

Fret-King Super 60 HB & Eclat

Six-string electric guitars

Guitar designer and luthier Trevor Wilkinson is very highly regarded in the industry, bringing many years of expert knowledge to each new model. We take a look at two electrics from his Fret-King Blue Label series.

Roger Cooper

When I was much younger, all my fellow guitarists and I thought of ourselves as being out-and-out liberal rebels. We didn't conform to any norms, as our flared jeans, cheesecloth shirts and Afghan coats showed. Our Telecaster, Stratocaster and Les Paul guitars served to underline our individuality, and the volume of our Vox, Fender and Marshall amplifiers simply reinforced the distance between us and our parents' generation.

Several decades on and it seems that little has changed. The same guitars and amplifiers still dominate today's music, the only differences being that the old guitars we played way back then are in some cases now worth six-figure sums (don't we all wish that we'd hung onto ours?), and that everywhere we turn there are copies and clones of, and 'tributes' to, our old guitars and amplifiers.

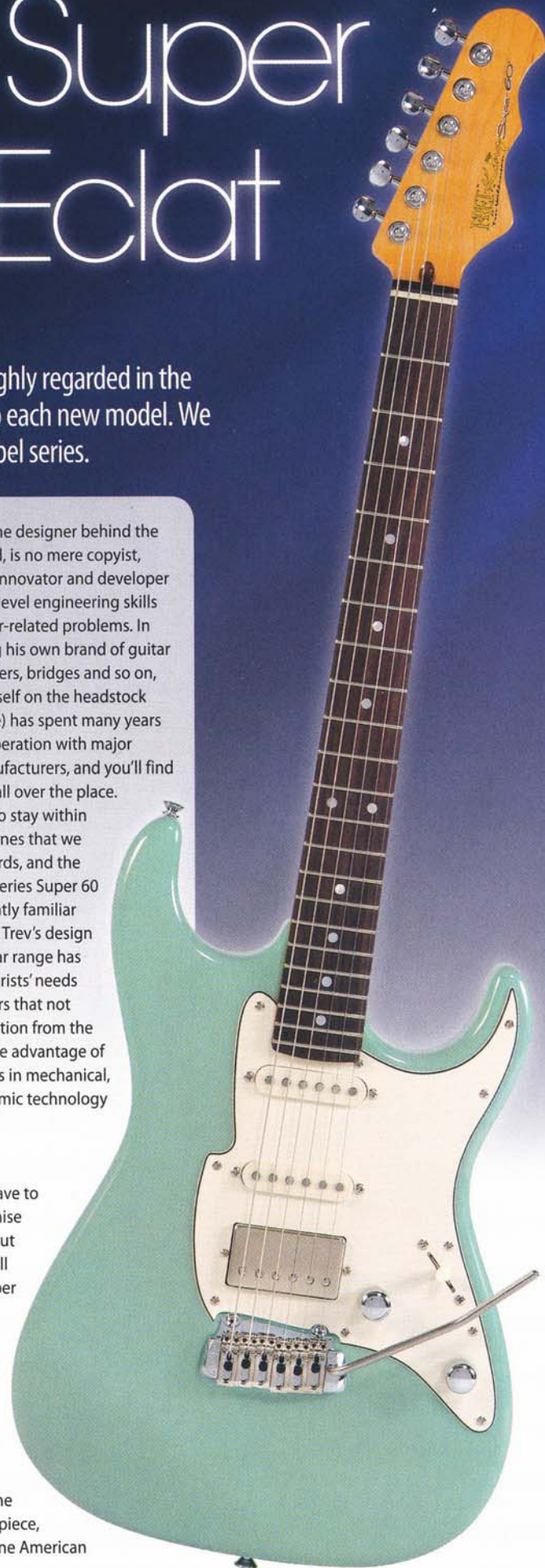
Liberal rebels indeed! It seems that we musicians are amongst the most conservative and superstitious beings on the planet, clinging continuously to our prejudices and preconceptions for over 60 years. Two of our most potent talismanic totems are the Fender Stratocaster and the Gibson Les Paul. Developed virtually concurrently in the early to mid-1950s, these two guitars have dominated mainstream guitar stylings since their inception, and their distinctive body shapes and electronics layouts underpin the basic construction of the overwhelming majority of electric guitars on the market today. "That which has come to be, that is what will come to be; and that which has been done, that is what will be done; and so there is nothing new under the sun." It seems to me that old King Solomon (or whoever it was who wrote the words of Ecclesiastes 1:9) knew a fair bit about the 21st century guitar market.

