

FRET-KING

Ventura Super 60 SSH

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The Fret-King Ventura Super 60 combines authentic vintage tones with one of the most distinctive designs you'll ever see. **Words:** Tim Slater

As its name suggests, the Fret-King Ventura Super 60 was inspired by the evocative sounds of 1960s instrumental rock and the offbeat guitars that are associated with that particular musical genre. Surf music's twangy reverb-drenched tones inadvertently inspired later generations of post punk bands and like surf music itself, the Fret-King Ventura also seems able to cross over into different musical landscapes virtually seamlessly. The Ventura's goofball retro design might suggest a bygone era but its chameleon-like ability to blend in to

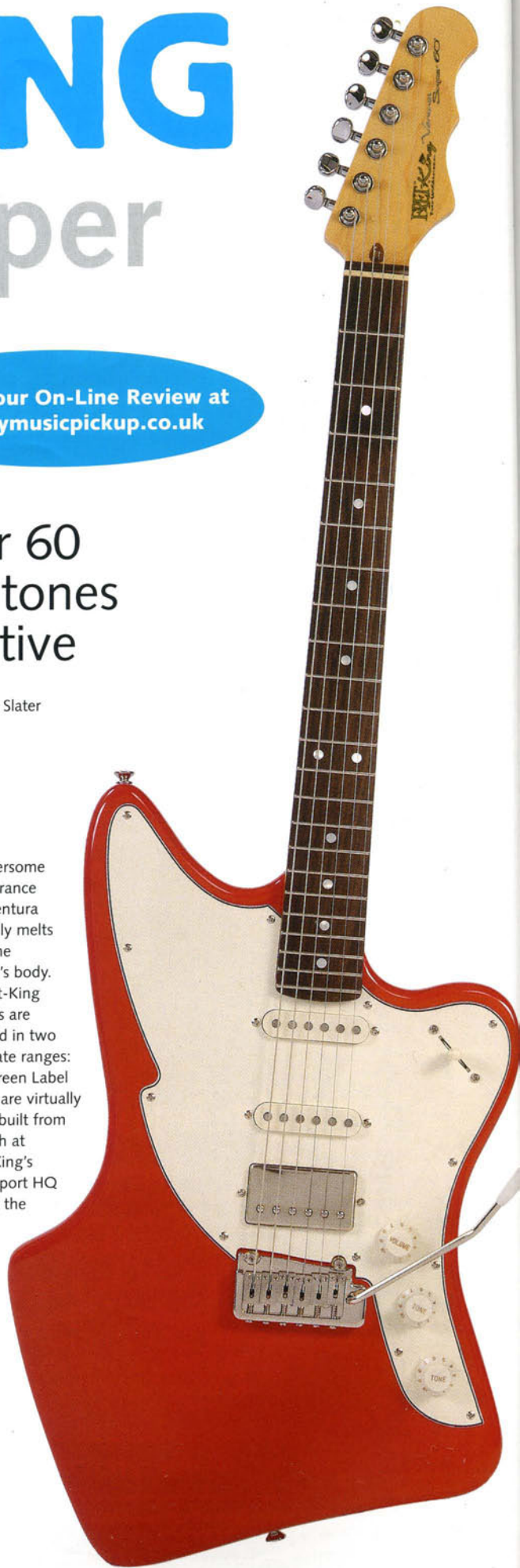
an impressive number of varied musical situations makes this guitar very difficult to pigeonhole.

Body and Neck

The Ventura definitely makes a statement and never fails to illicit a strong response whenever someone sees it for the first time. Not surprisingly, perhaps, the most common reaction is a look of disbelief bordering on mild horror, generally followed by 'ugh', topped-off by a look of bewilderment as soon as it begins to sink in how perfectly the oddly shaped Ventura moulds itself to the player's body. Once the initial shock fades, you can see that the Ventura owes its strange angular form to a blend of several different influences: a little bit of Fender Jazzmaster at the front end, maybe a sprinkling of non-reverse Gibson Firebird or Explorer informing that curious bulbous hump at the back? Regardless of its strangely mixed lineage the Ventura feels incredibly comfortable to play, its rear body contours and subtly rolled front forearm rest owe an obvious debt to a vintage Strat's luxurious curves and despite its bizarre and somewhat

cumbersome appearance the Ventura virtually melts into the player's body.

Fret-King guitars are offered in two separate ranges: the Green Label series are virtually hand built from scratch at Fret-King's Southport HQ whilst the



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SRP £729.00

All prices include VAT

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guitars that form the Blue Label line are manufactured in the Far East to strictly controlled specifications.

