

FIRST PLAY



SQUIER PARANORMAL JAZZMASTER XII £385

WHAT IS IT? Electric 12-string Jazzmaster at a price point that makes it a realistic purchase



SQUIER PARANORMAL CUSTOM NASHVILLE STRATOCASTER £369

WHAT IS IT? A Stratocaster body, loaded with Telecaster features, three pickups and seven voices

Paranormal Activity

Leave your preconceptions at the door because some of the most interesting guitars to come out of the Fender stable in 2023 could well say Squier on the headstock

Words Stuart Williams **Photography** Olly Curtis

If there's one thing that has changed at the more affordable end of guitar brands' offerings over the last decade or so, it's choice. Formerly the reserve of those willing – or maybe even at times begrudgingly – to pay more in order to get closer to the spec they wanted, the import guitar boom has well and truly busted down the door, behind which sit countless options.

That's a space occupied by Squier's Paranormal series. Since its introduction, it has not only given us affordable versions of Fender's more leftfield designs, but it's also created its own reimagined, mashed-up and experimental guitars. For some players, the Squier name holds certain preconceptions, but for others it's a well-priced vehicle to more sounds and greater versatility, and the two guitars we've selected for review here represent that ethos in a completely contradictory nutshell.





1. The Jazzmaster XII's hardtail bridge is described as a 'hybrid' due to the fact that the bass strings are fitted through the body. Meanwhile, the corresponding treble strings are threaded and anchored top-mount style through the bridge's surface holes

2. There are three voices on offer via a traditional three-way switch, giving us neck/middle/bridge. They're all usable, too, with chiming scoop coming from the neck, wider, more vintage from the bridge, and a lush blend of the two in the middle position

First up is the Paranormal Jazzmaster XII. Yes, you read that correctly, it's an offset 12-string electric, which, at any other price, would likely epitomise the word 'niche', but here it sees itself flung back in contention thanks to the sort of price tag that will take a guitar of this ilk from 'I can't justify it' to 'Worth a punt!'

Next, at the other end of the spectrum, is the Paranormal Nashville Stratocaster, which takes the familiar Strat outline and populates it with features from everyone's favourite 'versatile guitar', the Telecaster. Two very different beasts, indeed. However, there are some constants across the entire Paranormal range when it comes to the base platform these guitars are built on. For example, there's the poplar body – a softer wood that is often overlooked thanks to its lack of visual appeal, although burled poplar does appear on some higher-end guitars – and the maple neck/laurel fingerboard combination with a 648mm (25.5-inch) scale length, a 241mm (9.5-inch) fingerboard radius, 21 medium-tall frets and Fender-designed pickups.

Feel & Sounds

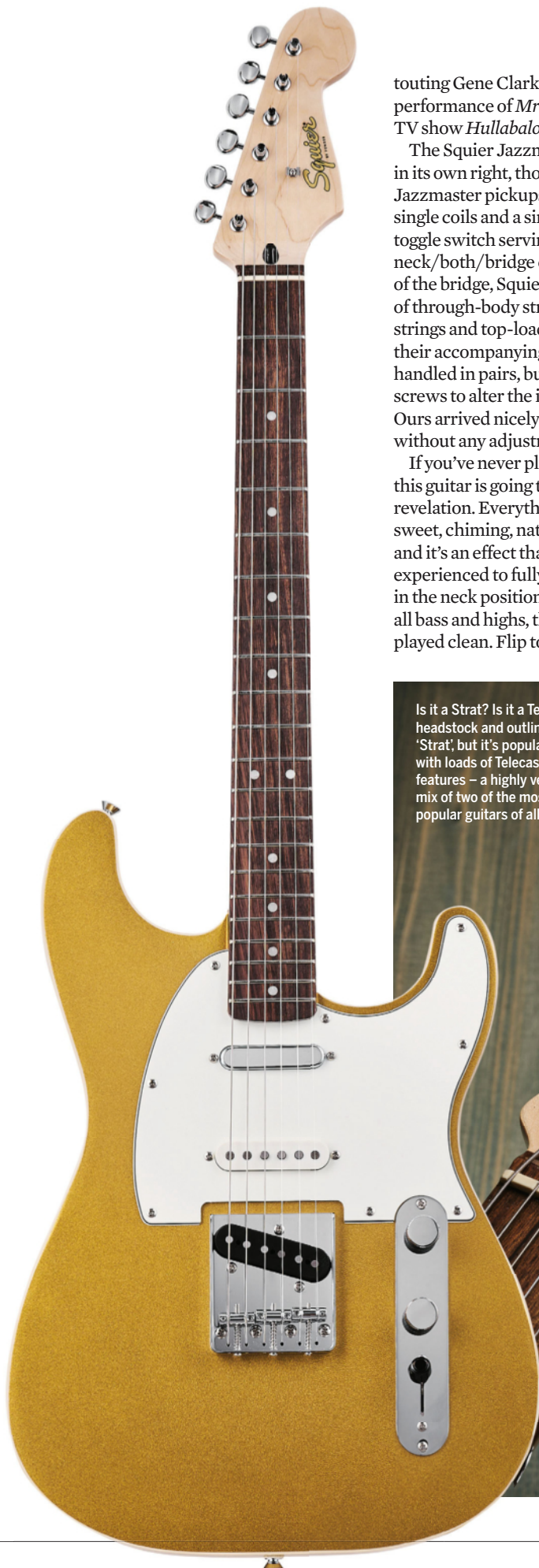
Now, this isn't the first time a Fender-owned brand has put its name to a 12-string electric, not least an offset one. The Electric XII launched in 1965, complete with an offset body as well as that (large enough to make your Starcaster blush) 'hockey stick' headstock, also seen on Fender's Villager acoustics. The Electric XII was

