





Second String

As PRS's more affordable USA-made S2 line moves into its second decade, the series gets a revamp with – at last – USA-made pickups and electronics. What took so long?

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker



PRS S2 STANDARD 24 SATIN & VELA SATIN £1,925 & £1,999

CONTACT PRS Europe PHONE 01223 874301 WEB www.prsguitars.com

What You Need To Know

1 These look cheap for USA-made PRS guitars.

We're not sure 'cheap' is the right word, but, yes, the S2 line is around half the price of the top-level Core line models, although they're still made in PRS's Stevensville factory in Maryland.

2 But don't the S2 models use the same pickups and hardware you'll see on the things like the £499 SE CE Satin?

They did, but that's the proposition for this 2024 refresh. While in some cases the new models use the same hardware as the SE and USA CE models, the S2 guitars will all now feature USA-made pickups and wiring – just like the Core line.

3 So, they're just satin finishes – where's the flame maple gone?

There are four all-mahogany satin-finish models; the other nine S2s are gloss-nitro finished. Figured maple tops are used on the gloss-only Custom 24, Custom 24-08, McCarty 594 and Singlecut McCarty 594.

For its first 16 years of production-guitar making, PRS only made its instruments in the USA. When the company finally began to offer the 'offshore' Korean-made SE models – now made in Indonesia – it gave the brand a new, much lower price point but also created a large hole, price wise, in between. From its launch in 2013, the USA S2 line aimed to fill that gap: the essence of PRS, still built alongside the all-singing, all-dancing Core level in Maryland.

The thing is, to achieve the much lower price point, not only was it necessary to streamline and simplify the build process, but the S2 guitars still used pretty much the same hardware, pickups and electronics that feature on those offshore-made SE guitars, which, as we reported back in issue 510, now kick off at £499. For some, that was an uneasy mix.

However, last year's 10th Anniversary S2 models – the limited-edition Custom 24 and McCarty 594 – signalled an impending



The previous S2 Satin models used dot inlays. For 2024, it's these solid birds only. Unlike the Core models, the S2 fingerboards are inlaid and fretted before the fingerboard is glued to the neck



1

switch to USA-made pickups. Now for 2024, the *entire* S2 line uses USA pickups and electrics. However, it's more of a refresh: aside from those USA components, the range stays exactly the same with a couple of minor specification changes.

As before, the 2024 S2 line – which all feature glued-in (not bolt-on) necks – kicks off with a quartet of the far-from-posh satin-finished models: the Standard 22 and Vela Semi-Hollow, plus the two models we have here, the Standard 24 and solidbody Vela. The Vela was introduced in 2016 and is the only S2-specific model and PRS's only offset. The guitars start at £1,925, considerably less than the Core guitars, which currently start at just over £4k. Half the money, half the guitar? Let's take a look.

Standard Style

As PRS aficionados will know, 'Standard' refers to the all-mahogany style, although today, with that lowly SE CE Standard Satin or the SE Standard 24-08, it can simply refer to an all-mahogany body without a maple top and with a maple neck. But the S2 Standards stick with prior art: they're all mahogany. There are no Standard models in the Core line-up and no satin finishes. In fact, these start-up S2s are the only current satin-finished guitars in the entire PRS range, with the exception of that recent SE CE Standard Satin.

From the moment you pull one of these start-up models out of its gigbag, the open-pore satin-finish style shouts out to the working musician, even though for this year the classic dot inlays of the previous S2 satin-finished models now revert to the ubiquitous bird inlays.

All the S2 models use a different top-carve, coined an 'asymmetric bevel' by PRS, which was first seen on the Mira and Starla models. This more SG-inspired style means the body thickness drops to 43mm

1. On one of the most identifiable headstocks in the industry, the three-a-side tuner placement means the strings straight-pull over the friction-reducing nut. The only S2 identifier on the guitar is the subtle legend on the truss rod cover

2. These top-locking enclosed tuners are actually available as an upgrade for the SE line. PRS has never displayed the country of origin on its USA-made guitars, only the Indonesian-made SEs



2



3. These S2 Standards are all-mahogany. The full-width neck glues into the body, under the neck pickup, just like the original PRS guitars of 1985. Classic stuff!

thick overall, although it becomes really quite Fender-like in playing position, with that large bass-side bevel to the top, plus a ribcage contour on the back.

