep the arm in place), then you've got a problem.

### Verdict

While spending time with this trio is definitely a time-warp jive, it reminds us just how 'out-there' these designs were at the time of their release. Now, at this Vintera II level, for the most part they're clearly reproduced with keen attention to detail and none of the issues that can come with buying original vintage pieces. Any mods you choose to make or 'improved'

## FLEXIBLE ERAS

The Vintera's decade-specific models have plenty of different styles to be inspired by

**O**ur '50s Jazzmaster doesn't have much of a decade to draw on as it was only introduced in 1958, and the Vintera II version shoots for the original style with its nine-screw anodised aluminium scratchplate, which was replaced in 1959 with a 13-screw white or tortoiseshell laminated plastic 'plate.

The Jaguar was pulled from production in 1975, so our '70s Jaguar reflects more the end-point than the start of the model back in 1962. Maple fingerboards returned after the CBS takeover, although vintage examples are apparently rarer than rosewood. Originally, it would have had a dot-inlaid rosewood 'board, which was bound from 1965 then block inlays were added the following year.

Another example of CBS style is the Mustang's 'Competition' stripes, which featured from 1968 to '73; the guitar itself enjoyed a good run until 1981. On its introduction in 1964, as a bridge between Fender student and higher-end models, the Mustang had a slab body like the Duo-Sonic; contours came a little later on these lower-end models.



**FENDER VINTERA II '50S JAZZMASTER**

**PRICE:** £1,149 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Mexico  
**TYPE:** Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, late '50s C shape, bolt-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5")  
**NUT:** Synthetic bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, white dot inlays, 184mm (7.25") radius  
**FRETS:** 21, vintage tall  
**HARDWARE:** 6-saddle vintage-style bridge with vibrato tailpiece vintage-style tuners – nickel-plated  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 54mm  
**ELECTRICS:** 2x vintage-style '50s single-coil Jazzmaster pickups. Lead Circuit master volume, master tone and 3-way toggle pickup selector switch. Lead/Rhythm circuit slide switch. Rhythm circuit thumb-wheel controls for neck pickup volume and tone

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.78/8.32  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Gold Foil Jazzmaster (£1,369) has 3x GF single coils with Bigsby. American Performer Jazzmaster (£1,389) has a single circuit with Stratocaster vibrato  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No. American Professional II Jazzmaster is available left-handed at £1,909  
**FINISHES:** Desert Sand (as reviewed), Sonic Blue – gloss polyester body, gloss urethane neck

**Guitarist CHOICE** 9/10

**PROS** Cleanly built repro of the first Jazzmaster with all its quirks in place; most Fender-like offset here with its full scale

**CONS** Bright voicing might need taming; the original 'board radius and small frets won't be for everyone



**FENDER VINTERA II '70S JAGUAR**

**PRICE:** £1,229 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Mexico  
**TYPE:** Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, late '70s C shape, bolt-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 610mm (24")  
**NUT:** Synthetic bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Bound maple, black block inlays, 184mm (7.25") radius  
**FRETS:** 22, vintage tall  
**HARDWARE:** 6-saddle vintage-style bridge with vibrato tailpiece, vintage F-stamped tuners – nickel-plated  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 54mm  
**ELECTRICS:** 2x vintage-style '70s single-coil Jaguar pickups. Lead Circuit master volume, master tone and 3-way toggle pickup selector switch. Lead/Rhythm circuit slide switch plus individual pickup on/off slide switches and high-pass filter switch. Rhythm circuit thumb-wheel controls for neck pickup volume and tone

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 4.04/8.89  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Kurt Cobain Jaguar (£1,469) adds a pair of DiMarzios, tune-o-matic-style bridge and modded circuit  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** Kurt Cobain Jaguar (£1,469)  
**FINISHES:** Vintage White (as reviewed), Black – gloss polyester body, gloss urethane neck

8/10

**PROS** Crisply built repro of later period Jaguar with expanded features; more jazz-like voicing from the rhythm circuit and shorter scale length

**CONS** Not everyone will enjoy the short scale or gloss-finished 'board with old-style radius and small frets; on the heavy side



**FENDER VINTERA II '70S COMPETITION MUSTANG**

**PRICE:** £1,049 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Mexico  
**TYPE:** Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on  
**BODY:** Mahogany back with maple top (w/ quilt maple veneer facing) and shallow violin carve  
**NECK:** Maple, early '70s C shape, bolt-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 610mm (24")  
**NUT:** Synthetic bone  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, white dot inlays, 184mm (7.25") radius  
**FRETS:** 22, vintage tall  
**HARDWARE:** 6-saddle vintage-style Mustang vibrato tailpiece, vintage F-stamped tuners – nickel-plated  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 55mm

**ELECTRICS:** 2x vintage-style '70s single-coil Mustang pickups. Individual pickup on/off switches, master volume and tone  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.66/8.05  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** American Performer Mustang (£1,379) retains the classic features but with modern fingerboard radius and 3 satin colours  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not this model  
**FINISHES:** Competition Orange (as reviewed), Competition Burgundy – gloss polyester body, gloss urethane neck

8/10

**PROS** Lightweight, more compact offset with the most Fender-like pickup voicing, plus out-of-phase potential; strangely alluring!

**CONS** Like the Jaguar, the short scale length won't suit everyone, nor the playability; the vibrato is less smooth in use

aftermarket parts you add won't affect your vintage investment, either.

Which one would we shoot for? Despite the improvements that the Jaguar brought, our sample certainly isn't light in weight and the maple 'board won't be to everyone's taste in either looks or playability. Then there's the short scale to get used to, which, like the Mustang, does impart a rather toy-like feel to begin with. That said, its sounds are more than worth investigating.

The full-scale Jazzmaster feels the most 'normal' in that regard. Even if you have no plans in place to use the 'rhythm' circuit, once you tame the high-end, well, there's a reason why this guitar has eventually become quite a classic – it has a different voice and feel from your Tele and Strat.

And although the Mustang's vibrato doesn't have that classic smooth feel of the Jazzmaster/Jaguar, the more comfortable sounds with out-of-phase potential made this lightweight model get way more play time than we'd expected.

There's character in plenty here and, while probably not for the journeyman function band musician, we'd wager there's a song or two to be found in these. **G**