3. This Paranormal model harks back slightly to Fender's iconic Electric XII, which has been played by many-a-legend since its short life in the 60s. The offset body tips its hat to the original, as does the 'hockey stick' headstock

If you've never played a 12-string before, Squier's Jazzmaster XII is going to be something of a revelation

only in production until 1969, but that didn't stop it from finding its way into the hands of the likes of Jimmy Page (yes, you can hear it on *Stairway...*), Jeff Beck and Pete Townshend. Eric Clapton even got in on the action during his Cream days, and it just about passed the test of 12-string obsessives The Byrds, then signed to CBS, when a pre-tambourine/harmonica-





touting Gene Clark used one for the band's performance of *Mr Tambourine Man* on TV show *Hullabaloo*.

The Squier Jazzmaster XII is a model in its own right, though, with Alnico Jazzmaster pickups replacing the split single coils and a simplified three-position toggle switch serving up the expected neck/both/bridge configuration. Talking of the bridge, Squier has used a hybrid of through-body stringing for the bass strings and top-loaded anchoring for their accompanying trebles. Intonation is handled in pairs, but there are adjustment screws to alter the individual string heights. Ours arrived nicely set up and buzz-free, without any adjustment required.

If you've never played a 12-string before, this guitar is going to be something of a revelation. Everything you've heard about sweet, chiming, natural chorus is true, and it's an effect that really needs to be experienced to fully grasp. This translates in the neck position with hi-fi like clarity, all bass and highs, that's addictive when played clean. Flip to the bridge position,

however, and it's a bit like going back in time with mid-rich, 60s-style tones that poke through with a bit of crunch and take on a swampy Americana vibe with a bit of added gain. Nevertheless, it's the middle position where we found the most jangle, with the blended pickups seemingly introducing even more of the most organic chorusing you can get. Unusually, it's almost an entirely plug 'n' play guitar, with very little need to adjust the controls once you've selected your pickup.

The Nashville Stratocaster isn't the first time we've seen Fender hybridise Leo's two most popular designs, either. While the Player Plus series saw the concept introduced with a Tele shape, here, the Squier designers have opted to go with the Strat outline, except it's double-bound, just like a Custom Telecaster. Sticking with that theme, there's no belly carve and no forearm contour. It's got a Strat headstock, but beyond that it's swaying more towards the Telecaster side of its DNA with a Tele scratchplate, three-saddle bridge and that all-familiar Tele control plate.

Is it a Strat? Is it a Tele? The headstock and outline say 'Strat', but it's populated with loads of Telecaster features – a highly versatile mix of two of the most popular guitars of all time





4. The three-saddle bridge, scratchplate, control plate and internally mounted barrel jack socket all show off the Nashville's Tele chromosomes, not to mention the double-binding and contour-less slab body

That is, until you reach for the selector switch. The lever has five positions like you'll find on a Stratocaster, giving you: bridge; middle and bridge; middle; middle and neck; and neck-only positions. But it doesn't stop there because there's a pull-switch on the tone control that engages the neck pickup in positions 1 and 2, totalling seven selectable voicings.

