

REVIEWED:

FRET KING

Eclat Standard & Esprit 3

Fret King's Blue Label series offers custom shop quality at off-the-peg prices. How do they do it?

Words: Tim Slater

FRET KING

Eclat Standard

SRP £999.00

All prices incl VAT

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WHAT IS IT?

A skilfully designed Korean made solid body single cutaway electric guitar that carefully sidesteps the whole 'copy' issue courtesy of some nifty features and high build quality.

WHY SHOULD I WANT ONE?

It takes a lot for guitarists to trust something new but the Fret King Eclat Standard delivers everything you would expect from this classic shape, enhanced with subtle but highly practical tweaks to the construction and electronics. Elegant, powerful and more versatile than you might assume, the Eclat Standard is ace. Simple as that.



Fret King Eclat Standard

Regular Playmusic Pickup readers will doubtless be familiar with Trevor Wilkinson, who is regularly name-checked in our guitar reviews due to the omnipotent presence of his personally designed range of high quality hardware and pickups, which are used as standard on many brands of guitars, including Italia and JHS's vintage range, to name but two.

Fret King guitars are Trevor's baby and both of the models reviewed here – the single cutaway Eclat and the unconventional-looking genspliced Esprit 3 – both serve as good examples of Trevor's own unique approach to guitar design borne from 40 years of repairing guitars and finding ways to make them sound and play better.

Rather than trying to re-invent the wheel, Trevor's approach – and the secret behind much of his success – is all about examining vintage designs in microscopic detail, learning what works and only really changing things where he genuinely feels there is room for improvement.

And that ethos extends into Fret King guitars: in the case of the Eclat we've all seen similar single cut designs dozens of times before but when you find out how much attention to detail has gone into the Eclat's concept and construction it gradually becomes clear why it can claim to offer something fresh, instead of a mediocre re-tread of a much-loved classic.

The Esprit 3, on the other hand, looks at offering similar benefits in sound and performance from the viewpoint of a body styling which to all intents and purposes is an amalgamation of several different vintage guitars. It could be argued that its shape is enough to make the Esprit 3 stand out from among the pack but Trevor insists that the quality of the hardware and construction, and how they are skillfully combined – Trevor likes to refer to it as 'coupling' – is really what makes Fret King guitars unique.

Both guitars featured here belong to Fret King's Far Eastern

manufactured Blue Label series, which are production-based cousins of the prestigious Green Label models that are hand-built to individual order by Trevor Wilkinson and his team in their UK-based custom shop.

Solid Senders

Before we talk about the woods used to make the Esprit 3 and Eclat it's just as important to have a gander at the metalwork, which is apparently the focus of a great deal of thought.

Both guitars use traditional-looking nickel plated Tune-o-Matic style bridges and separate tailpieces, screwed into threaded posts inserted into the top of the guitars. This is a fairly standard method of construction and while it isn't easy to do on a carved top guitar like the LP-influenced Eclat it is nevertheless fairly common procedure. In the Fret King's case, the high standard of fit and finish aims to improve on the middling quality often found in Far Eastern manufacture, which sometimes places far less emphasis

Fret King Eclat Standard & Esprit 3

on improving the guitar's tone and more on bashing as many units out the door as quickly as possible to meet the production schedule.

This isn't any particular manufacturer's fault – mass production on that scale usually demands a few corners get cut along the way – but the Fret King's bridge and tailpiece are rock solid and entirely rattle-free. Even strummed acoustically, both guitars demonstrate

impeccable rock 'n' roll credentials.

The neck, which Fret King claim is modelled on an original mid-60s Gibson SG, joins the body at the 20th fret and like a typical SG neck; this one seems to project further than usual, which has the strange effect of making the Esprit seem to have a longer scale than its standard 24.75". You get used to it after a while, as you do the strange back-to-front stringing that places the low 'E'

uniform outline but you grow used to it surprisingly quickly. The single-piece mahogany neck feels more like a typical 50s Gibson profile. It is certainly bulkier and less nimble than the Esprit's neck but the big frets and flat rosewood 'board nevertheless provide ample room for the wide bluesy string bends and generous vibrato that this type of axe excels in.

