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Fret-King forges ahead with two regal additions to its affordable Blue Label line – tonal versatility and flawless build quality combine with esoteric yet classy looks...

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FRET KING BLUE LABEL VENTURA SUPER 60 SSH & ELAN SUPER 60 HBP £729 & £699  
ELECTRICS

Guitarist April 2010





# Fret-King Blue Label Ventura Super 60 SSH & Elan Super 60 HBP £729 & £699

For 2010 Fret-King has added two new models to its more affordable Blue Label line. Let's investigate...

by *Dave Durban*

As more and more players search for guitars that step just outside the accepted norms, Fret-King is fast becoming a credible choice. It's the company's more original designs that have been stealing the headlines, too, helping the brand to establish itself both here and in Europe.

The current range divides into two series – the mid-price Korean-made Blue Label instruments and the higher-end UK-made Green Labels. Here we look at two guitars previously only available in that elite UK-made range. "We wanted to bring these models into the Blue Label line to make them more affordable, get more people trying them and, of course, to be a bit braver with their choice of guitar," says designer, Trevor Wilkinson.

## Ventura Super 60

If Fret-King's Esprit puts the Gibson Firebird, Explorer and Fender Jazzmaster into a mixing bowl, then you could argue that Mr Wilkinson used the leftovers to create the Ventura. "I was trying to come up with something different," he says, "but retain a familiar

vibe to it so not to alienate people. So, the Ventura's offset front horns have that Jazzmaster vibe, though it's got a little bit of Swinger about it too, which is a little known guitar Fender did way back."

There's certainly a little of the Esprit in the horn design here, but when Wilkinson came to the back-end he decided to move away from Gibson-style. "The Esprit is definitely modelled in vein of the Firebird and Explorer," he continues, "so

I in-cut it, I concaved the radius of the back-end, rather than convex it. But then it looked weird because it was still really pointy. I literally just chopped it off along the same line as the groove line on the Esprit and then rounded it over – it immediately felt comfortable. A nip and tuck later and the design was complete."

In typical Fret-King style, every curve serves a purpose and, despite looking unwieldy, the Ventura scores top marks in

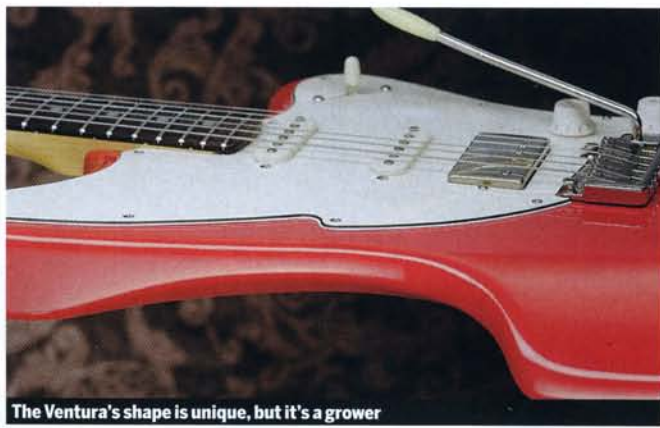
the player comfort category. The drastic roll radius of the body gives the illusion that it's literally wrapping itself around you, even though the rib-contour mimics that of a standard Strat. Played either seated or standing up, the Ventura rests in the most comfortable of positions.

Topping things off is an offset scratchplate, housing Fender Stratocaster-style control knobs and featuring a signature 'wave' design on the top edge – another Wilkinson creation.

For such a well-priced instrument few will be able pick fault with any aspect of this guitar's build. The vintage Du Pont-inspired Coral red finish is so well applied that there are no visible bumps, blemishes or over-sprays. Alongside this, each cavity has been carved with exacting precision, the fret finishing is top-drawer, and even the nut looks to have been expertly cut and lubricated.

The dark Indian rosewood-topped satin-backed maple neck doesn't spoil the party either. "I always do a 'C'-profile

Few will be able to pick fault with any aspect of this guitar's build



The Ventura's shape is unique, but it's a grower



neck," says Wilkinson. "I like to leave a bit of space in-between your thumb and the fleshy part of the first finger so it feels comfortable." It does.

Both the Ventura and Elan feature a floating Wilkinson WVP vibrato, similar in look to a PRS bridge with its high surrounding walls. "The idea was to create something very smooth to the touch and support the powdered metal stainless steel saddles as well," says Wilkinson. "We created a stamped steel plate that's machined and heat-treated so that bridge will never wear away – it'll wear the pivot posts away before the bridge actually wears." It's smooth in operation, too, with a wide range and great tuning stability.

The H/S/S pickup layout is controlled by a five-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone, while both

guitars feature Fret-King's clever 'Vari-control', which enables the humbuckers to be gradually transitioned from a full humbucker to true single-coil operation.

### Sounds

The bridge Wilkinson WHHB PAF-style humbucker mixes well with the single-coils. We have a range of very open tones that sits within both the blues and classic rock camps. Played clean, the bridge humbucker has real vintage-y Fender sparkle, though with the gain ramped up a bit, we get a warmer, juicier Gibson-esque tone that handles a plethora of old-school blues-rock and more throaty classic rock sounds.

Due, in part, to its alder body, with more gain present there's a more direct and considered tone than a denser mahogany battering-ram, yet it still

embodies ample sustain for most blues or rock lead needs. The Vari-control produces typical single-coil hum, but to our ears it remains one of the most convincing humbucker-to-single-coil control systems out there.

Mixing in the middle single-coil and voicing it on its own produces snappy and responsive sounds with a clean-ish amp. It's very reminiscent of that late fifties Fender-ish sound and there's plenty of old-school quack in the middle position. Middle and neck and neck alone are strong, clean and very percussive Strat-alike tones. Overall there's a strident mid-range that's not too far from John Mayer's favoured Strat voice – big, clean and extremely articulate. Wind up the wick and there's plenty of snap and nasal character for SRV-like bluesiness.