The three main positions perform as you might expect, just not how you might

clean. Then the neck pickup is back in Tele-firma, more open, more bite and a lot of twang. But that's to be expected.

What was most surprising was engaging the neck pickup in positions alongside the bridge single coil. It introduces a similar response as a well-set compressor, culminating in a stronger attack and squashier feel that bizarrely gives the impression of increased string tension. With the switch engaged, it feels like you

5. Along with the unusual pickup array, the master volume and tone are joined by a pull-switch on that tone control, which engages the neck pickup in positions 1 and 2 for seven voices

The Strat is a triumphant display of repurposing. A 'do-most-things' guitar with an expansive vocabulary

have heard in this combination. The neck pickup delivers a thick, thumpy low-end coupled with a snappy attack at the top that we found to be home for everything from Jimi-style rhythm to Texas lead, and with a bit of a bump in the gain we're firmly in Tom Morello riff territory. The middle position (a Strat pickup) obviously removes the deep, woody sound and swaps it for a bit more of a honk, which works great for vintage soul rhythm sounds when played





6

can hit the strings harder with a more controlled sound. It's here that it truly lives up to its name, pumping out biting picked notes that country and funk players will love, without becoming shrill.

Verdict

With so many brands applying their names to East Asian-made instruments, we think the perception of Squier – much like rival Epiphone – has probably changed in recent years. It's no longer the 'entry-level one', and guitars such as these are the proof. Asking guitar designers to come up with something different could result in a dog's dinner of ideas that don't work, but here Squier has made a stew that people are likely to want to eat.

The Jazzmaster XII is unlikely to be anyone's all-day guitar, but it solves a problem and gives access to a world of fun tones that may otherwise not be discovered by many players who don't want to risk forking out. Meanwhile, the Custom Nashville Stratocaster model is a triumphant display of repurposing. Is it a do-it-all guitar? 'Do-most-things' more like, and if you're playing R&B, blues, country or funk in any combination, it's got an expansive vocabulary. **G**

6. Two Tele pickups flank a Strat single coil in the middle position, and the lever is a five- not three-position switch



SQUIER PARANORMAL JAZZMASTER XII

PRICE: £385
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: 12-string solidbody electric
BODY: Poplar
NECK: Graphite reinforced maple, C-shape profile
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Laurel, pearloid dot inlays, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, narrow tall
HARDWARE: Chrome-plated, string-through-body/top-loaded bridge, split-post vintage-style tuners – nickel/chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: 2x Fender-designed Alnico Jazzmaster single coils, 3-way toggle selector switch, master volume and tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.7/8.16
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: Other offsets in the Paranormal range include the Offset Telecaster (£365), Offset Telecaster SH (from £399), Super-Sonic (£409) and Cyclone (£409)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Olympic White (as reviewed), Lake Placid Blue – all gloss polyurethane

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PROS A great-quality specialist guitar at a price point that will remove a lot of the 'justification' hurdles for many

CONS You'll have someone's eye out with the headstock; restringing/tuning will now take twice as long!



SQUIER PARANORMAL CUSTOM NASHVILLE STRATOCASTER

PRICE: £369
ORIGIN: China
TYPE: Solidbody Telecaster/Stratocaster hybrid
BODY: Poplar, double-bound Stratocaster outline
NECK: Maple, C-shape profile
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Synthetic bone/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Laurel, pearloid dot inlays, 241mm (9.5") radius
FRETS: 21, narrow tall
HARDWARE: Chrome-plated, string-through-body Telecaster three-saddle bridge, vintage-style tuners – nickel/chrome-plated
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52mm
ELECTRICS: Fender-designed Alnico single coils: T-style (neck and bridge) and S-style (middle), 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (with pull-switch to add neck pickup to positions 1 and 2 of the pickup selector)
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.6/7.95
OPTIONS: No
RANGE OPTIONS: The other different Strat in the Paranormal range is the Strat-o-Sonic (£369). There are also more Tele-shapes: single-pickup Esquire Deluxe (£369), Cabronita Telecaster Thinline (£395) and Baritone Cabronita Tele (£399)
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISH: Aztec Gold (as reviewed), Chocolate 2-Color Sunburst



PROS A very versatile 'hybrid' design that will have you covered for many different styles outside of hard rock and metal

CONS Some might prefer a more comfortable body; there could be a bit of a learning curve with the seven switch combinations