



Harley Benton ST-Modern HSS

Tyler Bryant's signature tube combo brings more power, blendable channels and headroom for pedals – but you might want to just crank it up for that sweet overdrive

By Rob Laing

HARLEY BENTON'S ST series of electric guitars has the familiar curves and newer levels of affordability to make it a winning formula for the Thomann brand, and unsurprisingly it's proved a consistent hit with players. But in 2024 the company decided to push the envelope of the ST, following its achievements with the Fusion line. It proved an instant hit.

The ST-Modern Plus HSS took some spec cues from the Fusion via stainless steel frets and roasted maple necks. While a compound radius, rolled fingerboard edges, locking tuners and fluorescent fret side markers further underline the modern premium features at an eyebrow-raisingly sub-\$350 price point. Even the left-handed players weren't left out. No wonder there is a seven-week wait to buy one at the time of writing. But Harley Benton isn't done with the ST-Moderns...

The Deluxe Series ST-Modern follows, jettisoning some – but certainly not all – of those premium specs but offering a guitar at well under half the price of the Plus in return. We're talking \$156 for this Shell Pink HSS ST-Modern. Just how low can Harley Benton go? Let's find out.

Build quality

Let's get the bad news on the aesthetic out the way – and it's really not that bad, but it is an odd one. A barcode and serial number on the back of the headstock... really? Yes, it's printed on there. Maybe one for the rubbing alcohol to take care of if it bugs you.

Let's move on, because there is much to celebrate here. A smooth satin maple neck with springy tension, for starters. It's compound radius too; 12-16". Described as a 'Modern D' (clearly taking a leaf out of the Fender Ultra playbook) but feels shallower in the palm.

The flatter radius is playing into that feel here (Fender's is 10-14"). It's definitely a marked change to the Modern C some may be used to, and more a Charvel vibe for me (there's a truss rod wheel like that brand use too). But it feels good, it feels quality. No sharp frets. The edges of the 'board are rounded too and it really helps with the settling-in period as a player. Just how much would a roasted maple compound radius guitar neck like this cost alone? Certainly more than \$150 in my mind.

The Harley Benton-branded Sung-II ML-55 tuners are locking like the Plus iteration too. They're smooth and stable. The neck concessions are the Plus's glow-in-the-dark side dots and stainless steel frets. A fair trade so far for the price difference, I think.

I also find a sculpted neck heel around the back that really does make a difference to that upper fret access. It's well-executed, and that applies to the general build standard here. The 'QC pass' sticker on our test model is not messing around.

For an HSS S-style guitar the 7.4lbs weight is on the lighter side, though this is poplar and not the alder of the Plus model. Our test ST-Modern definitely feels body heavy, whereas some guitars can feel more balanced with distribution – likely due to the tremolo system and three pickups of course. And like its Plus counterpart, this Shell Pink model comes with the maple 'board, while laurel is available for other select finishes. It's an attractive dusty pink too.

Playability

As I mentioned, if you're coming from most Fenders, the transition to this compound radius with these dimensions is a flatter experience.. A quick neck relief adjustment is in order first (standard practice with review guitars that have been in transit and variable temperatures). And I know truss rod wheel adjusters are offensive to vintage purists, but they are really convenient (you don't need a specific-sized hex key so can use anything that

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fits) and it definitely fits with the impression of classic and modern meeting here.

Action on our test ST-Modern is on the higher side of medium at 1.75mm from the low E and 1.50mm at the high E from the 12th fret. Certainly higher than I prefer on review guitars. With my fret rocker I check for any of the high spots that a low action will expose more, and find a few but no more than I often discover on test electrics that cost more than the ST-Modern. Indeed, I believe players should consider a trip to their local tech for fret leveling with new guitar purchases at some point and budget accordingly. And if you're confident doing fret filing and dressing yourself, all the better.

The tremolo here is s the synchronized Sung-II BS-213 Deluxe system, while the Plus features the superior Babicz FCH 2-Point Z-Series C full-contact tremolo. Quite a wedge of the extra cost of the model is going there actually. Unfortunately for the ST-Modern I'm testing, even light use of the tremolo consistently detunes the B string slightly. It's frustrating. Any Jeff Beck aspirations will need to wait. Perhaps it can be remedied with some work from a tech or DIY too.