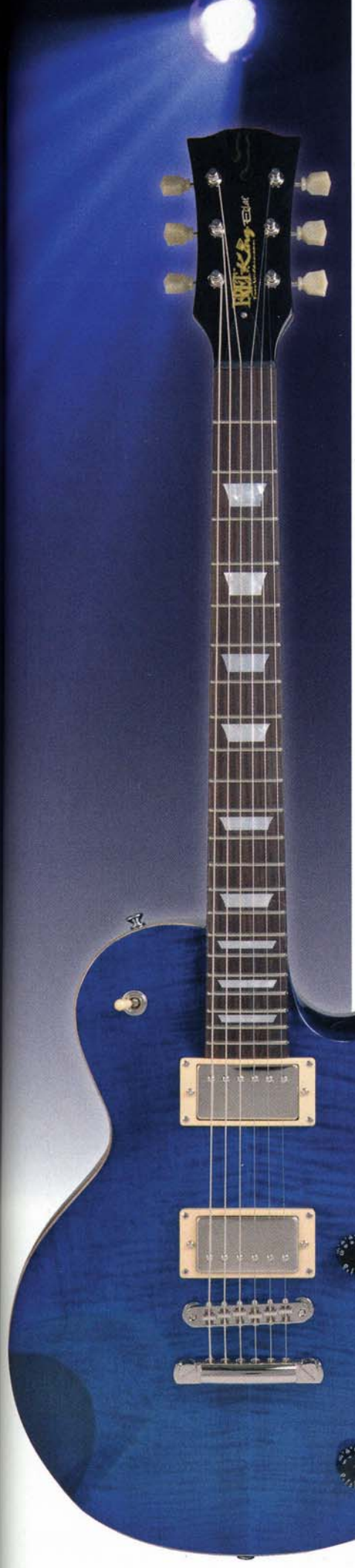
Trevor Wilkinson, the designer behind the Fret-King guitar brand, is no mere copyist, but a well-respected innovator and developer who applies his high-level engineering skills to all manner of guitar-related problems. In addition to producing his own brand of guitar and bass pickups, tuners, bridges and so on, Trev (as he styles himself on the headstock of the Fret-King range) has spent many years working in close cooperation with major guitar and parts manufacturers, and you'll find his name referenced all over the place.

But even Trev has to stay within the comfortable confines that we guitarists aspire towards, and the Fret-King Blue Label series Super 60 and Eclat boast instantly familiar features and outlines. Trev's design approach to this guitar range has been to address guitarists' needs for high-quality guitars that not only take their inspiration from the past, but that also take advantage of modern-day advances in mechanical, electrical and ergonomic technology and design.

Super 60 HB

You certainly won't have to cast around to recognise this guitar's outline, but a closer inspection will reveal a goodly number of changes that add up to a guitar that sounds familiar and feels pretty distinctive. As soon as you pick it up, you'll realise from its weight that this isn't a lightweight copy. The body is made of two-piece, centre-jointed, genuine American





alder; the neck is Canadian hard rock maple; and the fingerboard is Indian rosewood. All are beautifully fitted and finished, so you know from the start that you're dealing with a quality instrument.

The headstock, whose outline is Trev's take on the classic original, carries a set of premium Gotoh locking tuners with height-adjustable posts, allowing you to achieve the perfect rake angle for every string and removing entirely the need for a string tree. Although I'm no great one for locking tuners, these Gotohs work very well and allow you to string the guitar up to pitch very quickly indeed.

The gloss-finished neck has a reassuring chunky feel to it and is very comfortable to play on. The 22 frets that crown the slab Indian rosewood fingerboard are dressed to perfection, the action was just to my taste, and the combination added up to one of the

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best-feeling new out-of-the-box guitars that I've had my hands on in a long time. The nut is made of a material that Trev calls 'Wilkaloid', which appears to be similar to a lubricated version of that more common nut material, Delrin. No matter what it is made of, the result is a low-friction nut that helps maintain tuning when the vibrato arm is being given a workout. In common with modern necks of this type, the truss rod is adjusted through a dark wood-lined aperture just behind the nut area via an Allen key. Just like the 1960s necks from which it takes its inspiration, the Super 60 HB doesn't have a 'skunk stripe' filling a truss rod rout down its back.

