



Fender Vintage Hot Rod '52 & Classic Player Baja Telecasters

£1,499 & £499

FENDER VINTAGE HOT ROD '52 TELECASTER

PRICE: £1,499.99 (inc Tweed case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Single-cutaway solidbody electric
BODY: Premium ash
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: White plastic, 42mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, 241mm (9.5-inch) radius
FRETS: 21, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Fender/Gotoh vintage-style tuners, vintage-style Tele bridge with three compensated brass barrel saddles
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm
ELECTRICS: Custom Vintage Tele single-coil (bridge), Seymour Duncan Vintage Mini Humbucker (neck), three-way lever, one volume, one tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.85/8.5
RANGE OPTIONS: American Vintage '52 Telecaster (£1,379.99)
LEFT-HANDERS: American Vintage '52 Telecaster LH (£1,429.99)
FINISHES: Butterscotch blonde only (as reviewed)
Fender GB
01342 331700
www.fender.com

Separated by a short 160 miles but a long £1,000, just how different are these tempting tweaked Teles? **by Mick Taylor**

Two decades after rebirthing itself from the ownership of CBS, Fender has itself grown into an enormous, powerful corporation. Now benefiting from two finely honed, huge capacity Stateside production facilities, the big F is nevertheless nimble enough to offer constantly evolving variants on its two favourite guitars.

Take this brace of Telecasters for example. The first is a tweak to the ever-popular American Vintage '52 model from the Corona, USA plant, and the second is a Custom Shop-inspired example of the same, albeit hailing from Ensenada which is around 160 miles away in Baja California, the northernmost state of Mexico. From a few paces, you might mistake them for the same guitar, so let's get a little closer to see what accounts for that whopping £1,000 price gap.

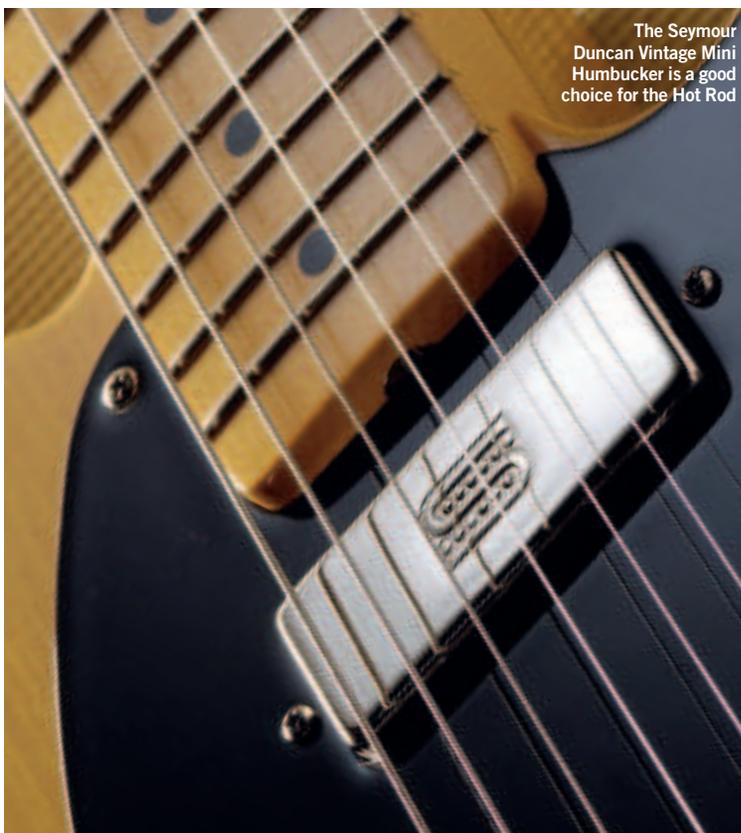
The Hot Rod '52 has a 'premium ash' three-piece body finished in butterscotch blonde, the 'premium' tag hinting at a more stringent selection process than the Baja Tele's plain ol' 'ash'. This timber is considered 'best' for fifties-style Teles thanks partly to its appearance and also to its relatively scooped-mid, rich and lively twangin' tone when compared with alder. Premium tag or not, there are still some pretty ugly, dark-coloured knots on the bass side of the guitar.