The other main constructional change to the S2 guitars is the neck, which uses a scarfed headstock and heel block, rather than the one-piece design of the Core models. While this three-piece construction is easily visible on PRS's bolt-on models, such as the CE or Silver Sky, you can slightly see the heel blocks

Both guitars look and feel very much like working tools, and their thin finishes will mark and begin to 'age' very quickly in use

4. The four-pole five-way switch dominates the Standard's scratchplate, but you can also see the treble bleed capacitor on the volume control

5. These Core-level components add to the uplift of the USA pickups on both the Vela here and the other 2024 S2 models

here but not that headstock scarf. In fact, if the spec sheet didn't tell us otherwise, we'd swear it wasn't there.

PRS's original 635mm (25-inch) scale length is used throughout the S2 range, with the exception of the shorter scale used on the three McCarty 594 models, which are also the only models with fingerboard-edge binding. Those shiny gloss-finish models will also look and feel very different from our models here where the finish sinks into the pores of the mahogany, which clearly isn't grain-

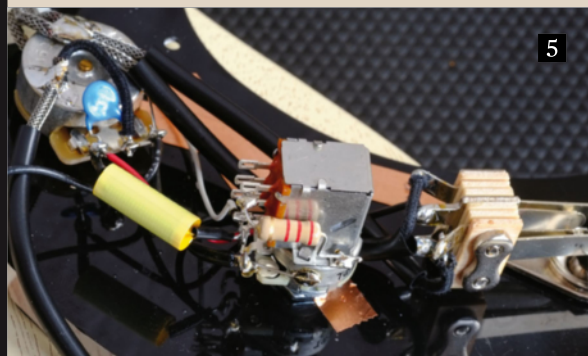
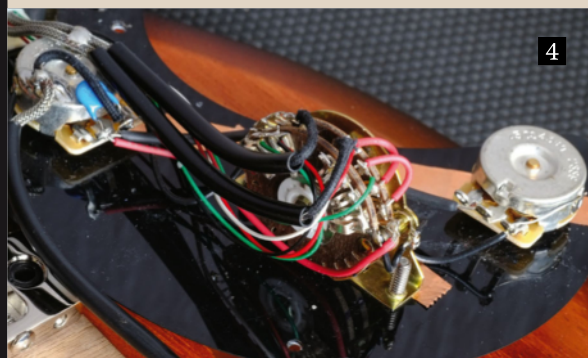
UNDER THE HOOD

We're promised USA pickups and electrics. What do we get?

The scratchplate-mounted pickups and electrics mean it's only the side-mounted output jack that isn't part of the assembly. Removing the Vela's 10-screw plate you see that the neck cavity is routed for a humbucker, not just the smaller Narrowfield, plus the full-width neck tongue sits into the body (as is usual for a PRS), across the full width of the rout. And, yes, the components certainly ape those in a typical Core level model. The volume pot has a nominal 500kohms value and uses PRS's standard 180pF treble bleed capacitor; the tone cap appears to be the standard IC .033µf, while the pull-push pot, again rated at 500k, also uses a 2.2k resistor to achieve the partial coil-split. The right-angled toggle switch appears to be Switchcraft.

When the Vela launched in 2016 it used the Starla's bridge pickup and the Type-D single coil at the neck. When PRS decided to increase the output of the Starla's bridge pickup, the Vela retained the original (lower-wind), which became known as the DS-01 (DS apparently stands for dual or double slug), while the new hotter Starla pickup was named the DS-02. The Vela's USA pickup retains that name and, of course, the neck single coil is replaced by the Narrowfield humbucker; both pickups are clearly labelled Vela Treble TCI and NF TCI at the neck. The bridge pickup has a measured at output DCR of 7.08k (4.88k when split) and the neck pickup is 6.8k.

The Standard 24's nine-screw scratchplate swaps the three-way toggle and pull-switch for a four-pole, five-position lever switch, again with the same capacitors as the Vela. The USA 58/15 LT pickups here (the LT suffix stands for 'low turns') have brushed nickel covers with the pickup name engraved in one corner. The pickups' backs confirm that, and both are clearly marked with the TCI suffix on the brass baseplates. Measured at output, the DCR of the bridge is 7.08k; the neck 6.97k.