The body of the review model is finished in a very fetching translucent shade of Ice Green, through which the grain of the alder body is easily visible. The white/black/white three-ply pickguard has the familiar outline of its ancestors, but to give it some distinction it has a stepped notch on the top edge. Pickups are an H-S-S configuration, with a Fret-King humbucker at the bridge and two Fret-King single-coils in middle and neck positions. The usual five-way blade switch is present, but instead of the expected master volume and two tone controls you'll find only a single volume and a solitary tone control, both with all-metal dome knobs. In another departure from convention, you'll find the output jack mounted on the edge of the body, using a variation on the

Telecaster theme.

The vibrato bridge is a twin-pivot Wilkinson VS401V. The hardened steel top plate, with its 'wave' curved front, carries six chunky bent-steel saddles that give you a fair range of intonation and height adjustment potential, as well as doubtless contributing to the Super 60 HB's tone. The other tone-inducing feature of the bridge is its steel block, which is stagger drilled. The high E-string hole is further forward and the low E one is further back, relative to the middle four strings, thus easing the task of setting intonation accurately. The whole assembly is rounded off by a lockable, adjustable-tension, push-in arm.

Eclat

The Pauline profile of the Eclat won't leave you puzzled as to its progenitor. However, to my eye, Trev's sensitive updating of the

original template for the Super 60 HB has been replaced on the Eclat by a slightly over-the-top effort to visually vary its classic construction.

As on the Super 60 HB, the Eclat's woods and its translucent Triple Cherry Burst finish are of very high quality. The one-piece mahogany neck with its unbound Indian rosewood fingerboard has a reassuringly chunky, comfortable profile and a great setup. It is fitted into the centre-jointed, two-piece mahogany body using the desirable long-tenon construction, which gives maximum contact between neck and body to give the best possible opportunity for resonance. The cap on the body is a carved piece of three-quarter-inch thick maple, bookmatched and with a fair amount of flame visible round the edges.

At first glance, the neck, adorned with the expected Kluson-style tuners and crown inlays, looks perfectly familiar, until you notice the small styling scoop at the top of »

Performing Musician

Fret-King Super 60 HB
£719 & Eclat £999

Combining original design concepts with practical modern-day advances, Trevor Wilkinson has produced two well-built guitars at reasonable price points considering their high quality. Well worth a try!

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Super 60 HB & Eclat

Electric guitars

» the headstock. Get down to the body and, instead of the usual binding around the top, you'll find the unstained edge of the maple cap showing up over a discontinuous circumference. The breaks in the binding are due to a larger version of the headstock scoop on the front of the body (at the point where your arm would rest if you held the guitar at just the right angle), and a PRS-like scoop in the treble cutaway. Although these three scoops don't do a lot for me personally, the comfort contouring of the rear of the Eclat's body is a different matter entirely and is most welcome.

The Eclat's pickups, selector switch, bridge and stop tailpiece follow the form and

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function of the original. The bridge is, as it should be, nickel-plated, as is the aluminium stop tail. The pickups are Fret-King's PAFs with solid nickel-silver covers, ensuring authentic tonal quality. When it comes to controls, only the three-way toggle selector switch is carried over from the past. Instead of the ancestral 'two volume, two tone' layout, on the Eclat you'll find only a master volume and a master tone. The third knob, lying between the other two, is the Vari-coil, which allows a continuously variable shift between humbucker and single-coil pickup modes. One way of converting a humbucker to single-coil operation involves shorting out the humbucking coil, and it would appear that that's what's happening here, albeit using a potentiometer, rather than a simple switch. The output jack, although mounted in the usual spot for this style of guitar, uses the Telecaster-ish method found on the Super 60 HB.

Plugging in

Playing the Fret-King Super 60 HB was a rewarding experience. The H-S-S pickup configuration was very well balanced in both tonality and output levels. Although a humbucker in the bridge position on this style of guitar can often overpower the two remaining single-coils, this just wasn't the case here. Before I plugged the Super 60 HB in, my internal preconceptions were expecting to need the services of a coil tap on the humbucker, but nothing was further from the truth — I just didn't miss it. The bridge humbucker had all the character of a hot single-coil bridge pickup, with a bit more body and a rounder, fuller tonality.

