

# FENDER VG STRATOCASTER

Fender and Roland have joined forces again, this time to produce a Stratocaster with a difference.

Text: Brad Watts

It's not all that often we review a guitar in *AudioTechnology* — that's a job best left to the guitar magazines. But every now and then an instrument hits the streets that truly embraces some of the technological advances we've all witnessed during the last 10 years or so. ESP modelling is one such field, and an area that "serious" guitarists do their best to steer clear of. But in the last couple of years systems such as Line 6's Variax range, along with various incarnations of the Roland "GK" standard and the digital Les Paul from Gibson, have infiltrated the "wood is good" domain.

The big drawcard of these guitars is versatility. I'm not talking about *cheap* versatility — like early MIDI guitars being rigged to play maracas or bagpipes — but the ability to emulate real, world guitar tones. That means, the character of a humbucker as opposed to a single-coil pickup, or the twang of a Tele or the quack of a Strat. Roland has been playing this game since the early '90s (remember the GR-100 and GR-207?), so it's hardly surprising to see Roland — now a world leader in guitar synthesis — team up with a world leader in guitar manufacturing, Fender USA. And the obvious choice as to which guitar to get the "virtual" treatment is the ubiquitous Stratocaster. The "Strat" is probably the most widely used and copied guitar on the planet, so it's the immediate choice for re-creating anything you can fantasise with the Roland-ready Strat of a few years back, now installed with a Roland GK hexaphonic pickup.

Roland has for a number of years been modelling alternate guitar formats with its VG line of guitar products. Besides offering simulations of amplifiers and speaker cabinets, the VG guitar systems can mimic particular body designs and pickup configurations. These are the style emulations that allow you to get away with using a single guitar, and save you dragging your Strat, Tele, Les Paul, an acoustic and a 12-string to every gig (assuming you own any of all of them).

These are the emulations that have found their way into the VG Strat. But before you jump to conclusions about Roland cranking the guitar with an unwieldy number of sounds and emulations, think again. The VG Strat is extremely simple to operate and offers only a modest 17 sound pre-sets — all revolving around the guitar's mainstay rock sounds.

## ACE EXAM

But first, let's look at the actual guitar. It's a standard American series Stratocaster that really is the pick of Fender's less exotic models. As opposed to the budget Highway One and Standard series, the American line of Strats feature nice Schaller machine heads, American series staggered pole pickups, two-point tremolo systems and polyurethane body finishes. It's the one you really want if

you've got a spare \$2.7k to drop on a guitar. And while the VG Strat comes with either a rosewood or maple fretboard, the colour options are limited to black or three-tone sunburst (the sunburst is a tad pricier, as per usual). Fender also supplies American series guitars with a solid moulded case rather than the padded gig bags that arrive with the lower-priced models. They're a very nice guitar and well worth the extra killy if you can stretch your budget.

The VG model up for review possessed an extremely nice maple neck, which for me is the ultimate neck — standard headstock design of course! The body, however, (black in this case) looked as though it hadn't been sanded correctly. My guess is that is why it was drilled in as the sacrificial head "dime model".

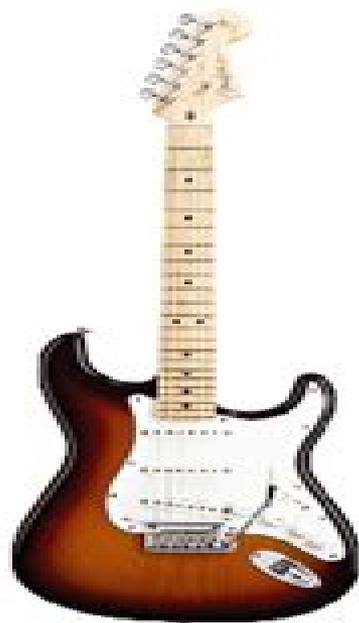
## VIRTUALITY

The "VG" elements of the VG Strat aren't immediately obvious. The Roland pickup is discreetly built in between the bridge pickup and the bridge, and sports an equally discreet Roland design. Slightly more obvious are the two mini-Strat-style knobs that replace the guitar's usual second tone control knob. The only other distinguishing feature you'll notice (and you will notice it) is the alarmingly bright blue LED situated between the remaining tone control and the volume knob. The system activates (or lights on) as soon as you plug a lead into the guitar — that's right, there are no proprietary cables or hookup procedures. Just plug in with a normal guitar lead and go. Power is supplied via four AA batteries that live in a tray on the rear in the body, behind the upper horn.

There's no provision for powering the guitar via AC power, which keeps the concept simple to operate and negates the need for extra cables. Some may wish for an external power source but for ease of use I believe Fender has done the right thing here — the priority being simplicity and usability. A set of Ni-MH rechargables should give you about 10 hours of use, but keeping an extra set on hand would obviously be a sensible move. (The blue LED will begin to flash when the batteries are nearing the end of their charge.) The batteries fit into a cavity before being inserted into the rear cavity — it'd actually be a smart move for Fender to supply a couple of these battery cables so you could have a set on standby for immediate replacement in a gig situation.

## DATING A MODEL

Modelling different guitar sounds is what the VG Strat lives for, so what sounds are actually available? Here the partnership has kept the choices to a minimum, which keeps the instrument inherently simple to drive. All sounds are selected via the two mini-Strat knobs; one is marked "M" for model, the other marked "T" for tuning. The Model knob offers five choices: "N" provides normal operation via the guitar's normal magnetic pickups. In this



# Fender Stratocaster Manual

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## **Table of Contents Fender Stratocaster Manual**

1. Understanding the eBook Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - The Rise of Digital Reading Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Exploring Different Genres
  - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
  - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
  - Popular eBook Platforms
  - Features to Look for in an Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Personalized Recommendations
  - Fender Stratocaster Manual User Reviews and Ratings
  - Fender Stratocaster Manual and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing Fender Stratocaster Manual Free and Paid eBooks
  - Fender Stratocaster Manual Public Domain eBooks
  - Fender Stratocaster Manual eBook Subscription Services

- Fender Stratocaster Manual Budget-Friendly Options
- 6. Navigating Fender Stratocaster Manual eBook Formats
  - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
  - Fender Stratocaster Manual Compatibility with Devices
  - Fender Stratocaster Manual Enhanced eBook Features
- 7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
  - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Highlighting and Note-Taking Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Interactive Elements Fender Stratocaster Manual
- 8. Staying Engaged with Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Joining Online Reading Communities
  - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
  - Following Authors and Publishers Fender Stratocaster Manual
- 9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Benefits of a Digital Library
  - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection Fender Stratocaster Manual
- 10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
  - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
  - Minimizing Distractions
  - Managing Screen Time
- 11. Cultivating a Reading Routine Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Setting Reading Goals Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
- 12. Sourcing Reliable Information of Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Fact-Checking eBook Content of Fender Stratocaster Manual
  - Distinguishing Credible Sources
- 13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
  - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
  - Exploring Educational eBooks
- 14. Embracing eBook Trends

- Integration of Multimedia Elements
- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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