

FRET-KING GREEN LABEL COUNTRY SQUIRE SEMI-TONE DE-LUXE & ELAN 50 SP £1,799 & £1,299
ELECTRICS



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMANDA THOMAS



Fret-King Green Label Country Squire Semi-Tone & Elan 50 SP

£1,799 & £1,299

These two vintage-looking guitars from Fret-King's UK Custom Shop offer some unique twists *by Neville Marten*

What we want to know

1 What's the difference between Green Label Fret-Kings and Blue Label Fret-Kings?

While the Blue Label range offers well-made Trev Wilkinson designs built in Korea, the Green Label series is hand-made in his Custom Shop in Southport.

2 Who's Trev Wilkinson when he's at home?

Trev is one of the world's top designers of guitar hardware and electrics. Trev's vibrato bridges and roller nuts have featured on instruments from many of the world's top guitar companies, including Fender.

3 Who's going to play a Fret-King?

The guitar player who isn't bound by tradition, but instead believes that design ideas from the past, while great, can actually be improved upon. Is that you?

You could say that Trev Wilkinson's position in the guitar world is one of understated royalty. Wilkinson gets on with the job without fanfares or puffed-up egos, just doing whatever he can for people who want the best guitar they can find for the money. Although best-known for his innovative, user-friendly hardware, Trev's knowledge about all other aspects of luthiery is also finely honed.

The guitars here represent the pinnacle of Wilkinson's craft – the instruments being built under his supervision in the company's Custom Shop in Southport, Merseyside.

To say that they aim to offer something for everyone is an understatement. The Tele-inspired Country Squire Semi-Tone provides humbucking bridge tones as well as Strat-like in-between sounds, while the more Strat-outlined Elan 50 SP's twin P-90-style pickups and set neck make it an intriguing hybrid.

Country Squire Semi-Tone De-Luxe

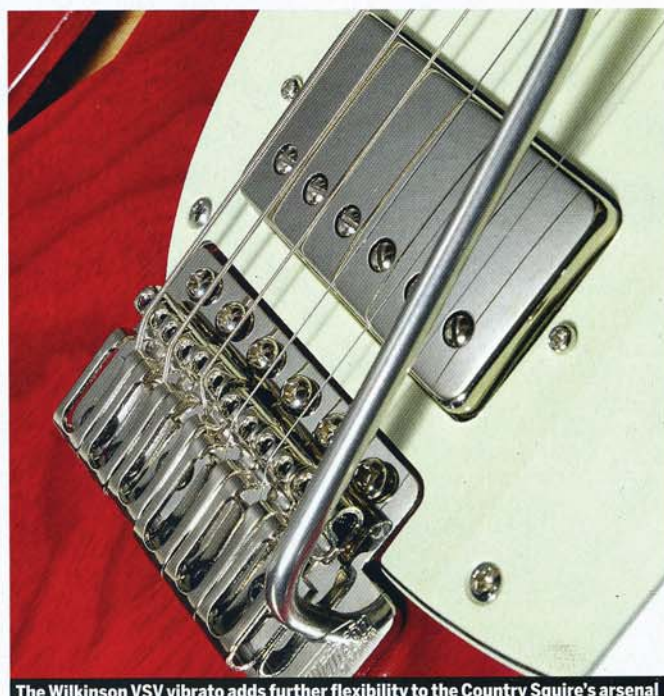
Wilkinson freely acknowledges the debt we all owe the likes of Leo Fender and Ted McCarty

but, without false modesty, also reckons certain aspects of their work could be "respectfully improved" – it is 50+ years old after all. And, as other builders have found, combining Gibson and Fender ideas can often create the most fruitful results.

So, no prizes for spotting where the influence for this

instrument lay! The shape, even in semi-hollow guise, is unmistakable, though Wilkinson's scratchplate styling is his own. With its stylised 'kink' along the top edge, it houses a pair of cream Strat-style pickups in neck and middle position, and a nickel-covered humbucker at the bridge. You'll also notice Wilkinson VSV vintage-style vibrato bridge, adding further flexibility to what already looks like a real all-rounder.

A swamp ash body, which is hollowed-out on the bass side only, provides a sturdy but lightweight base for a 22-fret neck with a lovely dark 'slab' rosewood fingerboard. Double-bound in cream, the ash's striking grain shows through the translucent finish – which can either be thin-skin nitro or polyurethane (Wilkinson told us that it's not the finish that affects tone, it's its thickness).



