

FIRST PLAY



PRS SE NF3
\$979

WHAT IS IT? PRS's own-style take on the S-style that looks back to the very early 90s for some inspiration

Bolt-On Beauty

This new SE-exclusive NF3 uses a similar bolt-on platform to John Mayer's Silver Sky model – but is a very different guitar. How so? Let's find out

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker

Has PRS gone a little bolt-on mad? Well, certainly in the Indonesian-made SE line, it's bolt-ons that have been the recent trend in terms of new releases. Only a little while back we saw the SE CE 24 and Swamp Ash Special, both based on historic PRS designs, then earlier this year the superb stripped-down (both in style and price) SE CE 24 Standard Satin, which added to the bolt-on choice behind the more established SE Silver Sky. Typically for PRS, those new bolt-ons are all twin-humbucking guitars (although the Swamp Ash Special does add a mid-placed single coil), but this new NF3 introduces a trio of hum-cancelling Narrowfield DD 'S' pickups, Indonesian-made interpretations of those units used on the more T-style NF 53 that launched in 2023.

There's a familiarity about the NF3 that recalls PRS's first attempt to crack the Stratocaster-style market, the first-series EG 3 (SSS) and EG 4 (HSS), which appeared briefly back in 1990 before they were redesigned into the more PRS-like EG II series, which lasted until 1995. The EG did reappear, again briefly, in the SE range back in 2004 but as a three-single-coil, all-mahogany set-neck with stoptail or vibrato, and then an HSS variant.







1. As with the whole design, the NF3 is a very PRS guitar using the standard all-steel six-screw vibrato that's used throughout the SE range and on the USA S2 and CE 24, as opposed to the two-post vibrato of the Silver Sky

It's not even the first PRS to use the NF3 name. Another short-lived bolt-on, the original NF3 was produced from 2011 to 2013 and used three 57/08 Narrowfield humbuckers, with a 641mm (25.25-inch) scale, maple fingerboard and a korina body.

Despite these attempts to 'do a Fender' – and there have been a few others, such as the alder-bodied DC3 and even the Brent Mason signature – it was, of course, the Silver Sky and John Mayer that finally nailed the job. Thing is, plenty of people



2. Unlike the Silver Sky, the headstock employs the standard PRS outline. As with the other SE bolt-ons, the maple is slab-sawn and the headstock is scarf-jointed. Tuners are non-locking and we have the standard black friction-reducing nut

3. Plenty of PRS designs use some tricky wiring but not here. Unlike the more Strat-style layout of the Silver Sky, we get just master volume and tone, with the five-way switch giving us the usual Strat-style selections



(ourselves included) think the very successful Silver Sky is, by design, rather derivative; this new SE NF3 most definitely isn't. For example, while it shares the same body wood (poplar) as the SE Silver Sky, that's about where any similarities end. It does have a similar outline and contouring, but there's that original EG-like chamfer to the top horn and the output jack moves to the body edge. The headstock is standard PRS, not reversed, the scale length is PRS's standard 635mm (25-inch), not the longer Fender scale of the Silver Sky, and the fingerboard radius is standard PRS at 254mm (10 inches), not the 216mm (8.5 inches) of the SE John Mayer design. The SE NF3 uses the standard PRS-designed SE vibrato, too, not the two-post version used on the USA and SE Silver Sky. Then the controls revert to master volume and tone with the five-way pickup selector with its proprietary switch tip, offering the standard Stratocaster combinations.

At launch, we get four pretty classy colour options and a choice of either rosewood or maple bird-inlaid fingerboards.

Feel & Sounds

Even though we're primed by previous experience of PRS's SE bolt-ons to expect a very tidy guitar, pulling the NF3 out of its gigbag surprises us. It's a very fit-for-business weight of 3.35kg (7.37lb), neither

UNDER THE HOOD We found a few surprises here ...

When you remove the seven-screw scratchplate, you can see that rather than a 'swimming pool' cavity there are individual pickup routs – the neck and bridge of which are certainly large enough for a full-size humbucker.