Our review Ventura Super 60 belongs to Fret-King's Blue Label series and its traditional construction centres on a two-piece alder body and a bolt-on maple neck. The Ventura's designer, Trevor Wilkinson, has apparently based the neck profile on a familiar vintage pattern and so we find a rounded but nevertheless fairly slim 'C' shape neck that still feels fairly contemporary thanks to the rosewood fingerboard's supple 10-inch radius and 22 frets, which both help to introduce a modern feeling of easy playability.

Electronics & Hardware

The Ventura Super 60's humbucker-plus-twin single coils pickup layout offers a workable balance between the single coils' sprightly twang and the humbucker's darker and more muscular voice. Being a Fret-King guitar, you can bet that there is more

progressive linear action feels much smoother than the abrupt 'on-off' of a traditional coil-tap circuit and while the end result sounds essentially the same the Vari-coil circuit is arguably more versatile thanks to its subtlety.

The chunky Wilkinson vibrato bridge is a nice example of a vintage fulcrum-style vibrato that has been upgraded to more contemporary specs. The bridge pivots on a two-point fulcrum whose unusual offset design is claimed to improve tuning stability by preventing the bridge from sticking on the posts under heavy whammy abuse! The heavy-duty feel is compounded by a low profile surround that prevents the six sold steel bridge saddles from slipping sideways. It feels exceptionally comfortable and the vibrato's action offers a good range from subtle surf undulations to manic Hendrix-style dive bombing, topped-off by impressive tuning stability.

Generally speaking, I'm not a fan of push-in vibrato arms – they don't

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Sounds

The bridge humbucker is a Wilkinson WHHB model; a fairly low output ceramic humbucker that Wilkinson claims combines the crisp highs that ceramic pickups are known for along with the warmth of a vintage-style alnico PAF pickup. It sounds a bit unlikely but if anyone is going to nail it, you can bet that Trevor Wilkinson wouldn't release anything bearing his name unless he was satisfied that it works and to be fair you'd hardly believe that the WHHB is a ceramic pickup.

It certainly doesn't have the aggressive heavy metal tone and characteristic searing top end that

up the bridge tone a little, placing the Vari-coil control around $\frac{3}{4}$ brings the bridge pickup's tone more in-line with the phat-yet-powerful sound of a P-90 style single coil. It's certainly a great way of getting a bit more bite from the bridge pickup without necessarily compromising the extra punch you get from the humbucker's superior output.

The pickups are linked to a standard five-way blade selector switch and the vintage style alnico single coils sound appropriately silky. Their sparkly highs and a firm but not overly powerful low end lends the single coils tones a delicacy and detail that sounds sweet and easy on the ear whilst also delivering the right kind of forceful clout when you need to get down and dirty with it. The single coils' classic elasticity delivers exactly the type of versatility one would hope for; positions two and four on the selector unleashes the wispy hollowness and 'quack' so beloved of many Strat players, complimented by the more robust tones of the individual neck and middle pickups. There are none of the quirky strangulated tones that you'd associate with a guitar like a Fender Jaguar, for example; the Ventura 60 sounds pretty much like a straight-down-the-line classic augmented by the pokey sounding bridge humbucker. The Vari-coil adds an extra degree of versatility but the Ventura's main strength is that it places quality and usability above a selection of whacky sounds that few players would find much use for. **PM**



The popular humbucker-plus-twin single coil pickup array offers a wealth of great tones

going on under the hood than appearances might suggest and the humbucker is wired to a special tone-circuit that Fret-King called 'Vari-coil'. Not strictly a coil tap in the traditional sense in that it doesn't use a conventional switch to select between humbucking and tapped faux-single coil sounds, Vari-coil uses a rotary control located in place of the lower tone pot that gradually adjusts the bridge humbucker voicing to single coil mode and vice-versa. Vari-coil's

seem to feel as tight as the old school screw-in types – but you can't knock this one; the whammy bar sits firmly in its socket and doesn't flop about like a pair of drawers on a washing line. The overall impression of a carefully chosen selection of hardware is completed by a set of good quality chrome Gotoh tuners, a good quality Far Eastern brand, and in this case they compliment the vibrato bridge by helping to maintain a very reliable and stable tuning.

one would normally associate with a ceramic unit and if anything the WHHB actually sounds quite dark. This is where the Vari-coil circuit really scores; going from a full humbucking mode to a single coil sound in one easy motion is useful enough but if you want to lighten

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SHOULD I BUY ONE?

They say that looks are only skin deep but you'd have to really love the Ventura Super 60 to fall for it purely on sight. It's unconventional looks ('fugly' some might say) make it an ideal stage guitar, but it isn't until you pick one up and play it that you realise what a superbly designed and great sounding guitar the Ventura Super 60 actually is. The unwieldy looking design won't appeal to everyone but if you can look beyond that – or indeed actively embrace it as the early post punk bands did with the likes of Fender's ugly ducklings the Jaguar and Jazzmaster – then you'll definitely enjoy the benefit of standing out – and by that we mean way out – from the crowd.