6

filled. We could argue these might be too utilitarian for the PRS fanbase, but one major thing that's always been central to the PRS proposition is the perfect craft – and that's very evident here.

Hardware

Both guitars use the brass-post, top-locking 'Low-Mass' tuners (available as retrofits for the SE line) and two different bridges. The Standard 24 employs the moulded (we'd say cast) not machined all-steel vibrato used on the SE and the USA CE models that's based on the original PRS vibrato design, while the 'plate-style' bridge Vela was engineered specifically for the Vela and is also used on the £3k NF53 and Myles Kennedy signature models. It's a classy format that dates back to pre-production PRS designs and uses two brass barrel saddles angled to allow pretty much bang-on intonation. The baseplate is nickel-plated steel and the strings top-load in keyhole slots behind the saddles.

Finally, we get to the new bits: the USA pickups. Our Standard 24 uses the 58/15 LT treble and bass humbuckers like the majority of the range, with the exception of our Vela, which goes for the DS-01 humbucker at the bridge and a Narrowfield humbucker at the neck, the Custom 24, which uses 85/15 treble and bass 'buckers, and the Custom 24-08, which features the narrow TCI humbuckers.

Feel & Sounds

As we've often expressed, the faultless gloss-finished craft, not to mention the cost, of PRS's Core guitars means that we're almost scared to actually test them. It's the opposite here. Both these guitars look and feel very much like working tools and, of course, their thin finishes will mark and begin to 'age' very quickly in use.

Perhaps surprisingly, however, bearing in mind their similar size and materials, there's quite a weight variance: the Vela

6. These covered 58/15 LT humbuckers are the draw here – they're exactly the same as those featured on the top-level Core models. PRS doesn't tell us what's under the cover, but the 58/15 has always chased a more vintage vibe

7. Previous Vela models have used the well-liked Type-D single coil at the neck, which is replaced here by PRS's USA Narrowfield as used on the Myles Kennedy Signature and the Core-level Special Semi-Hollow and Studio, for example



7



8

8. Based on the original pickup used on the USA Starla, this new DS-01 is a regular-sized humbucker with its exposed slug polepieces. It can be partially split to single coil: think classic with attitude!

9. Used on the SE models as well as the USA CE 24, this all-steel vibrato is more than fit for purpose. Combined with the friction-reducing nut and locking tuners, it's very stable, tuning-wise. A now-classic design



9

THE RIVALS

Gibson has been tweaking its Modern Collection recently and the satin-finish Les Paul Modern Lite kicks it off at £1,499. The proper LPs start with the new satin-finish Modern Studio (£1,999), slightly thinner than the full-fat models. Both use the same pickups: the Lite has standard wiring, the Studio has four pull-push pots. There's some SG vibe to the S2 models, and the SG Standard is good value at £1,699.

The S2's scratchplate style nods to Fender's modular production style. The American Pro II Telecaster Deluxe (£1,899) uses two V-Mod II Double Tap humbuckers, four controls and a toggle-switch pickup selector – a 'Gibson' in Fender dress!

Godin's Canadian-made electrics offer crisp build and, although more LP in style, the Summit Classic (£1,549) is a good alternative to the big guns.

comes in at a very light 2.65kg (5.83lb), while the Standard 24 is heavier but far from overweight at 3.39kg (7.46lb). And while weights aren't specified, neck profiles are: our Standard 24 goes for the Pattern Thin, the Vela the Pattern Regular. The difference? Well, the Regular is slightly thinner at the nut – 42.06mm as opposed to 42.86mm, PRS tells us – and the Thin is thinner in depth at the nut at 19.84mm, as opposed to the Regular's 21.43mm. Our measured dimensions support that with the Vela's nut width measuring 42mm; the Standard 24's is 43.2mm. In terms of 1st-fret depth, the Vela measures 21.5mm, the Standard 24 is 21.1mm, and at the 12th fret we get 23.5mm on the Vela and 22.8mm on the Standard. Both necks have a pretty classic 'C' profile, the same fingerboard radius and frets (which we measured at 2.66mm wide and 1.14mm high), and that same slightly in-turning curve and rolled edge to the fingerboard edges. Put simply, they're not a million miles apart in feel. Likewise when strapped-on: while the extended upper shoulder of the Vela gives slightly more of a Strat-y vibe, both feel exceptional, not least with the lower profile bevelled-edge body.

