





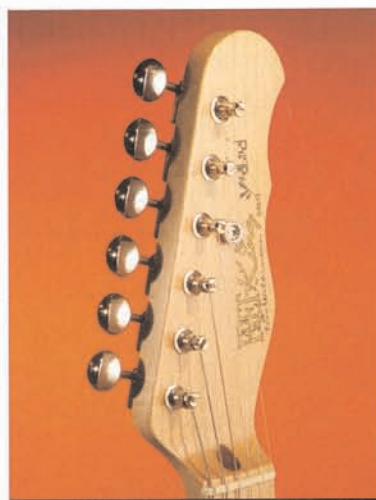
Never underestimate what a single pickup can do, not on a guitar as sweetly built as this toneful, lightweight, stripped-down Fret-King. Review by Marcus Leadley

# Fret-King

## Country Squire Yardbird

If you look closely enough at most electric guitars designed in England today, it seems you'll find Trevor Wilkinson grinning back at you. As one of this country's best known and most experienced designers, he's a busy man - but Fret-King is his own brand, and it holds a special place in the man's affections. You can spot it easily; the attention to detail, well thought-through stylistic touches, and quality materials. This Country Squire Yardbird is a Green Label guitar, which means it's been hand-built at the company's Southport custom shop. Top of the line, then - not that it's any easier to fault the quality of the Korean-built Blue Label guitars.

Generally speaking, Fret-Kings riff on Fender and Gibson themes. The Yardbird not only pays homage to one of Fender's early single pickup classics, the Esquire, but is also modelled on the specific 1954 guitar used by Jeff Beck with the Yardbirds. Perhaps it should be called the Fret-King Walker Brothers as it originally belonged to John Maus, who contoured the body to make it feel more comfortably like a Strat. Beck bought the guitar for £75 while the two bands were on tour together in 1965. Beck didn't want a rosewood board, the current option of the day, but he was rather miffed at paying this price for a secondhand instrument when he could have got a nice new one for £10 more. Beck's primary contribution to the guitar's spec, it seems, was swapping



The original-design Fret-King headstock comes with a cool version of the original Yardbirds logo



The one-piece maple neck has a walnut skunk stripe and a quality set of chrome Kluson-alike tuners

**The Yardbird not only pays homage to a Fender single-pickup classic but is also modelled on Jeff Beck's 1954 guitar**

over the brass bridge saddles from another Tele. Eventually, during the making of *Blow By Blow*, he traded it to Clapton for a Tele with two humbuckers. The original guitar is now owned by Seymour Duncan, and Fender has produced a couple of tributes of its own.

Being a 'riff', not a copy, this Fret-King Yardbird offers the spirit, facilities and dimensions but not the look of the original. The original featured a

two-piece swamp ash body in blond; this Yardbird has a one-piece body in the same wood but the rich honey blond has a golden yellow hue and is totally transparent. It's very appealing and shows off the wood well. Freed from the constraints of reproduction there's been no temptation to relic the instrument, so any battle scars it gets will be all yours, and as the body chamfers have been left unfinished, or at best lightly sealed, ➤

### FACTFILE

#### COUNTRY SQUIRE YARDBIRD

**Description:** Solidbody electric guitar. Made in UK

**Price:** £1499

**Build:** Swamp ash body, solid maple four-bolt neck with 21-fret fingerboard. Vintage ashtray-style bridge with strings-through body anchoring and brass saddles, all chrome hardware, Kluson-style tuners

**Electrics:** One Seymour Duncan Broadcaster repro pickup, three-way selector offering tone bypass, regular, or preset rhythm-sound capacitor positions. Single tone and single volume

**Finishes:** Honey blond only

**Scale length:** 25.5"/648mm

**Neck width:**

Nut 42mm

12th fret 51.4mm

**Depth of neck:**

First fret 22.2mm

12th fret 24.6mm

**String spacing:**

Nut 35.2mm

Bridge 54.2mm

**Action as supplied:**

12th fret treble 1.5mm

12th fret bass 2.0mm

**Weight:** 3.18kg/7lbs

**Contact:**

JHS Ltd

0113 286 5381

www.fret-king.com

## THE COMPETITION

### FENDER Classic Series Esquire

At around £415 on the street for this Mexican-made reissue, you can afford to take a dirty great file to the body yourself

RRP: £699

### GORDON SMITH Classic T

Another British maker offering a T-style with different pickup configurations. Bet they'd do you an Esquire version

RRP: FROM £649

### FENDER Seymour Duncan Signature Esquire

A tasty two-tone sunburst vintage-style ash/maple Esquire with a special Seymour Duncan pickup and a switch giving full output and two taps

RRP: £1900

the guitar will take on some grime pretty quickly and develop a well-played look. Ergonomically the chamfers do work well - they make the guitar feel less like a Tele and more like a Tom Anderson Drop Top T, but that's no bad thing.