The Wilkinson VSV vibrato adds further flexibility to the Country Squire's arsenal



The Rivals

Country Squire

Fender's **Classic Telecaster '72 Custom** (£729) is fully solid, has only two pickups, and its humbucker is by the neck, but it's many people's favourite alternative Tele. The **Tom Anderson Hollow T Classic** (from £2,799) is one of the finest guitars in the world; choose either a curved or flat chambered top – a centre pickup is optional.

Blade's stylish **Dayton Custom** (£1,999) is another, perhaps more unique, twist on the Tele theme: with a single-coil at the neck and a humbucker at the bridge, it's a classy solidbody option.

In fact, there's virtually no sinking on what's a notoriously difficult tonewood to cover.

The neck seems to be non-lacquered, but is in fact coated in a secret process that uses neither oil nor conventional matt lacquer. Trev says it lasts much longer than oil, but will tastefully wear over time. The 22 medium jumbo frets are perfectly crowned and polished, and the area where the neck morphs into the Epiphone-like 'batwing' headstock has been beautifully shaped for a nice look and feel. The truss rod is the slim vintage type that requires the removal of much less maple, thereby enhancing tone in a subtle but hopefully noticeable way.

Although the standard Tele control panel has been retained, the arrangement has been

The Elan's Fender scale length proves no hindrance to string bending and its sleek feel and slender nature give instant playing gratification

swapped so that the five-way switch is furthest away from the strumming hand. This means the volume control is in a more natural position and the switch is far less likely to be accidentally knocked.

Neat ergonomic touches include easy-to-adjust individual saddles on the vibrato bridge – just loosen a screw, move the saddle and tighten it down again – and a set of staggered-height tuners that requires no fiddly string tree.

Action is set spot-on for all-round use – low enough for

speedy licks, but the big frets have room for slick bends and expressive vibrato. Strapped on the De-Luxe balances well and feels right, and the VSV vibrato handles wobbles and dive-bombs equally well.

Build, fit and finish are all exemplary – as one Guitarist staffer commented, "it's got to be one of the best made, best playing British guitars I've seen in a long time."

Sounds

Strat-style neck pickups are beefier than their sweeter Tele counterparts. But Wilkinson's Alnico single-coil in this semi-hollow body sounds lighter and more dynamic, although still with plenty of snap and SRV-like bluesiness. A middle position Strat pickup is a wonderful sound – just ask Jimi Hendrix – and when used in combination with the neck unit, that lovely hollow sound manifests itself. It's very Knopfler, circa 1976, but very un-Tele-like too. Another fabulous tone is when a good humbucker combines with a middle single-coil in that other in-between setting. This is very fat Strat indeed, but with a vocal quality that's great for clean arpeggios or dirtied-up blues-rock. On its own the humbucker is quite bright – certainly more SG than Les Paul – but still musical and articulate. This is a very versatile guitar that could cope with virtually any musical situation – and it looks rather great to boot.



The set-in neck design of the Elan adds to the Fender/Gibson hybrid feel of the guitar

The Rivals

Elan 50 SP

The **PRS McCarty Korina** (£2,395) uses all-korina construction and a stop-tail wrap-over bridge, but comes with dual McCarty humbuckers. **Rob Williams** also employs a set-neck Strat-like vibe with his **Set Neck Standard** (approx £2,336). As a custom builder, wood/pickup choice is down to you. Another UK-maker is **Martyn Booth**, and his P-90-equipped **Special** (£1,495) is slab mahogany-bodied, simply designed and superlatively crafted.



Rubber rings around the controls help you to grip them

Elan 50 SP

Wilkinson's reasoning behind the Elan is very simple. He's built it for people who love the shape of the most famous double-cutaway of all, but hanker for the bigger, more sustaining tone of beefier pickups and a set neck.

Built from Korina, or African limba wood, the Elan feels light and comfortable in the hands. Remember Gibson used this timber for its original Explorer and Flying V, so we should expect pretty strident tones when matched to Wilkinson's P-90-style large single-coils.

There's something very reassuring about guitars in this kind of colour – harking as they do back to those early Californian custom Du Pont finishes – for some reason, especially when incorporating 'soapbar'-type pickups. It's a look that evokes a golden age of electric guitars – a time when optimism for the future was plain to see in everything from car design to space travel and, of course, music.