And yet while the scale length and construction might be the same, the combination of the different bridges, different pickups and the way they're wired

In PRS's post-TCI pickup world, any concerns around imbalances are a thing of the past

give us two quite distinct voices, albeit with plenty of similarity. First off, there's not a bad sound to be had from either. We're not reaching for the tone control to pull down excessive highs; there aren't any. In PRS's post-TCI world, those imbalances are a thing of the past.

The Standard's 58/15 LT pickups offer classic, quite beautiful and very musical humbucking voices. They're not overpowered, but they don't sound weak or thin at the bridge or over-thick and sludgy at the neck, either. In part due to its placement after the 24-fret neck, the neck pickup has nice clarity to the attack, which sounds very vocal, clear and soulful. Kick in a boost and blues rockers worldwide will be at home for their expressive solos.

Back to the bridge and there is a little snarl to the attack, but it's certainly not over-thin and is very responsive to your pick attack: pull back and you could be playing a single coil; dig in and the sound matches you. The two inner single coils (position 4) throw

Quality Time

With a total of 13 models covering some diverse styles, pickups and colours, the S2 line-up is quite the self-contained range

Words Dave Burrluck



VELA SEMI-HOLLOW SATIN **£2,079**

The Semi-Hollow Satin variant of our reviewed Vela will no doubt be another lightweight guitar. Aside from the different body construction, though, everything else is the same, including the bridge and pickups. If satin's not your bag, there are five 'Standard' nitro gloss colours at £2,259.



STANDARD 22 **£2,050**

A subtly different ride from the 24 we have on review, this Standard 22 model otherwise sticks to the same specifications and is also available in five Standard gloss colours (including this Antique White) and, of course, four satin nitro hues (at £1,925). The gloss finish Standard 24 is the same price, too.



CUSTOM 24 **£2,465**

Sticking to PRS history, the Custom 24 adds a maple top but keeps the same asymmetric bevel curve. We also get the USA 85/15 humbuckers, but otherwise the specs and controls are the same as our reviewed Standard 24. This is a gloss-only model and comes with six 'Custom' colours.



CUSTOM 24-08 **£2,575**

This maple-topped model, with mahogany back and neck, tweaks the Custom 24 recipe by adding the narrower TCI humbuckers – as used on the Core level 24-08 and the Paul's Guitar – which are selected by a three-way toggle. Each TCI pickup is switchable by its own mini-switch to voice 'true single coil' mode.



MCCARTY 594 **£2,675**

Effectively the more vintage-style strand of the line-up, the 594 uses the same maple-topped construction as the S2 Custom 24 but with two fewer frets, a slightly shorter scale, four controls and the two-piece bridge array from the £4k-plus Core models. The slightly thinner-bodied McCarty 594 Thinline (£2,359) is all-mahogany, and all the S2 594s employ the new 'wing' buttons on the non-locking tuners.



MCCARTY 594 SINGLECUT **£2,675**

The single-cutaway version of the 594 recipe is otherwise the same spec as the double-cut model, including the Pattern Vintage neck profile and bound fingerboard. In terms of hardware, pickups and electronics, it's a dead ringer for the Core-level Singlecut, which is priced from £4,620. Again, there's a choice of six gloss specific colours for the maple-topped 594s.



10

10. The Vela uses exactly the same bridge that's on PRS's £3k T-inspired models: the strings top-load into the steel baseplate and the two big brass saddles add to the Telecaster-style vibe

us across to the Fender-y tracks – a little bit Tele, little bit Strat. Position 2 does the same but with a slight extra push, while the twin-humbucker mix is fuller yet still has that parallel-wired bounce.

As for the Vela's voice, at the bridge it's a little more snarly without touching our amp or pedalboard, like a good Filter'Tron but without the shrill highs, though there's nothing dark or over rounded here. It's definitely a bit more roots-rock, with a little more character. The partial split (which

11. A simple but versatile drive, the five-way selector switch of the Standard mixes humbucker and single coils effortlessly with master volume and tone controls

primarily voices the slug coil) is especially good, too, nodding back to a Tele, and certainly not over-thin or anaemic. The Narrowfield at the neck actually sounds very slightly thicker than the 58/15 LT of the Standard 24 and not as overly focused as the narrow aperture might suggest. It's a big voice on this platform and both mixes are delicious. That single coil character of the split humbucker with the Narrowfield is particularly good, with the mismatch of styles working in its favour.