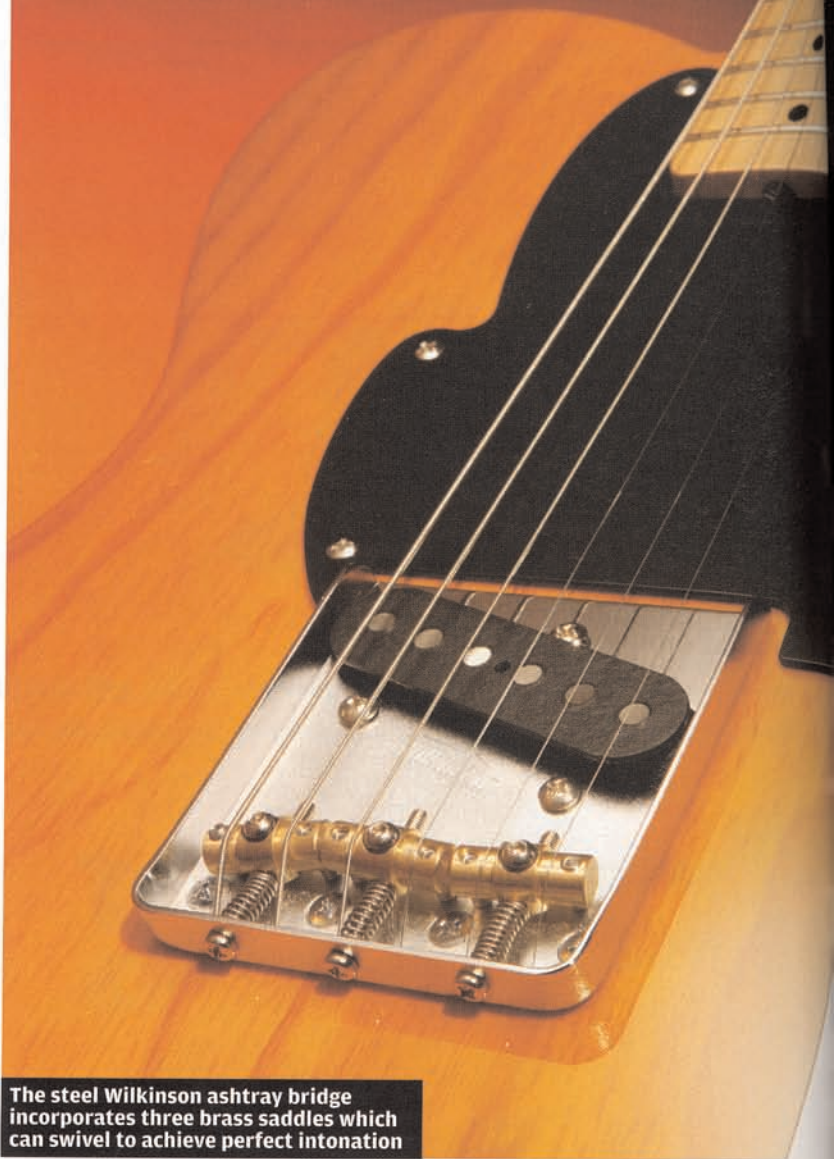
The 21-fret solid maple neck is a peach. It feels as if you've been playing it for years, and with narrow fretwire and well-rounded fingerboard edges the twangy, fast feel and the snappy, quacky tone demands to be plugged in.

You may be wondering what a three-way selector on a one-pickup guitar does. Here, 'bridge' position bypasses the tone circuit; it's the brightest and highest output setting. 'Middle' engages the tone circuit, giving a slight treble roll-off; barely perceptible at full treble, but there all the same. 'Neck' position is something else; a tone preset where two caps and a resistor choke the top end, giving a rhythm/bass voice. This was exactly how the old Esquires worked.

## SOUNDS

The Seymour Duncan Broadcaster repro captures all the clarity and twang of the Yardbird's unplugged sound. Compared to a lot of electrics, especially those with humbuckers, you'll need to wind off some top end; this pickup is designed for slightly soupy vintage amps and is very bright in combination with these woods. Once the amp's adjusted, the guitar sounds fantastic with rich, clear highs and musical mids. The big bass thump is

The ribcage and forearm cuts have been left unfinished to evoke the look of Beck's home-modded original



The steel Wilkinson ashtray bridge incorporates three brass saddles which can swivel to achieve perfect intonation

## The Yardbird is a guitar that makes you want to play all night, and it's as flexible as your style and tastes will allow

also really appealing. This much clarity and twang immediately suggests country music, but Esquire players include Syd Barrett, Paul McCartney and Bruce Springsteen - yes, this guitar goes to a whole heap of places.

Moving between 'back' and 'up' positions on the selector has a marginal effect unless you 'preset' the tone rotary, in which case you can switch from a slightly rolled-off rhythm tone to a bright and biting lead. With the tone bypassed the Yardbird hints at more presence, sparkle and output, and this can always be used to good effect for recording. Not surprisingly the guitar does blues as if it was born for it when you wind up the amp, and going punk or Quo is just a matter of attitude. The selector-forward treble cut position is a bit of a challenge at first, with a significant volume drop to work around and very little definition. I don't think it's great for rhythm (unless you want the six-string equivalent of mumbling on your song), but hit a clean boost pedal to deal with the volume issue and you have a brilliant, wailing crying tone, great for weepy solos.

## VERDICT

The Fret-King Yardbird is an excellent guitar - just the sort of instrument that makes you want to play all night, and as flexible as your style and tastes will allow. One pickup is certainly no limitation; live or in the studio, you won't need another guitar if the T-style vibe is your thing. It's British-built and, pleasingly, can compete with anything made in the States or other centre of fretting excellence. It plays great, sounds great, looks great, and - apart from the ripple on the top edge of the scratchplate, which might be one curve too far - I can't think of a single thing about it that I don't like.

## FINAL SCORE

Build Quality	19/20
Playability	18/20
Sound	19/20
Value for money	17/20
Vibe	17/20

**TOTAL** ..... **90%**

Good for... blues, rock, pop, country, western... you name it

Look elsewhere... for humbuckers or a vibrato