



# FRET-KING SUPER-MATIC

PRICE  
£1,200

Fret-King's latest model showcases a brand new self-tuning system. After we've convinced him it isn't witchcraft, Hayden Hewitt takes the Super-Matic for a spin...

**G**uitars that can tune themselves or magically switch to an altered tuning have been grabbing the headlines over the last five years or so, whether it's a digital system such as the Line 6 Variax (which doesn't self-tune but does digitally simulate altered tunings) or the high-tech Gibson Robot system, which sees your machineheads spookily turning all on their own. Into this field, previously the stomping ground of large corporations with serious R&D budgets, marches Britain's own Trevor Wilkinson with the ATD HT440 self-tuning bridge. How will this plucky contender line up against the big boys?

## Body & Neck

Before we get to the technology let's take a closer look at the guitar it lives in. At first glance, the Fret-King Super-Matic appears to be very much a 'superstrat'. Compared to the traditional Fender paradigm, the alder body's offset double cutaways are slightly deeper with longer, sharper horns, giving the Super-Matic a more modern and aggressive look, as well as improving upper fret access. The guitar also boasts a sculpted heel with recessed bolts as opposed to a bulky heel and plate affair. Like pretty much any instrument Trevor Wilkinson has designed it is very comfortable in use. With no trem cavity routed out at the rear – the ATD bridge assembly is exceptionally compact – the body can seem a touch weighty compared your average whammy-equipped equivalent, but everything is in exactly the



The ATD HT440 self-tuning bridge can be fitted to any Stratocaster-style guitar

## THE BRIDGE FEELS COMPLETELY NATURAL UNDER THE PALM OF YOUR PICKING HAND

right place and the ergonomics are top notch.

Considering the body's modern styling, the 24-fret maple neck is something of a surprise. Not that there is anything wrong with it in any way, it's more that the full C shape, 10-inch fretboard radius and medium jumbo frets seem better suited to one of Fret-King's more traditional designs. Naturally, this is a matter of personal taste, but we feel that a slimmer, flatter neck might have

been more in keeping with the overall vibe.

Styling conventions aside, the neck offers no nasty surprises. There are no dead spots or sharp edges, the 24 medium jumbo frets are perfectly finished and it's very comfortable in use. You get the impression this will feel like an old friend in no time at all.

## Hardware & Parts

And now for the meat and potatoes part of the Super-Matic, the ATD self-tuning bridge. Powered by a 9V battery located in an easy-access compartment at the rear, the system actually comprises two parts. The first, a small hex pickup with an oval LCD screen, sits in front of the guitar bridge. Looking rather like a Roland MIDI pickup from the future, it is slim and discrete and features a small white button on the treble side that

controls all the self-tuning features.

Behind this sits the bridge unit itself. Looking for all the world like a standard guitar bridge, only with an unusual string anchor design, it contains microprocessor controlled motorised capstans that take care of the physical aspect of tuning your guitar. Perhaps the most important thing to note here, apart from what it can do, is just how unobtrusive this system is.

The bridge will fit into any Strat (or Strat-style) bridge rout and feels completely natural under your hand. Anyone out there who already uses a Wilkinson bridge will know just how comfortable and reliable they can be and the ATD is no exception to this.

To get to grips with the ATD, you'll need to master all the functions available from that single button. The first thing we did was reset the unit to factory specs. To do this you have to hold the white button down for approximately 20 seconds then tap it to scroll to the correct option which is shown on the small LED screen. Next up was calibration. We tuned the guitar in the old fashioned way (with the machineheads) using the hex display and onboard chromatic tuner. Either side of the display are multi-purpose arrows which light up red, amber, and then green, as well as indicating whether you are sharp or flat. The tuner itself is very accurate indeed and compared favourably with various handheld and rackmount tuners we had on hand.