The idea of a set-neck, Strat-shaped guitar with Gibson-type pickups is not new, but Fret-King has done it in style. The horns join the neck heel rather like a Rickenbacker or PRS – at a sharp angle rather than curving round – so it's not an obvious Strat copy. And the carved top, with interesting forearm and cutaway scoops, takes it even further away from the Fender look (and, truth be told, a bit closer to PRS). The

neck itself is pitched slightly back by a degree or two, again lending more of an SG/PRS vibe than that of a Strat or Tele, whose necks are generally on the same plane as the body.

Joining at the 19th of its 22 medium-sized frets, the Elan's neck features a slender 'C'-shaped profile, a relatively flat 12-inch fingerboard radius and the same 'batwing' headstock as the Country Squire. It works particularly well here, with the back painted California gloss green and the front black. Tuners are Kluson-style tulip buttons in classic 'phlegm' green but, due to the headstock's eight-degree pitch, require neither string trees nor staggered tuning posts.

The finish on all these Green Label Fret-Kings is top-drawer, being flat, neat and tidy in all respects. So it's curious that the Elan's black fingerboard nut is a good millimetre short at both ends. It means nothing in playability terms, but it would look so much better if the ends were flush with the 'board, as on a Gibson or Fender.

Cream 'soapbar' pickups always look great. This pair is matched so that output is even from both neck and bridge; and also reverse wound, reverse polarity so that the middle position is humbucking. A volume pot governs each one's output – with lovely rubberised white knobs – while a single tone pot takes care of both.

Soapbar guitars are often associated with simpler bridge

and tailpiece set-ups and the Elan is no different – although its bridge is. This is Wilkinson's GTB100 wrap-over unit and it's clever in so much as the G and B strings sit on their own short section, with their own common saddle. This can be moved backwards or forwards by loosening a small grub screw and relocating the section forward or back depending on

whether the intonation is sharp or flat. Two other grub screws, one at each end of the bridge, provide overall intonation adjustment. The GTB100 is typical Wilkinson – smart, simple and it works.

A few people played the Elan while it was in the Guitarist office and it was universally given the thumbs up. Quality fret and fingerboard finishing



Fret-King STVUDIO Series Atelier £3,199

Wilkinson shows he's prepared to go to extremes...

Just to show the kind of outlandish stuff the Fret-King Custom Shop can do, take a look at this Atelier. Okay, so it does look a little like a collision between a Jazzmaster and a Firebird in Liberace's wardrobe, but it shows the level of experimentation that goes on – it's almost like a 'concept' car. Its 'Vintique' finish includes 24-carat gold leaf, while the four – yes, four – P90-style pickups are set in pairs, neck and bridge. The two top toggles control each pair as though it were an individual two-pickup guitar, and operate in the normal way, while the

solitary toggle switches between the two pairs. The rather odd-looking body shape seems much less strange once strapped-on, the big forearm 'shelf' making for a comfortable and balanced playing experience. We expect the Country Squire and Elan may be to more people's tastes, but we salute innovation in a market where most manufacturers are pulling in the reins, not pushing out the boat. For the more conservative, the same shape two-pickup Ventura 60 comes in standard vintage colours and costs just £1,599.



create a welcoming environment for the fingers, with the generous cutaways allowing unfettered top-end forays. It's a potentially speedy guitar, its Fender scale length proving no hindrance to string bending and its sleek feel and slender nature giving instant playing gratification. Whether the forearm scoop has any real benefit is debatable, yet it's an interesting touch that underlines the Elan's will to be familiar and yet remain different. Overall, quality is on a par with the best around.

Sounds

Bear in mind that Explorers and Flying Vs have become blues and classic rock guitars by default, and that their Korina bodies contributed to their stinging, sustaining tone. Then picture Freddie King with his P-90-equipped Les Paul and a view starts to take shape that the Elan may do bluesy rock rather well. And indeed it does.

Lighter built Gibsons, such as SGs and ES-335s, have traditionally been described as more 'dynamic' than the battering-ram sound of a Les Paul. Strats with humbuckers at the bridge show a similar trait. So this relatively slender instrument with two cutaways and the rather more earthy tone of P-90s makes for interesting listening. There's a natural 'honk' in the tone of the slightly higher output bridge pickup that's really pleasing. It never sounds completely clean – there's always an underlying 'rasp' that tells you it wants more; more gain, more attack, more everything.

