

FRET-KING

Super-Matic

The self-tuning electric guitar takes a significant step forward thanks to Trevor Wilkinson and Fret-King... **Words:** Tim Slater

With so much advanced technology around these days it is surprising that so few manufacturers have seriously addressed the issue of designing an electric guitar that can automatically tune itself.

The high cost of research and development probably explains why only a huge company like Gibson was the first out of the gate when it launched its controversial Robot Guitar back in 2007 but other companies were watching and the first truly viable answer to the Robot Guitar comes from a British-based concern, Auto Tuning Developments. ATD is headed by Trevor Wilkinson, never a man to dodge a technical challenge, and as Trevor is one of the key driving forces behind Fret-King guitars it is only natural that the new Fret-King Super-Matic is the first instrument that features the remarkable new ATD self-tuning bridge. Whereas the Gibson Robot Guitar is essentially a 'closed system' meaning that it is only available on a specially modified Gibson guitar the Fret-King ATD self-tuning bridge is designed as a retro-fit that will mount seamlessly onto virtually any modern

US Stratocaster-style bridge route. Another attractive feature regarding the ATD's adaptability is that despite its clever electronic and mechanical components it nevertheless looks and feels almost completely unobtrusive. You honestly wouldn't even know that it is there until you need to use it; all the action takes place down at the bridge, so you don't even need to change your guitar's standard tuners.

Take it to the bridge...

The ATD HT440 self-tuning bridge looks remarkably low key for such a revolutionary piece of hi-tech wizardry. At first glance it loosely resembles a locking tremolo bridge due to the six small motorised capstans' resemblance to the fine tuners that you usually find on a locking vibrato system. The ATD is a fixed bridge setup; it has to be to provide a stable base for the six separate tunings that this unit is capable of storing in its memory.

Six individual low-friction diamond coated steel bridge saddles are fully adjustable for individual string height and intonation in a conventional way but the strings wind around individual motorised capstans that are linked to the onboard digital processor. When changing to a different tuning the digital processor tells the capstans how much tension they need on each string for the guitar to retune itself accurately and they automatically set to work. The whole process looks a little spooky at first but despite a minimal amount of mechanical noise from the capstan motors (Turning the guitar's master volume control down will prevent the sound coming out of your amplifier) there is little to giveaway that anything remarkable is happening.

The different tunings are selected

by an OP button mounted on the hexaphonic pickup with a small digital display that indicates which of the six individual tuning modes has been selected, besides which two green arrows also confirm when the bridge has completed the retuning process. The super low key layout serves the ATD bridge very favourably; being both readily accessible yet very unobtrusive.

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SRP £1399.00

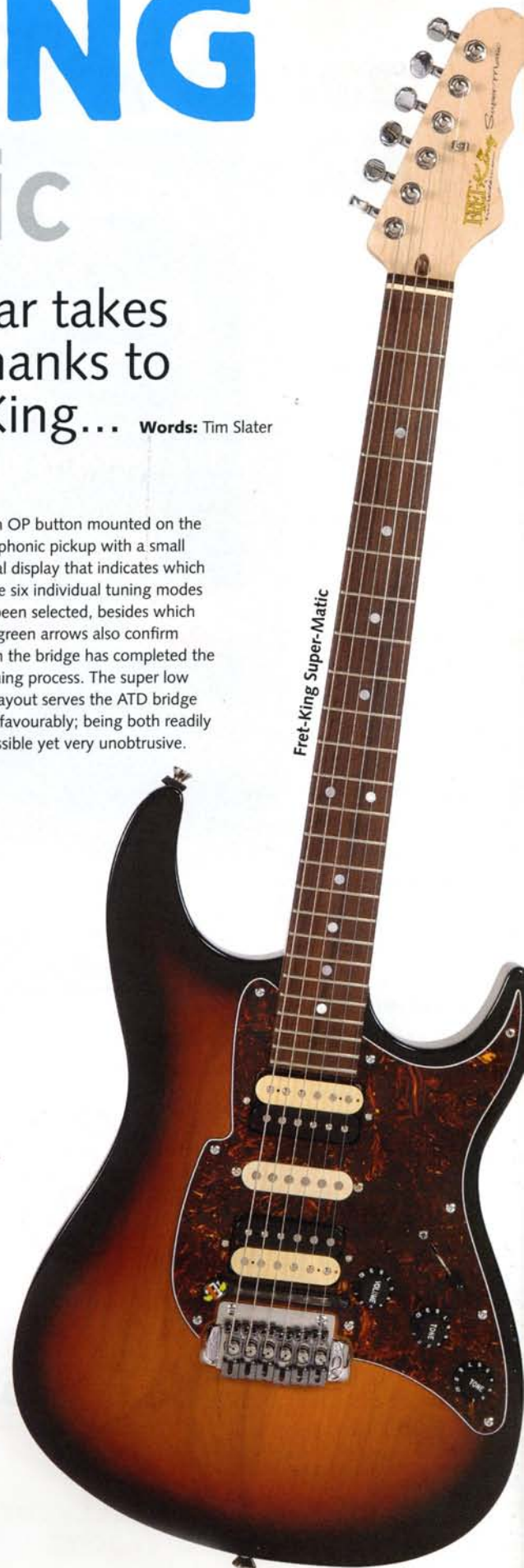
All prices include VAT

CONTACT

John Hornby Skewes

T: 01132 865381

W: www.jhs.co.uk



The Super-Matic has six preset tunings:

