

# Frontend

Welcome to Frontend, bringing you the best gear, artist and event news alongside essential info to improve your playing

The ATDHT440 is a hardtail design and houses all the gears and electronics that will self-tune the instrument and offer five programmable slots for altered/open tunings. It's an expensive bridge to manufacture – "It's complex," says Wilkinson, "it'll never be on a £100 guitar"

The Super-Matic modern design uses an alder body and is offered in black or original classic burst. The guitars come with a Fret-King gigbag

A standard maple bolt-on neck with 22-fret rosewood fingerboard and standard tuners completes the Super-Matic's specification

Using an H/S/H layout of Wilkinson pickups with a five-way lever pickup selector and Vari-coil control, the Super-Matic offers a versatile palette of sounds

The ATDHT440 bridge is designed to be retrofitted to standard guitars

Wilkinson knows that for the ATDHT440 bridge to catch on, it must be in a familiar host guitar

## At last!

With the help of Trevor Wilkinson, the guitar that tunes itself is finally here

The Fret-King Super-Matic has been a long time coming. Reviews Ed Dave Burrluck was first shown a prototype of the self-tuning technology a decade ago, and Dave and Mick Taylor have played various prototypes since then.

What is it? The guitar is quite standard, but the ATDHT440 bridge isn't: it auto-tunes your guitar in a matter of seconds to

standard pitch or a handful of altered tunings.

"I was approached by Richard Whittall and his son Nick," remembers Trevor Wilkinson. "They'd decided to have a go at creating an auto-tuning device. I'd just come back to the UK from California, so this was the mid-nineties. They showed me their work so far. It was huge, expensive to make and I said, The only way it

can be successful is if it could retro-fit to a Fender Strat – the important thing is to install it without altering the guitar."

Wilkinson is certainly the biggest name behind the design and development of the ATD bridge and, with extensive experience of creating some of the world's finest guitar hardware, was the obvious choice to take an inspired idea further. But, as he says: "I'm part of a team – it's not all down to me. Andy Leadbetter (technical director) has been with the project for 10 years and we have a digital engineer, Dave Goodway, working with us." The ATD prefix stands for company name, Auto Tuning Designs.

The actual tuning gubbins is all in the typically neatly designed

bridge, and launching the unit on a Fret-King guitar was a no-brainer, as that's Wilkinson's own brand. But, crucially, the ATDHT440 is being offered to any guitar company: we could see numerous brands offering auto-tuning guitars in the near future.

The auto-tuning concept isn't new. While ATD was developing its concept, Tronical's Powertune System (reviewed in issue 295) was launched and subsequently offered to Gibson for its Robot range of guitars. Then there's the Transperformance guitar, a very expensive USA design that, unlike the Tronical or ATD design, requires extensive modification of the host guitar. The trade-off with these designs and the ATDHT440, is the ability to quickly re-tune to

an altered or open tuning, something that Line 6 offers on its Variax guitars (see this issue for review). The difference, of course, and it's a big one, is that Line 6's retuning happens in the digital realm: the strings stay in standard pitch while the outputted sound is electronically pitch-shifted. The Transperformance, Tronical and ATD designs physically retune your strings via small motorised gears – the Gibson/Tronical gears are placed in the tuning machines at the headstock, the ATD's are in the bridge itself.

"I've always said a design like this had to be unobtrusive and stay within the realms of what people expect to see. You need to be able to string it easily too. People buy with their eyes so,

irrelevant of the technology, it still has to look, feel and sound right."

Consequently, the host Fret-King guitar remains very standard in appearance. A full review of the guitar and an interview with Trevor

Wilkinson will appear in the next issue of *Guitarist*.

**Cost:** Initially at least, the ATD bridge is only offered on the Fret-King Super-Matic, which will retail at £1,299.

### Talking Heads

**They say:** "If the ATD isn't successful, it probably means that players don't want an auto-tuning guitar. It's been totally conceived from the player's viewpoint – it doesn't take anything away from the guitar, it adds. I've never lost sight of the guitar player being onstage and I think that's crucial."

**Trevor Wilkinson, ATD**

**We say:** This should be of massive interest to any gigging guitarist – re-tuning between songs promises to be ultra fast. The same goes for fans of altered and open tunings. But Gibson's Robot guitars had usability issues and the success of the ATD design will rest squarely on how well it performs in the heat of battle.