11

Verdict

Over the past decade the S2 range has offered not only more affordable USA guitars but ones that have their own, arguably more 'alternative' style with that simplified bevel top and those big scratchplates. Of course, PRS Core lovers might see them as a bit cut-price, considering that up to this point the S2s have used the same pickups, electrics and hardware as the SE guitars. Now, while the 2024 refresh includes pukka US pickups and electrics, it also comes with a £300 price rise on our samples, just under 20 per cent. To be honest, that doesn't seem excessive – how much is a posh set of pickups and a new wiring loom? – but, on paper at least, it does make these quite simple satin-finish guitars seem a little pricey. Nevertheless, the immaculate craft and lutherie on display is unmatched and the workhorse



style is enhanced by quite exceptional, wide-ranging sounds.

The classic Standard 24 really has its roots in the very early days of PRS and is a no-brainer for the working musician who needs to coax humbucking and single-coil sounds from one guitar. It's effortlessly in tune and has one of the best vibratos out there (irrespective of where it's made). The Vela is now a real outlier in the PRS range; the Mira and Starla have been shelved, leaving this one guitar to appeal to

12. There are fewer sounds than the Standard here as you can't split the neck-placed Narrowfield, but the simple three-way toggle selector switch, master volume and tone (which has a pull-switch to split the bridge humbucker) still cover a lot of ground

Over the past decade the S2 range has offered more affordable USA guitars with their own more 'alternative' style

a potentially large group of players. To PRS, it's just one arrow in a pretty full quiver and does seem rather isolated. But for the roots-rockers out there, it's a seriously good musical tool. Maybe PRS should start an off-shoot company in Seattle that just makes Velas with funky finishes, a vibrato option and all sorts of boutique garb...

In the meantime, any guitar maker anywhere in the world needs to check out the craft here. 40 years on, PRS is still setting standards that other brands would do well to study very closely. **G**



PRS S2 STANDARD 24 SATIN

PRICE: £1,925 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany with 'asymmetric bevel' top carve

NECK: Mahogany, pattern regular profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")

NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/43.2mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 24, medium

HARDWARE: PRS vibrato (cast), PRS Low Mass locking tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: PRS 58/15 LT Treble and Bass humbuckers, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.39/7.46

OPTIONS: Colour only

RANGE OPTIONS: There's also a 22-fret Satin version (same price), plus both 22 and 24 fret Standards are available with gloss finishes at £2,050

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: McCarty Tobacco (as reviewed), Vintage Cherry, Charcoal, Antique White – open-pore satin nitrocellulose



9/10

PROS Less posh workingman style; versatile and high-quality classic sounds; effortlessly in tune; superb playability and vibrato system

CONS Very hard to fault in craft or sound, though it's a shame PRS ignores the left-handed community



PRS S2 VELA SATIN

PRICE: £1,999 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: USA

TYPE: Offset double-cutaway solidbody electric

BODY: Mahogany with 'asymmetric bevel' top carve

NECK: Mahogany, pattern regular profile, glued-in

SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")

NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/42mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: PRS 'plate style' top-load bridge, PRS Low Mass locking tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: PRS DS-01 (bridge) and PRS Narrowfield (neck) humbuckers, 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (with pull-switch to split the bridge pickup only)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.65/5.83

OPTIONS: Colour only

RANGE OPTIONS: The Vela Semi-Hollow Satin costs £2,079. Both solid and semi-solid Velas are available with a gloss finish at £2,259

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Antique White (as reviewed), Vintage Cherry, Charcoal, McCarty Tobacco – open-pore satin nitrocellulose



10/10

PROS Unique-to-PRS offset design; superb craft throughout; vibe-y bridge pickup voicing; surprisingly big-sounding neck voice, glorious mixes; very in tune; lightweight

CONS We miss the dot inlays here – but, hey, it is the anti-PRS guitar