That aside, tuning stays solid elsewhere during extensive play. And the feel and comfort of the neck here really is a highlight – an important strength for any guitar to have. The compound radius with the sculpted heel combines to enhance the higher register playability well beyond what I'd expect for a guitar near this price.

Sounds

An HSS configuration has the potential to provide one of the most versatile experiences for an electric guitar. But the pickups and electronics here are where some of the budget price point begins to clearly reflect in the performance.

I tested the Harley Benton ST-Modern through my own Supro Delta King 12 tube amp, one of Harley Benton's JAMster desktop amps (with a Neural DSP Nano Cortex) and a Positive Grid Spark with my pedalboard, including a Wampler Tumnus overdrive pedal. I stacked that with other drives including a Funny Little Boxes 1991 and a Walrus Ages.

I also used it with the models of a Fender Deluxe, Vox AC30 and Marshall Super Lead and Super Bass found in Universal Audio's Dream '65, Ruby '63 and Lion '68 plugins.

Unfortunately, the tone control also has no audible effect between 10 and 3 so it's pretty redundant here. And I'd argue a guitar like this needs two effective tone controls to fully realize its potential. The volume at least has some use in cleaning up.

The HBZ Alnico V neck and middle single-coil pickups are the stronger of the trio here. The neck is percussively woody enough to pass muster, while the middle has the chimy quack to make the second between position pleasingly twangy. They're solid enough and about what you'd expect at the sub-\$200 market.

The bridge HBZ humbucker feels like a lost opportunity. I found it strangely opaque, bordering on wooly considering how high it's raised, and the chunk and crunch for palm-muting is lacking. I'd hoped for more clarity from chord work too, and I found myself activating the coil-split via the tone control to brighten things up. It's certainly the most obvious candidate for an upgrade – though the

GUITARWORLD VERDICT



An excellent neck, impressive core build and locking tuners perform above expectations here. The underwhelming humbucker and tone pot aside, there is much to recommend with the ST-Modern at its bargain price.

PROS

- + Excellent neck feel.
- + Impressive build overall.
- + Compound radius, sculpted heel and locking tuners at a low price.

CONS

- Humbucker could do with an upgrade.
- Tone pot quality reflects the budget price point.

SPECS

TYPE: Six-string electric guitar
MADE: China
BODY: Poplar
NECK: Roasted Canadian maple
FINGERBOARD: Laurel, 12" to 16" compound radius
SCALE LENGTH: 25.5"/648mm
NUT/WIDTH: Graphite, 42mm
FRETS: 22, medium nickel-silver
HARDWARE: Sung-II BS-213 Deluxe vibrato, Sung-II locking tuners
STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE: 53mm
ELECTRICS: HBZ Custom Wound VTH Alnico V humbucker, HBZ Custom Wound VTM/N Alnico V single coils (middle & neck), 5-way selector switch, master volume, master tone (w/coil-split switch)
WEIGHT OF TEST MODEL: 7.4lbs/3.35kg
LEFT-HANDED OPTIONS: Yes (Shell Pink, Flame Bengal Burst, Lake Placid Blue)
FINISHES: Shell Pink (as reviewed), Seafoam Green, Lake Placid Blue, Black, Olympic White, Flame Blue Burst, Flame Bengal Burst
CASE: No

fact the neck position is also routed for a humbucker also opens the H/S/H potential here.

If you're a new player, there are definitely stronger humbucker options out there on the sound side even from the HSS Sonic Series Squier. But that guitar is still \$50 more than this, and doesn't offer the kind of neck and tuner specs the ST-Modern has elsewhere.

Verdict

As a platform for upgrading, the ST-Modern is a very attractive deal. Some new pots and pickups could realise sonic potential here to match the spec elsewhere. But as it is stock it's still a recommendable deal.

The compound radius fretboard allows a best-of-both-worlds scenario for flatter space in the upper frets without sacrificing the bar chord comfort in the lower, rounder range. The roasted maple neck has a lovely feel and that's the kind of thing matters to all us players, but can really keep beginners onside during the early challenging stages of building up the calluses. Solid tuning – that trem issue with the B-string aside – is also welcome.

At this price, some things can't excel, and the bridge bucker and tone pot are the most glaring candidates. But I don't think they're deal-breakers for \$156 considering the overall package. This could well be Harley Benton's most impressive electric guitar platform yet when it comes to value.