The American guitar gets treated to Fender's thin-skin nitro-cellulose 'lacquer' coat, which shows signs of sinking into the ash's grain here and there. So while it doesn't offer a flawlessly flat finish, it's generally

VINTAGE HOT ROD '52	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** Proper Tele tone with extra beef; real-world fingerboard and frets
- **WE DISLIKED** Sticky feeling neck despite the 'satin back' claim; knots in the ash

The Hot Rod's Seymour Duncan neck pickup adds girth, but thanks to the mini-humbucker design, keeps a good degree of sparkle and chime



The Seymour Duncan Vintage Mini Humbucker is a good choice for the Hot Rod



JULY 2007 **Guitarist** 97

PHOTOGRAPHY NEIL GODWIN



FENDER CLASSIC PLAYER BAJA TELECASTER

As Vintage Hot Rod '52 Telecaster except...

PRICE: £499.99 (inc deluxe gigbag)

BODY: Ash

HARDWARE: Non-compensated bridge saddles

ELECTRICS: Custom Shop Broadcaster single-coil (bridge), Custom Shop Twisted Tele single-coil (neck), four-way lever, push/push S1 switch

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.97/8.75

RANGE OPTIONS:

Classic Series '50s Telecaster (£499.99), Highway One Texas Telecaster (£749.99)

LEFT-HANDERS: Standard Telecaster LH (from £449.99)

FINISHES: Blonde with black pickguard (as reviewed), desert sand with parchment pickguard

CLASSIC PLAYER BAJA TEST RESULTS

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

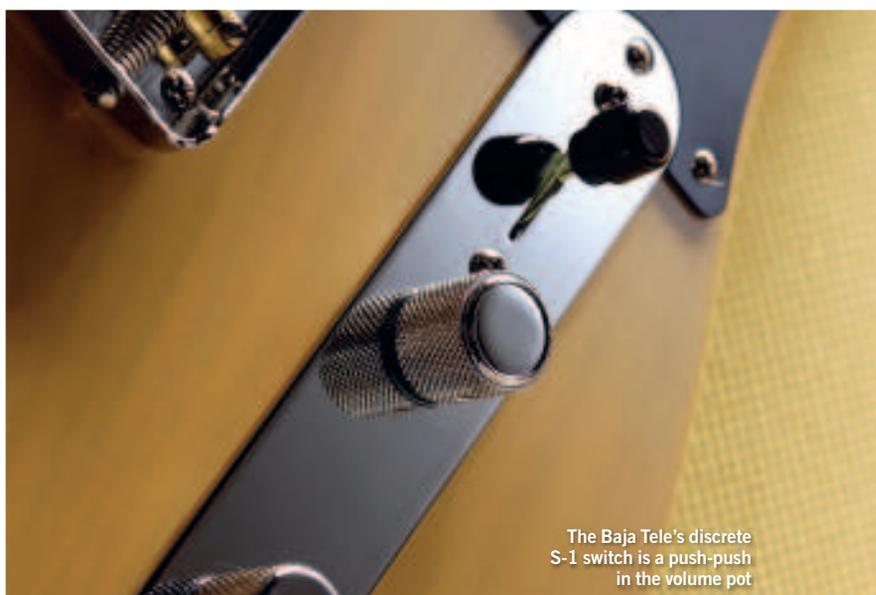
- **WE LIKED** Just about everything!
- **WE DISLIKED** Fender's 'deluxe' gigbag is decidedly not so these days

→ considered to be better for tone than being too thick – just like with high-end acoustic guitars. At 8.5lbs, the Hot Rod '52 is no lightweight either.

The Baja Tele arguably gets the prettier pieces of ash in this case – up to four to make up the body by the looks of things – though the grain is only just visible through the milky blonde, gloss polyester finish. This poly coat is thicker and flatter than the Hot Rod's sure-to-age-gracefully cellulose, and will still be this shiny when all that's left is Keef and the cockroaches.

As for contouring there's nothing in it: both bodies have that substantial slabby feel for which Teles are loved and loathed in equal measure.