### Elan Super 60

Compared to the Ventura, the Elan's 'Strat-meets-PRS' vibe is one of Wilkinson's more conservative designs.

Moreover, the presence of alder with its different three-pickup configuration should ensure a different tonality from the Ventura too – more like a Strat on steroids.

The finishing is on a par with the Ventura, thinly applied, its three-tone sunburst looks particularly luxurious and the body is again sculpted to maximise player comfort. Some may argue the forearm chamfer is a little clumsy aesthetically, however, a few moments with the guitar proves it to be a comfortable addition to an otherwise familiar, yet unique looking instrument.

Again the neck is a welcoming platform, with a comparatively nimble and contemporary feel that should appeal to both Fender and Gibson player camps with, like the Ventura, the same 22-fret Indian rosewood 'board, Fender scale-



A contour too far? It might be comfortable, but it might also be ugly – your decision



The floating Wilkinson vibrato is a smooth and stable unit that's excellent in use

length and 254mm (10-inch) radius. "I've been using this slim 'C' profile for many, many years," says Wilkinson. "It originally came off of a '62 Gibson SG and I really just loved the feel of that guitar."

Here we have two PAF-style humbuckers and a soapbar single-coil wedged between, but control-wise it mirrors the Elan although, curiously, the Vari-control resides in the middle tone control position, while on the Ventura it's the furthest from the volume.

### Sounds

Plugged into a dirty-ish valve amp, the bridge humbucker displays a bright top end that's rounded off by juicy bass response and a comfortable mid-range. It's very obviously under-wound, and this leads to more sedate clean tones too, which suits open and twangy sounding chords that leave it teetering into beefed up Tele territory. Ultimately, it won't get you into heavy rock riffing without a helping hand, but is effortless for bluesy rock, Americana or indie riffing with a classic older Gibson character.

Wilkinson makes a very fine soapbar single-coil. Packed full of character, the middle-position single-coil blends big brassy lows with a soft and charming mid-range that helps keep that prickly high-end attack well in hand. It's a great platform for Stones tones as well as adding a sweet edge to modern, funkier pop licks.

Switching to the neck and listening clean, the sound is bigger in the lower mid and bass end than the other positions. Roll off the tone control and you're in a great position for hollowed jazz tones, but if you turn up the gain, and volume, you'll gather a biting and sensitive blues solo tone – less dense tonally than a mahogany-based Les Paul but still Gibson-

esque. Again the Vari-control added some smart single-coil tones that worked best with a reverb-laden cleaner sound.

### Verdict

Two of Fret-King's more original designs, the Ventura and even the more conservative Elan will get you noticed. If you're looking for something that turns heads and gets you the feel and tone of an old, slightly souped-up Fender, look no further than the Ventura Super 60.

The Elan is harder to pin down, a little bit Gibson, a little bit Fender and a soupçon of PRS. Far from shabby for the money it's one heck of an all-purpose workhorse. **G**

### The bottom line

#### Fret-King Ventura Super 60 SSH

**We like:** Build; unique style; brilliant neck profile; price

**We dislike:** Maybe a bit too 'out there' for everyone

**Guitarist says:** If you're willing to be brave, the Ventura will offer you bags of Fender-derived tones with added beef and extremely good build quality for reasonable outlay

#### Fret-King Elan Super 60 HBP

**We like:** Build; sleek neck/set-up; superb tonal range

**We dislike:** Forearm chamfer looks aesthetically awkward

**Guitarist says:** One of Fret-King's more conservative designs that comes equipped with a range of Fender-meets-Gibson tones, excellent build and a comparatively modest price-tag to boot



### Blue Label Ventura Super 60 SSH

**PRICE:** £729  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5-inch)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Cream synthetic/42.3mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with dot inlays, 254mm (10-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium  
**HARDWARE:** Wilkinson WVP vibrato, Gotoh Magnum Locking tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 53mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Wilkinson WHHB humbucker (bridge), two Wilkinson WTS single-coils (middle/neck), five-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone, Vari-coil control (humbucker only)  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 4/8.8  
**OPTIONS:** The Blue Label Ventura Super 60 HB3 (£779) comes with three humbuckers in vintage white and Laguna blue  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** UK-made Green Label Venturas start at £1,599  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Coral red (as reviewed), original classic sunburst  
**JHS**  
**0113 286 5381**  
**www.jhs.co.uk**

### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★



### Blue Label Elan Super 60 HBP

**PRICE:** £699  
**ORIGIN:** Korea  
**TYPE:** Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Alder  
**NECK:** Maple, bolt-on  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 648mm (25.5-inch)  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Cream synthetic/42.3mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood with dot inlays, 254mm (10-inch) radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium  
**HARDWARE:** Gotoh Magnum Lock Wilkinson WVP vibrato, six-in-line Wilkinson tuners  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 53mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Wilkinson WHHB humbuckers (bridge and neck), Wilkinson soapbar single-coil (middle), five-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone, Vari-coil (humbuckers only)  
**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.5/7.7  
**OPTIONS:** The Elan Super 60 SSP is also available with soapbar single-coil at bridge with two single-coils at neck and bridge at £679  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The Blue Label Super 50 is the set-neck, mahogany-bodied version with wrapover bridge and comes in the same SSP (£729) and HBP (£749) pickup configurations. UK-made Green Label Elans start at £1,399  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** No  
**FINISHES:** Vintage white, original classic sunburst (as reviewed)

### Test results

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

**GUITARIST RATING** ★★★★★