

FRET-KING BLUE LABEL VENTURA SUPER 60 HB3

PRICE
£749

With more extrovert curves than a 1959 Cadillac, the Fret-King Ventura is sure to get you noticed. David Greeves finds out if it's best seen or heard

By now, we'd expect most of you to be familiar with Fret-King guitars, designed by the UK's Trevor Wilkinson. The high-tech, self-tuning Super-Matic (reviewed in last month's issue) notwithstanding, there's a definite retro vibe to the range, but with that added twist of visual flair that Wilkinson has made his trademark. Nothing sums this up better than the outline of the Ventura, a bold shape that's both highly original and at the same time reminiscent of the futuristic styling of the 1950s.

In the time we've had this model for review, it has generated a great deal of comment – in fact, it's hard to think of another guitar that has provoked such an instant reaction from every person who has seen it, though the nature of those reactions has varied a great deal. But then there's no need to tell a designer of Wilkinson's huge experience that guitarists are a deeply traditional lot who tend to judge a guitar as much with their eyes as their ears.

"It's very difficult to design a guitar that's revolutionary and not have people say, 'No, I don't like it,'" he tells us. "The Ventura is one of my favourite guitar shapes I've ever done because I'm a big Jaguar fan, and you can see where it's heavily influenced by the Jaguar and Jazzmaster. It's one of those drawings that I've had on my board for years. I see it as a slightly more modernesque sort of offset guitar, and I wanted to differentiate it but still have



The Wilkinson WVP vibrato bridge turns in an impressive all-round performance

a guitar that was comfortable and, I think, pleasing to the eye."

Body & Neck

The Ventura Super 60 HB3 hails from Fret-King's Blue Label range, manufactured in Korea...

Anyone still harbouring doubts about the quality of Far Eastern manufacturing – despite abundant evidence to the contrary in recent years – should have a good look at this guitar because, from the standard of build to the quality of the materials and hardware, there's little if anything to find fault with.

The body is a two-piece, centre-jointed slab of American alder that has then been comprehensively carved into the

fluid and highly unconventional shape you see before you. At first glance, we wouldn't blame anyone for being startled by this radical design, but there are hints of the familiar in there, with some of the curves and corners bringing elements of the aforementioned Fender Jazzmaster/Jaguar, but also the Gibson Firebird, to mind. The 'Laguna Blue' finish on the review model, which is faultlessly applied, reinforces the '50s Fender vibe, vintage white with a black scratchplate being the other option available.

When you actually pick the Ventura up, that initially alien shape makes a whole lot of sense. Whether seated or standing, it's a very comfortable guitar. Thanks to extensive contouring at the front and rear, that curvy lower bout seems to wrap itself around your body, providing excellent support

for your forearm. The Ventura is also very well balanced, although, with its slightly larger than average body, it does weigh a bit more than your typical Strat.

The maple bolt-on neck adopts Fret-King's now familiar '60s-style profile, a rounded, slightly chunked up C shape that feels both speedy and comfortable. Playability is further enhanced by a rosewood fingerboard with a 10-inch radius, 22 expertly finished medium frets and medium-low, buzz-free action.

Hardware & Parts

Given that Wilkinson is well known for his high-quality hardware, we're not a bit surprised to find plenty of it here, and very welcome it is too. The WVP vibrato bridge is a great design all round, with its solid sustain block, 'Wilkinson Wave' knife-edge pivot and push-in arm. The saddles are fully adjustable, while the thick walls of the pressed-steel bridge plate prevent any lateral movement in the saddles, which can quickly rob you of sustain. To aid accurate return to pitch, the Ventura features a neatly cut synthetic bone nut and a set of Gotoh Magnum locking tuners – the strings are locked in place from the top of the capstans, which are staggered in height to render string trees unnecessary.