With calibration complete it's time to see what this thing can do. If you tap the white button once you get to the chromatic tuner for manual tuning. Holding it down



## FRET-KING SUPER-MATIC

**Price:** £1,200  
**Built in:** Korea  
**Scale length:** 648mm (25.5 inches)  
**Nut width:** 43mm (1.69 inches)  
**Body:** Alder  
**Neck:** Maple, bolt-on  
**Fingerboard:** Rosewood, 254mm radius (10 inches)  
**Frets:** 24 medium jumbo  
**Pickups:** 2 x Wilkinson WHHBZ33 humbuckers, 1 x Wilkinson WHSM single-coil  
**Controls:** 1 x volume, 1 x tone, 1 x Vari-Coil, 5-way selector  
**Hardware:** Wilkinson ATD HT440 self-tuning bridge, Gotoh enclosed tuners  
**Weight:** 3.6kg (8lb)  
**Finishes:** Black (shown), Original Classic Burst  
**Case:** Fitted hard case included  
**Left-handers:** No

### CONTACT DETAILS

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## GB VERDICT

### GOLD STARS

- ★ Deadly accurate tuning
- ★ Very comfortable to play
- ★ It takes a long time for the novelty to wear off!

### BLACK MARKS

- Sounds are a little light on low end

### IDEAL FOR...

Getting tricky with your tunings at the touch of a button, or simply ensuring that you're always exactly in tune

### GBRATING



for around one second gives you access to the five preset tunings the ATD will store. The first is standard tuning, which you cannot edit. To test this we detuned the guitar, held the white button for a second, and selected preset one, then gave all six strings a strum. Those of you who haven't tried a self-tuning guitar before will be forgiven for feeling a sense of childlike wonder as the small capstans whirr into life and your guitar brings itself back into tune. Sure, you know it's all microchips and technology but the child that lives in the back of your mind is convinced it's magic.

In default setting the four other presets available are Drop D, Open E, DADGAD, Open A, and Open G. You can also overwrite these with any tunings of your choice. In use, the ATD does seem a little slower than the Gibson Robot system but, on the flip side, it is terrifically accurate each and every time. To put this into context, it takes around 15 to 20 seconds for some tunings. That might sound like a long time, but how else can you be at a gig, tune your guitar in less than half a minute and have a sip of a refreshing beverage at the same time?

## Sounds

The Super-Matic features a HSH pickup layout, with a Wilkinson WHSM single-coil sandwiched between a pair of WHHBZ33 'offset polepiece' humbuckers – each coil features three screw and three slug poles. Wired to a five-way selector, these low-output, vintage-style pickups provide a workable palette of sounds, but again not what the shape and look of the guitar might suggest. The guitar sounds bright and open but seems rather lacking



The Super-Matic is solidly built



Standard Gotoh tuners are used here

in both low end muscle and mid-range detail. Through modelling gear this is less of a problem but through a valve amp some weaknesses do show. This light and breezy tone will appeal to some but for us the guitar demanded something a little more special with a touch more weight.

However, one extra element is the Wilkinson 'Vari-coil' circuit, which takes the place of a second tone knob and allows you to gradually tap off one coil of each humbucker. It's a neat feature,



The pickups are fairly low-output

adding the flexibility of progressively thinner neck and bridge tones, though with the inevitable drop in volume and increase in noise.

## Conclusion

While we're a little underwhelmed by the sounds the review guitar has to offer, the standard of build, finish and playability are all very good. And as a demonstration of the ATD HT440's capabilities, the Super-Matic does an excellent job. This means that the Super-Matic – currently the only guitar to feature this impressive self-tuning system – is a desirable beast, but we'd hope to soon see the ATD available on more models to allow further choices of body shape and pickup configuration. Though this modern shape will suit rock and metal players who like experimenting with lowered tunings (though they will almost certainly want to fit hotter pickups), it would be nice to see more traditional shapes available for the blues slide players and roots rockers who will get a lot from those open tunings. **GB**