In combination with the middle pickup, the hollowness that usually appears in this position wasn't as pronounced as usual, so Mark Knopfler licks were out. However, there

were still echoes of it, overlaid on a somewhat thicker sound that was great for rhythm stylings. Five minutes of Chic-style funk chording later, I actually got into the middle position on its own. This is a position that I usually woefully underuse, and the Super 60 HB has something in the sound here that I need to explore further in my own Strat playing. Middle and neck pickups together get you back into the normal 'out-of-phase' sounds, and the neck pickup on its own has the glorious acoustic-edged sound that only ever comes from a good neck position single-coil.

The pickups on this guitar do sound very good, and once you crank things up into distortion territory you'll find that there's a real

rock guitar lurking just under the surface. If you had to own just one guitar to cover the sounds of a multitude of styles, from modern pop rhythms through to the crunch of heavy metal, the Super 60 HB wouldn't be a bad choice. The neck is one of the best maple/rosewood necks I've played on in a long time. Chunky, but not clubby. Fast and comfortable with superb frets and setup. It was an absolute joy and shows just what can be achieved with a bit of careful design and manufacture.

I had high hopes for the Eclat when I came to plug it in. PAF-inspired humbuckers and the Vari-coil tapping seemed to offer much, but sadly failed to live up to their promise. Compared to the PAF clones in my own guitars, I felt that the Eclat's pickups lacked the authoritative edge that I'd hoped for. This isn't to say that they are actually bad-sounding pickups, as they're not. To my ears, they don't really sound like PAFs, but do have their own voice, which is pretty attractive in its own right and makes them good for the bluesier end of the rock spectrum, where they are quite capable of driving an amplifier front end into break-up. Run them flat out into a wound-up preamp or a distortion pedal and you'll get a thick rock tone that won't disappoint anyone.

The Vari-coil control pot gives you a very effective way of moving between humbucker and single-coil sounds in a subtler manner than the usual switch. With cleaner sounds, the humbucker's thickness is thinned out to give the Eclat a very attractive brighter edge as the single-coil mode becomes more pronounced in the mix. Once you get into thicker distortion sounds, you'll find that the Vari-coil tapping really starts to come into its own, allowing you to thin and brighten the Eclat's sound to your own individual taste. Since all the action on the Vari-coil control seems to be in the last few degrees of its travel, you've

Tech Spec

Super 60 HB

- Centre-jointed, two-piece alder body.
- Mahogany neck (Standard profile or Wide/Thin option).
- Indian rosewood fingerboard.
- 22 frets.
- Wilkinson hardware.
- Gotoh locking tuners with height-adjustable shafts.
- Fret-King H-S-S pickups.
- Single volume, single tone, five-way blade pickup selector.
- Ice Green, Ice White, Original Vintage Burst options.

Eclat

- Centre-jointed, two-piece mahogany body with three-quarter-inch maple cap.
- Mahogany neck.
- Indian rosewood fingerboard.
- 22 frets.
- Wilkinson hardware.
- Kluson-style tuners.
- Fret-King treble and bass humbucking pickups with Vari-coil tap.
- Single volume, single tone, three-way toggle pickup selector.
- Triple Cherry Burst, Honey Burst, Blue Burst options.

got to be very careful and precise if you're trying to reproduce a sound that you had developed earlier. I'd really like to see this pot with a bit more effective travel and possibly also detented, so that you could get more consistently repeatable results out of it.

The Eclat's traditional construction and mass means that it has sustain to spare, and together with its supremely comfortable and playable neck and the Vari-coil tapping, the whole package adds up to a versatile guitar that should suit a wide range of players.

Conclusion

With the Fret-King brand, Trev Wilkinson set out to give working guitarists "authentic-build, working vintage guitars that are free of compromise without having to pay homage to outmoded design criteria." In many ways he's succeeded admirably, as the Super 60 HB and the Eclat exhibit both the qualities of their respective heritages and some sensible improvements that either address issues with, or offer benefits over, the original designs.

Both the Super 60 HB and the Eclat are beautifully built, great playing, high-quality guitars that, at their list prices, are sensible value for money. Whether or not you buy one of them will depend more on your own personal preferences and desires than on anything else. Give them a try when you see them in your local guitar store. They're both well worth considering. ■ PM