Moving to the necks, both guitars receive two important tweaks to vintage spec in the form of a flatter-than-vintage 9.5-inch radius fingerboard and medium-jumbo frets. The fret jobs are uniformly tidy and well executed, making the most of the flatter 'board radius for problem-free bends anywhere on the neck. Aesthetically, the fact that the 12th-fret dots are positioned 'wrongly' too close together is an annoyance to this reviewer, but much more importantly, the neck profiles are inviting; a soft 'V' behind the first couple of frets for the Baja Tele, and a marginally clubbier 'U' in the case of the Hot Rod. As we said last month in the Vintage Hot Rod Strats review, the satin-backed nitro-cellulose finish is a qualified success for the Hot Rod series as it still feels stickier than the Baja Tele's full-on gloss polyurethane. Also, for some reason the Hot Rod has an unusually ungainly contour where neck meets headstock on the rear – it doesn't affect



The Baja Tele's discrete S-1 switch is a push-push in the volume pot

tone or playability one bit, but it looks too squared off nonetheless.

Both guitars have vintage-style Tele bridges with brass barrel saddles – again considered tonally 'best' for fifties Telecasters. Potential intonation issues are addressed in the case of the Hot Rod by slanting the threads in the saddles so they sit slightly at an angle, lengthening the G string in relation to the D string for example, which is what you need to do to set the intonation correctly. It's hardly an exact science on the single-saddle set-up, but it is a theoretical improvement over the Baja Tele's straight saddles. In practice, there's really very little in it – you could even argue that the intonation fight with this style of bridge is all part of the classic Tele tone and vibe. As it is, only the endlessly fussy will be bothered by intonation niggles on either guitar.

More noticeable is that the Baja Tele's bridge and saddles feel marginally less substantial than the Hot Rod's. Whether that's down to the materials used or how well it's coupled to the body isn't clear, but when you tap them, the Hot Rod's bridge sounds fuller, meatier and more solid.

There's very little discernible difference between the slot-head machineheads on either guitar; they do their job with stoic understatement and reliability if the myriad examples that have passed through our hands over recent years are anything to go by.

It's in the electrics department that these guitars differ most. The Hot Rod '52 Tele gets a pair of uprated pickups; a 'Custom Vintage Tele' single-coil for the bridge, and a Seymour Duncan Vintage Mini Humbucker at the neck, which is a relatively low output, Alnico V design. It's the kind of pickup you'd find in Gibson Firebirds or Les Paul Deluxes and is a popular mod for Tele players who want more balls from the front pickup (Keef and Ronnie fans in particular). They're controlled via a three-way switch that selects bridge, neck or both, as you'd expect.

The Classic Player Baja Telecaster, meanwhile, has a lot more going on that its looks might suggest. Under the hood, so to speak, are a Custom Shop 'Twisted Tele' pickup at the neck and a Custom Shop Broadcaster single-coil at the bridge. Fender doesn't publish any specs on these units, but historically →

The rivals

VINTAGE HOT ROD '52 TELE

Fender American Vintage '52 Tele	£1,379.99
Fender American Deluxe Ash Tele	£1,299.99
Tom Anderson T Classic	£POA

If you're in the market for this style of guitar, it's no surprise that Fender is dominant. The 'ordinary' American Vintage '52 Telecaster is the proven workhorse for countless guitarists the world over, despite its skinny frets and curvy fingerboard compared with the Hot Rod. Swapping vintage for modern would be the American Deluxe Ash Tele which has a premium ash body, satin-finish neck, 22 frets, Samarium Cobalt noiseless pickups and S-1 switching. Arguably the best high-end alternative to Fender, Anderson does away with half the bridge plate to reduce high-end squeal, and offers the choice of a solid swamp ash or alder body. Tom Anderson TV1 and TV3 pickups are hum-cancelling when combined.

CLASSIC PLAYER BAJA TELE

Fender Highway 1 Texas Tele	£749.99
Blade T2-MG Delta Classic	£649
Vintage Advance AV2S	£329

An extra £250 buys you in to the American-made Highway 1 Texas Tele with an ash body, 12-inch radius 'board, Hot Vintage pickups and 'Greasebucket' tone control. The satin finish looks used pretty quickly: lovely. Blade's maple-necked T-style axe has a 'sen' ash body and comes with the versatile VSC active electronics package. You also get gold hardware and a six-saddle bridge. With a humbucker at the neck and 'vintage roll' control, the Vintage is a good value alternative, but there's no maple 'board option.

