

# The Modern Fender

The Player Plus guitars are the latest to modernise the Fender guitar recipe. In fact, 'modern' is winning the battle against 'vintage'. Who'd have thought it?

Words Dave Burrluck



If these new Player Plus guitars up the spec over the standard Player Series models, they also reflect a seismic shift in how we play guitar today. "Player Plus is an extension of the Player Series, which was the most widely adopted Fender guitar series in 2020 and has sold more than 400k units since its 2018 debut," states Fender's launch PR. "Millions of new players began their learning journey during the pandemic, and for many, the Player Series provided a seamless entry into the Fender brand.

"As digital platforms like Tik Tok have opened up pathways for artists to find audiences," it continues, "Fender has designed Player Plus for the generation leading the charge: both online and as live music begins to roar back after its hiatus."

Indeed, in September Fender launched its own Tik Tok channel with the Player Plus series as its debut. We're told to expect "exclusive content, product demos and educational content, tailor-made for both passionate musicians and aspiring artists" on the app – with musicians such as bassist Blu DeTiger, country artist Hannah Dasher, NYC multi-instrumentalist Gabriel Garzón-Montano, California punk-rockers Destroy Boys and Brit duo Nova Twins making appearances as well.






Fender is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year and, of course, times change, as Justin Norvell, EVP Fender Products, said of the new guitars at the Player Plus launch: "Fender's balance – being 70-plus years old – is really about past, present and future, and we always want to make sure we're staying relevant and with the times. So while we love the vintage stuff that we do, we are always pressing it forward with

**"Fender has designed Player Plus for the generation leading the charge: online and live" Justin Norvell**

instruments like the [American] Ultra that we have higher up in the range. But the idea to have a kind of Ultra 'light' instrument that's just above the Player series makes a lot of sense to us and helps to create a kind of stairway, or a ladder, to navigate the line and make sure there's something for everyone. So it's modern but we didn't saw the horns off 'em or anything – it's still a Stratocaster. It's still everything that people want it to be."

So, while the past is covered by the Mexican-made Vintera range and the American Original, the other main series have become a lot more contemporary or modern. Using the Stratocaster as our guide, what on earth are the differences between Player, Player Plus, American Performer, American Professional II and American Ultra series?

Perhaps the key series is the Corona-made American Professional II, more akin to a firmware upgrade to the previous American Professional series that replaced the long-running American Standard series in 2016. Notable changes here included the introduction of roasted pine as a replacement for the threatened American ash, a contoured heel with Micro-Tilt adjustment, 'smoother' satin back finish, coined "Super-Natural", and heavier rolling to the fingerboard edges, a new cold-rolled steel block for the two-post bridge, and updated mixed magnet V-Mod II pickups. Each American Pro II model also featured a new-to-Fender push-push switch on the tone control adding, on the three single-coil Strats, neck and bridge and all three together options, as we get on the Player Plus. The standard Stratocaster costs £1,749 including case. State-of-the-art USA Fender? Pretty much.

<b>At A Glance</b> Specification details for the 'modern' Fender Stratocaster	 <b>PLAYER STRAT</b>	 <b>PLAYER PLUS STRAT</b>	 <b>AMERICAN PERFORMER STRAT</b>	 <b>AMERICAN PROFESSIONAL II</b>	 <b>AMERICAN ULTRA STRAT</b>
<b>Nut material/ width</b>	Synthetic bone/ 42mm (1.650")	Synthetic bone/ 42.8mm (1.685")	Synthetic bone/ 42.8mm (1.685")	Bone./ 42.8mm (1.685")	Bone/42.8mm (1.685")
<b>'Board radius</b>	241mm (9.5")	305mm (12")	241mm (9.5")	241mm (9.5")	254-356mm (10-14")
<b>Frets</b>	Medium Jumbo .103 x .046"	Medium Jumbo .103 x .046"	Jumbo .110 x .055"	Jumbo Narrow .094 x .054"	Medium Jumbo .103 x .046"
<b>Neck profile</b>	Modern C	Player Plus Modern C	Modern C	Modern Deep 'C'	Modern D
<b>Neck depth 1st fret</b>	20.83mm (.820")	20.83mm (.820")	20.83mm (.820")	20.83mm (.820")	20.83mm (.820")
<b>Neck depth 12th</b>	22.1mm (.870")	22.1mm (.870")	22.1mm (.870")	23.4mm (.920")	22.1mm (.870")
<b>Pickups</b>	Player Series Alnico 5	Player Plus Noiseless	Yosemite	V-Mod II	Ultra Noiseless Vintage Strat
<b>Auxiliary sounds</b>	None	Pull-push tone adds neck pickup to position 1 and 2	Pull-push tone adds neck pickup to position 1 and 2	Push-push tone control adds neck pickup to position 1 and 2	S-1 switch on volume control adds neck pickup to position 1 and 2

1. The 'standard' USA-made range is the American Professional II, a perfect mix of vintage and modern features

2. Combining USA-made necks and bodies with Mexican-level hardware, the American Performer

series models are the entry point to the USA Fender range

3. Within the American Ultra range we have the most modern style of all the full Fender ranges – they're about as far from vintage as you can buy



However, a year earlier saw the launch of the American Ultra series, certainly the most modern vision of the Stratocaster (and part of the inspiration for the Player Plus). The Ultras come with new-generation Noiseless pickups, S1-switching on the volume control, locking tuners, that contoured heel (but no Micro-Tilt) with rear contouring, and it's the only Fender production range that offers a compound radius fingerboard. Appearing at the start of 2021 – although we haven't seen them yet – are an extension to that range, the American Ultra Luxe guitars, which push the envelope further with stainless-steel frets. The American Ultra Stratocaster costs £2,049 including a moulded case.

The modern Fender guitar might have been evolving, but costs were rising – which is where, in 2018, the Mexican-made Player series took over from the Standard. From what Fender has said, in terms of units it is the company's biggest-selling series. It currently includes some 18 models, with prices ranging from £589 for the Duo-Sonic and Mustang up to £879 for the Strat Floyd Rose. Coming back to our Stratocaster reference, which costs £675, we have alder-only bodies, a maple neck with satin back and glossed face and headstock, and Player Series Alnico 5 Strat single coils. But as you

can see from our At A Glance specification table above, it has a narrow nut width and 'midway' 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius. It also features a two-point vibrato but with pressed-steel saddles and non-locking tuners. The Player Stratocaster will get you started and, if you know how, can be souped up considerably.

Which leaves the American Performer series that replaced – and expanded upon – the previous 'gateway' USA series, the American Special. Maple necks, with either maple or rosewood fingerboards, and alder-only bodies are made in Corona, but many parts, such as the Strats' vibratos, are Asian, as with the outgoing American Specials and typical Mexican-made guitars. But, again, these have their own thing going on with 70s-style headstocks, and Tim Shaw-designed Yosemite single coils (named after the National Park in California) and DoubleTap humbuckers. The Stratocaster here employs the 'seven sound' mod, plus the Greasebucket tone control on the bridge pickup. The American Performer Strat costs £1,199 with a gigbag and we suspect is rather overlooked.

The modern Fender is in the lead, but the key vintage-style American Originals date back to 2018. Can we expect a refresh next year? We might take a bet on that... **G**