Flip to the neck and the nasal sound is replaced by sweetness and light. In fact here you feel you don't even need much drive, since the tone is so natural. Dig in and the Elan responds with a sharper bite; play lighter and it respects your desire for subtlety. With both pickups on, the tone is thinner and funkier, but very versatile – a rhythm player's delight.

Overall it reminded some of the Guitarist writers of a PRS McCarty Soapbar – it has a similar mass, similar level of power and is similarly good at just about everything, but excelling in expressive blues-rock situations.

The Verdict

Instruments in Fret-King's Green Label series are made to the highest standards in very low runs – so much so that they're virtually built to order. Choice timbers such as swamp ash and Korina make all the difference, while Trev Wilkinson's ability to delve into his own vast reservoirs of hardware and electrics gives him an edge over a large proportion of the competition.

Both these guitars have endeared themselves to those that played them, with everyone commenting on their quality, feel, attention to detail and general likeability.

With its versatile pickup layout and a vintage-style vibrato that stays in tune, the Country Squire is like a Fender Thinline Tele on steroids. It's about as all-encompassing as a guitar can be and, as we've said many times in these pages, this classic design is perfect for the kind of tweaking that people such as Wilkinson do so well.

The Elan too proves itself a popular friend, Wilkinson's take on the Fender/Gibson hybrid working particularly well. Some scepticism as to its gaudy colour gave way to praise for its build, fabulous neck and easy playability.

Both instruments echo their designer's ethos to the letter: to provide the player with sensible, quality tools for the job. That Fret-King's UK Custom Shop has also managed to imbue these guitars with no little class, flair and desirability, is to its credit. **G**

The Bottom Line

We like: Great necks on both instruments; innate understanding about what a good guitar should be; well-chosen elements from some of the best guitars around
We dislike: Very little, but our Elan's nut was too short for its slot; headstock logos look a little fussy

Guitarist says: These Fret-Kings are a truly great combination of the best bits from guitar history mixed with individual updates that create two very likeable guitars indeed



Fret-King Country Squire Semi-Tone De-Luxe

PRICE: £1,799
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Semi-hollow bolt-on neck electric
BODY: Swamp ash with hollowed-out bass side, double-bound
NECK: 'Secret' matt-coated maple with dark rosewood fingerboard
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Wilkaloid/42.5mm
HARDWARE: Nickel-plated Wilkinson VSV vibrato bridge; Wilkinson staggered-height tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 54mm
ELECTRICS: Two Wilkinson Alnico single-coils at neck and middle; nickel covered humbucker at bridge; five-way pickup selector switch with master volume and tone
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 7.6/3.5
OPTIONS: One-piece maple neck/fingerboard (£65); gold hardware (£105); Vintique 24-carat gold leaf pickguard (£50)
RANGE OPTIONS: Classic model (£1,449) with solid body, standard T-style two-pickup layout; Semi-Tone (£1,599) with neck humbucker and standard T-style bridge and bridge pickup; Yardbird (£1,499) with single bridge pickup and forearm chamfer
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, £150 extra
FINISHES: Vintage burst, classic burst, see-thru red, honey burst, blue burst, green burst
JHS & Co
01132 865381
www.fret-king.com

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★



Fret-King Elan 50 SP

PRICE: £1,299
ORIGIN: UK
TYPE: Solidbody set-neck electric
BODY: Korina with scooped lower cutaway and forearm chamfer
NECK: Korina with dot-marked rosewood fingerboard and eight-degree headstock pitch
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT/WIDTH: Graphite/42.5mm
HARDWARE: Tulip-style tuners, intonatable Wilkinson GTB100 wrap-over tailpiece
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 51mm
ELECTRICS: Two Wilkinson P-90-style pickups, reverse-wound for noiseless operation on middle setting, three-way toggle pickup selector, two volumes and two tones
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 7/3.2
OPTIONS: Gold hardware (£105)
RANGE OPTIONS: Elan 50 (£1,299) with twin humbuckers; Elan 60 (£1,429) with Wilkinson VS401 bridge and Gotoh Magnum Lok tuners; Elan 60 SP (£1,349) as Elan 60 but with matched P-90-style pickups
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes, £150 extra
FINISHES: Vintage white, obsidian black, laguna blue, California green, see-thru blue, see-thru red, natural

Test results

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

GUITARIST RATING ★★★★★