→ the Broadcaster pickup was a flat-pole design that was more powerful than later Tele pickups, with a strong mid-range. It looks the part, but in fact it's not as beefy as the bridge pickup in the Hot Rod. More interestingly the Baja Tele has a four-way blade selector and a discrete push/push switch in the volume pot for Fender's expanded S-1 options. So, positions one and three are always the bridge and neck pickups in isolation, leaving positions two and four to varying combinations of neck and bridge pickups in series, parallel, plus in and out of phase, depending on whether the S-1 is in or out: very neat.

Also worth a mention are the black pickguards on both guitars. It might seem like an insignificant thing to some, but the Vintage Hot Rod's guard is a much higher quality material and has lovely bevelled edges, in contrast to the Baja Tele's rudimentary, thin plasticky guard. Likewise the knurled knobs are higher quality on the American guitar, and the pots feel better too, even if whipping off the control plates reveals very little in it.

SOUNDS: If you're in the market for a high-quality, traditional sounding Tele, the American Vintage '52 Reissue should always be your first port of call. It has balls where lesser models can be weedy, and underlines just how fundamental a decent piece of ash, nitro-cellulose lacquer, and top hardware and pickups are to Leo's seminal plank. Good news then that the Hot Rod bears these characteristics, with a fuller, more resonant fundamental unplugged tone than the Baja, and that's the case when you plug in too.

Many players find a Tele bridge pickup just too unruly, but if you've got the guts to attack a Fender Bassman or Marshall 'Plexi' you'll soon realise why so much rock 'n' roll rhythm guitar has come from this very set-up. You can knock the tone back to tame some of the high end with more drive, or simply dive in loud and proud for anything from country spank to searing Buchanan-inspired leads.

The Seymour Duncan neck pickup adds girth as you'd expect, but thanks to the mini-humbucker design, keeps a good degree of sparkle and chime. Again, knock back the tone pot if you want the feel of a full-size 'bucker, but there's something uniquely musical about a mini-humbucker that begs for tasteful, lightly driven, bluesy leads and big ol' chunky chords. It's a good choice for this guitar, partnering well with the bridge in terms of output, so you get the customary mid-position sound, just with a little extra grunt.

The Baja Telecaster meanwhile has a wider tonal palette. Straight out of the bridge or neck pickups it perhaps



The Hot Rod's 'thin-skin' butterscotch blonde finish reveals more grain

Whether the Baja's out-of-phase sounds have a place in your music is for you to decide, but the extra option of the two pickups in series is undoubtedly a winner

lacks the overall grown-up character of the Vintage Hot Rod, yet still delivers credible Tele attitude. Things get more interesting when you explore positions two and four, where both pickups in series (position four, S-1 up) gives a big, fat powerhouse of a tone that brings to mind a hint of Brian May. Hit the S-1 switch and whole thing hollows out completely, the bottom end dropping away to an out-of-phase sound. Position two does a similar thing, this time with the pickups in parallel for what you'd always think of as the standard in-between Telecaster tone. Whether the out-of-phase sounds (which are essentially what the S-1 switch brings) have a place in your music is for you to decide, but the extra option of the two pickups in series – thanks to the four-way – is undoubtedly a winner.

Verdict

With Fender currently on top form, these were always likely to be highly likable, playable guitars. What's more surprising is that the quality and spec of the Chris Fleming-designed Mexican model makes the American guitar look very expensive indeed. Nitro-cellulose lacquer, tweed case and slightly better quality all round notwithstanding, it's hard to explain the Hot Rod '52's price in a quick comparison. Play them both in, however, and the American guitar's depth of tone offers more justification. For the ultimate fifties Tele experience without spending stupid money, it's clear why Fender's American Vintage template is so popular, beefed up here with the neck humbucker and made easier to play with the big frets and flatter 'board. The extra versatility and almost laughable price of the Classic Player Baja Telecaster, meanwhile, make it a far more affordable option that you'd be mad not to audition: an extremely likeable guitar. 

Fender Vintage Hot Rod '52 Telecaster

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Fender Classic Player Baja Telecaster

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★