The pickups chosen for the Ventura Super 60 HB3 are based around the WHHB PAF-style humbuckers found in other Blue Label models, but here their output has been calibrated to suit a





FRET-KING BLUE LABEL VENTURA SUPER 60 HB3

Price: £749
Built in: Korea
Scale length: 648mm (25.5 inches)
Nut width: 43mm (1.69 inches)
Body: American alder
Neck: Maple, bolt-on
Fingerboard: Rosewood, 254mm radius (10 inches)
Frets: 22 medium
Pickups: 3 x Wilkinson WHHB PAF-style humbuckers
Controls: 1 x 'Vari-coil' variable coil tap, 1 x volume, 1 x tone, 5-way selector
Hardware: Wilkinson WWP vibrato bridge, Gotoh Magnum locking tuners; chrome
Weight: 3.9kg (8.6lb)
Finishes: Laguna Blue (shown), Vintage White
Case: Gigbag included (Fret-King FK200 moulded ABS hard case £149)
Left-handers: No

CONTACT DETAILS

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GB VERDICT

GOLD STARS

- ★ Superb and varied set of tones
- ★ Great build and playability
- ★ Effective 'Vari-coil' control

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Anyone seeking a versatile, vintage-voiced axe for blues, rock and country that punches well above its weight

GE RATING



neck/middle/bridge set. Each coil has three slug polepieces and three screws, in a small nod to Fender's 'Wide Range' humbuckers, and they look great under nickel covers. A five-way selector switch sits at a convenient angle on the lower horn, while master volume and tone controls are joined by Wilkinson's 'Vari-coil' knob. This gradually taps off one coil of each humbucker, giving continuous variation from fully humbucking down to single-coil operation.

Sounds

A quick unplugged strum proves very promising indeed. There's plenty of volume and sustain – you can feel the vibrations running up and down the body and neck – and a lively, full sound, but with a breathy, airy edge that is undeniably Strat-like. With such abundant raw materials at their disposal, the trio of humbuckers turn in a nicely distinguished performance, offering a range of superb sounds that are remarkably varied.

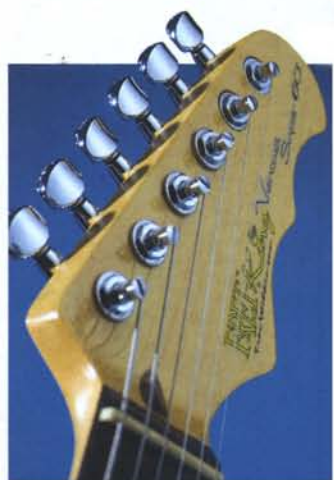
Leaving the Vari-coil knob untouched for the moment and sticking in full humbucking mode, the three main switch positions

reinforce the Strat-y impression, but this is an altogether richer, more full-sounding take on that classic set of sounds – from plummy, mellow neck tones to the bright, incisive bridge pickup, via some muscular, well defined sounds in the middle.

The open and clear PAF-style response of these pickups seems to suit the guitar perfectly, yet they're not short of output – the bridge pickup measures around 15k! This is no metal machine, of course, but for jazz, blues, rock, country and everything in between, the Ventura is a very capable playing partner.

There's less mileage to be had from the 'in-between' settings until you wind back the Vari-coil pot and the familiar mixed-pickup tone gradually emerges. In truth, the Vari-coil's effect is not completely smooth and gradual – the most obvious change in tone happens between 1 and 5, though the more subtle change between 5 and 10 will become more obvious with additional volume and gain.

Set to fully single-coil, a whole new side of the Ventura emerges, with some very authentic tones that are full of twang and bite. Some of our favourite sounds are to be found

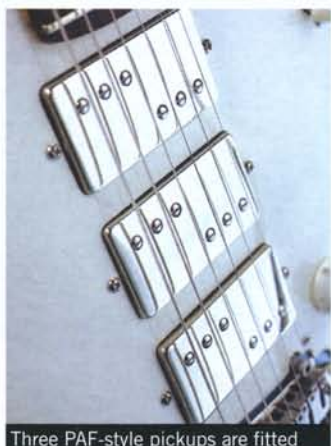


Locking tuners are a welcome touch

with the Vari-coil knob set between 2 and 3 – plenty of bite, but with a bit of fatness brought back in – but we're sure other players will find their own favourites, and it's a fantastic facility to have.

Conclusion

At first, we must confess that (like many of you, we're guessing) we found this guitar's unconventional looks a little off-putting. Since then, the Ventura has steadily worn down our resistance – with its comfortable, well-balanced body, with a superbly playable neck that's very difficult to put down and finally with a set of sounds that are not only extremely good given the asking price but very versatile too. It's fair to say that we've been completely won over, so much so that the review model has been bought and paid for and is staying right here! In terms of build, tone and playability, the Ventura Super 60 HB3 punches way above its weight. There's no denying that looks matter, but you'd be surprised how quickly qualities like these will convince any beholder that this one's a beauty. **GB**



Three PAF-style pickups are fitted



Fit and finish is excellent all round