Standard: E A D G B E A440

Drop D: Low E a whole tone down to D

Open E: E B E G# B E

DADGAD: D A D G A D

Open G: D G D G B D

Special Mystery Tuning: E B D A B E

In Use

At first it is a bit too easy to get carried away with the novelty of the ATD. You expect it to work instantly, which can lead to some complications if you don't exercise some degree of patience. Firstly, this system does work remarkably fast but it still takes around 20 seconds to complete the process, which

in the ATD's memory but storing new presets does feel a bit fiddly and isn't a particularly speedy process, involving some skilful holding down of the OP button. Whilst the ATD's automatic re-tuning doesn't feel as super fast as the Gibson Robot Guitar system, its accuracy cannot be overstated. One can immediately appreciate the potential benefits it



The ATD440 self-tuning bridge feels very unobtrusive...

begins when the player selects a new tuning with the OP button and then strums briskly across all six open strings. The processor takes a few seconds to reset itself and then the tiny motors kick in, you can actually hear the strings altering pitch – as if by magic! It all feels a bit uncanny but so long as the procedure is allowed to take place uninterrupted the user will be rewarded with a completely accurate alternative tuning within what is really a fairly short space of time. If, however, let's say for example the player gets bored or forgets to remove their left hand from the fret board during the re-tune then the processor will automatically compensate for the new intervals, with some seriously unexpected results when you try and play the expected tuning! Of course, this can always be turned to an advantage and if you are into the more adventurous non-standard tunings you can come up some far-out sounding tunings that Biffy Clyro or Sonic Youth would be proud of. Any new tunings can be stored

suddenly presents to guitarists who use altered tunings and usually cart several different guitars to live gigs. Bottleneck slide players who prefer heavier strings should be OK too; ATD claim that the system will easily cope with heavier string gauges like .011-.052, and shims are available that will raise the action without affecting the sensitive ratios between the bridge saddles and the motorised gears driving the capstans.

The guitar

The Fret-King Super-Matic guitar that provides the host for the ATD system is a Korean-made Fret-King solid body twin cutaway guitar with a bolt-on maple neck. This particular model is exclusive to the ATD bridge and isn't available elsewhere in the Fret-King Blue Label line up of Korean-made guitars. The contoured solid alder body presents a sharp aggressive modern feel compared to Fret-King's more familiar vintage-led designs, whilst generous cutaways and contours lend the body a comfortable sleekness. The bolt-on

neck's generic 'C' shape feels fairly middle of the road, although the 24 fret fingerboard makes a nice concession to the extra possibilities afforded by the altered tunings. The Super-Matic's standard electronics comprise of a humbucker/single coil/humbucker pickup array that is linked to a standard five-way selector switch, a master volume control, one standard rotary tone control and Wilkinson's own Vari-coil that is essentially a progressive coil tap linked to the bridge and neck humbuckers. Vari-coil gradually changes the full humbuckers to single coil mode and back in one smooth linear operation instead of merely toggling between both modes like a light switch, providing a greater variety of sounds.

Sound-wise the Super-Matic has quite a tightly focused tone that leans towards the typically bright and fluid performance of a typical bolt-on neck electric guitar. The twin Wilkinson WHHBZ33 humbuckers don't appear to have a great deal of pokey midrange, which dilutes the potential for a meaty Gibson-esque thump but they nevertheless deliver a brisk and punchy tone that seems to suit medium to higher gain situations. The Vari-coil also helps to define an extra degree of light and shade tone-wise and in conjunction with the single coil pickup in the middle the classic hollow in-between 'quack' is easily to hand. The Super-Matic doesn't exactly blow you away when it comes down to its sounds but it delivers a solid performance and to be honest its lighter breezier tone probably works in its favour. The Wilkinson humbuckers' more open

and forgiving tone shouldn't deter those who don't necessarily rate humbuckers as their favourite choice when it comes to pickups. **PM**

The Fret-King Super-Matic is also available in black!



SHOULD I BUY ONE?

The Super-Matic is definitely one of the most exciting breakthroughs in guitar technology that we've seen in a considerable while. Its potential is undeniable, especially when you view it as an aid to delivering a smooth stage performance, unhampered by awkward guitar changes or on-stage re-tuning. Even if the actual Super-Matic guitar itself doesn't grab you the ATD self tuning bridge still feels like a genuine breakthrough. OK, it isn't perfect in that it requires a bit of patience until the re-tuning process completes itself (you can always use these moments to fill your onstage patter by describing that your amazing 'magic' guitar is tuning itself) and programming in your own presets is bit time consuming. However even bearing all this in mind the ATD's unfailing accuracy is very seductive and it really works! There are one or two interesting alternatives in the form of the Robot Guitar and the Line 6 Variax that uses digital processing to create the effect of altered tunings without actually altering the pitch of the guitar strings in real time but the open-ended potential of the ATD bridge and the Fret-King Super-Matic suggests that for the time being at least, this British manufacturer is at the cutting edge.