Up at the far end, the familiar spade shaped headstock is fitted

Magnetic Personalities

The Eclat sports a pair of nickel-plated humbucking pickups that Fret King claims are wound to deliver a similar gutsy performance as the original PAF units from the 1950s.

Fifties technology being what it was, it is of course difficult to establish a firm benchmark because the hand-winding process used back in those days made sure that no two pickups would be exactly identical

Even strummed, acoustically both guitars demonstrate a truly impressive resonance and sustain that is always the hall mark of a quality solid body electric guitar...

a truly impressive resonance and sustain that is always the hall mark of a quality solid body electric guitar.

Got Wood?

While the hardware plays a major part in Fret King's construction, the choice and quality of the woods used is also just as important. The Esprit 3 has a three-piece mahogany body with a one-piece mahogany set neck and as Trevor Wilkinson explains, the unusual body shape takes its cue from a diverse group of influences. "The front half is inspired by a Fender Jaguar, while the rear half is a combination of a Gibson Explorer and a non-reverse body Gibson Firebird!" On paper, this bizarre concoction is likely to induce one to reach for a brown paper bag but in reality it works amazingly well. In fact, the Esprit design is a something of a triumph; it is a big old lump of a thing but, like the original Explorer shape, it begins to make sense when the guitar is slung several inches low below the belt buckle. Apparently, the Esprit range was designed with exactly that type of player in mind and if you've ever seen Marshall amp's demonstrator Chris George wielding his Fret King Esprit around his ankles whilst managing to look and sound as cool as a tattooed polar bear in a blizzard, then you'll appreciate that the Esprit 3 comes with

tuner where you wouldn't usually expect to find it, at the furthest end of the headstock. Think about it though; this is exactly how Hendrix would have strung his right-handed Strats when he flipped them over to accommodate his left-handed playing style. The low 'E's increased speaking length doubtless contributed to Jimi's unique tone and penchant for lowered tunings – and in a modern context the Esprit could also be more amenable to drop-tunings than a conventional six-a-side headstock might allow.

You can't get away from the fact that the classic designs are still accepted in today's market. Is it because they've been around for so long that we've got used to them or is it that they were so good to begin with? That question surely applies to the Eclat.

The deep forearm chamfer, deeper lower cutaway for improved fret access and rear ribcage contour notwithstanding, the Eclat is still instantly recognisable and is built using a traditional two-piece mahogany body with a neat centre joint, topped-off with a carved book-matched flame maple top.

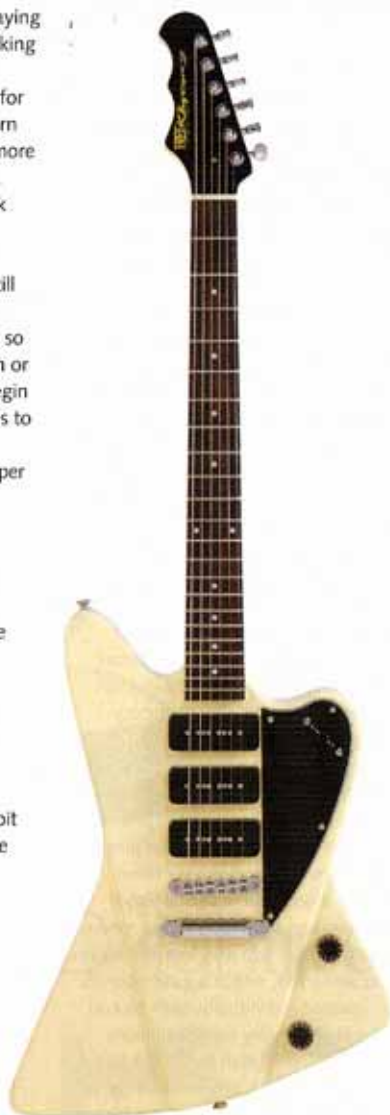
Features like the front forearm contour may appear sacrilegious from a purist's standpoint but from a practical perspective it works a treat; granted it looks a bit odd when you are used to a more

with Wilkinson's own vintage-styled tuners, complete with aged 'snot' green plastic tuning keys. Lovely.

in terms of output but we all have a pretty good idea of what should a good humbucker should sound like and the Eclat delivers everything you'd expect.

The tone is as fat and fruity as a Christmas pudding; chock full of articulate plummy mids and a top end so smooth and buttery that you could spread it on your toast in the morning! I can't say with hand on heart that either of these pickups sound particularly 'vintage' but they still deliver everything that you'd expect: power, clarity and bags of sustain, with no hint of microphonic instability.

Trevor has also changed the traditional control layout for one that is far more versatile and user-friendly. The single volume pot has ▶



Fret King Esprit 3

The Eclat's tone is so smooth and buttery that you could spread it on your toast!

FRET KING

Esprit 3

SRP £569.00

All prices incl VAT

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WHAT IS IT?

A highly individual looking, great sounding blues monster.

WHY SHOULD I WANT ONE?

Initially odd looking but virtually impossible to put down. The Esprit 3 is cool personified.



Fret King Eclat Standard

▶ been moved closer to the bridge, putting it within easy reach of the player's right hand. A single master

something away. With Vari-Coil you get a gradual process and when you get to the end of it, (where the single

The pleasing compromise between the full-throated blast of a conventional humbucker and a single coil's more detailed edge leads us to suggest that the Esprit 3 is a blues player's dream made flesh – or wood, if you like – with enough tonal range between the three pickups to make this guitar a more than capable all-rounder.

Conclusion

Fret King are a very rare thing; a Far Eastern guitar that actually makes you feel proud to own and take out on a gig. Look beyond the first impressions and you'll find an attention to detail and build-quality that feels totally different from a typical mass produced Far Eastern guitar, plus

On paper, the Esprit 3's bizarre shape is likely to induce one to reach for a brown paper bag but in reality it works...

tone pot is complimented by a useful and practical rotary coil tap control (christened 'Vari-Coil') that is the Eclat's trump card.

We'll let Trevor explain how it works. "Coil taps have been around for a long time but I never liked them on a guitar because guitar players never want to go quieter, they always want to go louder! The instant that you pull a coil tap knob up or flick a switch, you get a drop off in volume and I think it feels like you are taking

coil-type sounds kick-in) it sounds pleasing to your ears. It sounds brighter, but you haven't actually heard a drop in volume like you would with a switch or a push-pull pot."

Many guitarists would doubtless agree with Trevor's wisdom and in Vari-Coil's case you do actually find yourself using it rather a lot; either to approximate single coil-type sounds or even just to back off the humbuckers grunt when you need to maybe sweeten things up a little. Those nickel plated pickup covers should quickly start to gain a nice patina of wear once the guitar is in regular use, too; adding an extra sprinkle of mojo.

The Esprit 3's P-90s could be reasonably compared to a 'Strat on steroids', if you like. The initial impression is one of almost humbucker-like output and sustain but cleaner tones allow the pickups versatility to really shine courtesy of the five-way selector switch. Selecting in-between bridge and middle and middle and neck (usually referred to as 'position two' and 'position four' by most guitar players) unleashes the lovely glassy tones usually associated with Strat-style pickups, and the P-90s wiring means that positions two and four are noise-cancelling too, which is a nice bonus.

Selected individually, each pickup sounds noticeably fuller and more resonant than a standard sized single coil, with enough power to nudge a small clean amp into the outer fringes of overdrive.

a sound quality that makes them almost impossible to put down.

Fret King are still not what you'd class as 'cheap' but they aren't supposed to be. What they represent is truly excellent value for money.

These guitars are like a perfect partner; once you've got one you'll have little reason to look elsewhere. **PU**

Eclat headstock



Fret King Esprit 3