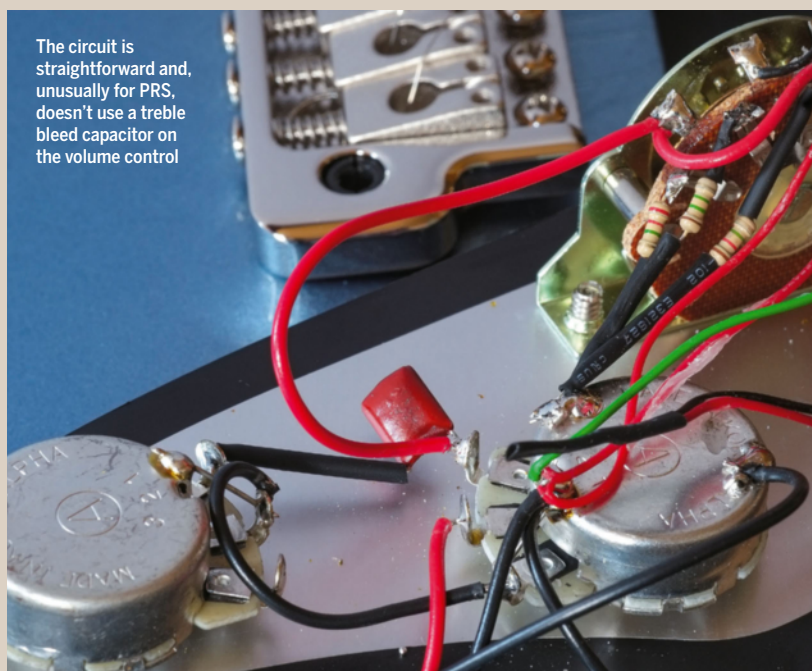
The circuit uses two Alpha 'Made in Korea' pots, with a simple .022µF (223J) tone capacitor and a standard five-way lever selector switch. As you'd expect, it's wired modern style and, perhaps surprisingly for PRS, there's no treble bleed capacitor on the volume control. However, what we do get are three resistors connected – individually

to each pickup position – from the output side of the five-way switch to ground. These specifically tune the value of the single coils and a humbucker are installed on an HSS guitar with a single volume control.

Here, the volume pot is rated at 1meg-ohm with an audio taper, although ours measured a little under that at 939k; the tone control is rated at 500k, again audio taper, and measures 490k. In conjunction with those resistors of 1.2meg-ohm (bridge), 1.5meg-ohm (middle) and 2.2meg-ohm (neck), this means that the pickups are

effectively 'seeing' 526.7k, 577.5k and 658.5k respectively. This is typical of PRS's TCI procedure: they really are listening and tuning the pickups and circuit to sound exactly how they want it to.

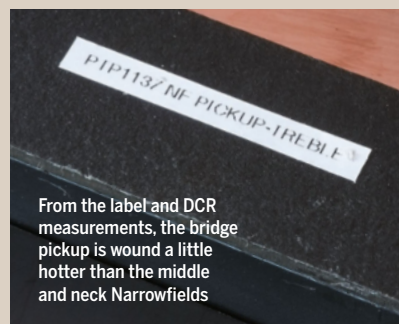
These new Narrowfield DD 'S' pickups are cleanly made, too, and have thick fibre-like bases. The neck/middle are to the same spec based on the rear logos; the bridge has a bit more power, which results in a very balanced output overall. Measured at output, the bridge pickup has a DCR of 8.76k, and the middle and neck are virtually identical at 7.87k.



The circuit is straightforward and, unusually for PRS, doesn't use a treble bleed capacitor on the volume control



These three different-value resistors help tune each pickup to the sound PRS wants to hear



From the label and DCR measurements, the bridge pickup is wound a little hotter than the middle and neck Narrowfields

feather-light nor over-heavy for the style. The neck back is a very lightly tinted satin that will typically burnish up with use; our reference SE Silver Sky's neck back certainly has.

The Wide Thin neck profile here is a PRS classic. The nut width is just over 43mm (with 36mm string spacing), and it has a depth of 21mm at the 1st fret, increasing to a shade under 23mm by the 12th. The SE Silver Sky is slightly narrower at the nut at 41.8mm (with 35mm string spacing) with a similar 1st-fret depth and slightly deeper by the 12th at 24.3mm. The neck back is beautifully shaped, a classic 'C' with no hint of a flat back or over-big shoulders.

Sharp fingerboard edges and fret ends? Not here. The fingerboard edges are nicely rolled; the fretwork from the standard SE medium jumbo stock is faultlessly installed

This SE NF3 comes across as very much a PRS guitar, not a retooling of someone else's design

and finished. After some basic new string stretching, the SE NF3, which ships with 10s, is perfectly in tune, and even with some pretty vigorous vibrato wrangling it stays that way.

While Fender players might feel more at home with the Silver Sky, PRS players will definitely feel a little more comfortable here. Part of that, of course, is the slightly shorter scale length and the fingerboard radius, but the voicing is very PRS-like,

too, in that although we have the standard Stratocaster selections, aside from being fully hum-cancelling, it comes across as a fuller, less thin voice that will certainly appeal if you can't get on with single coils and/or need a little more body. Pulling back the tone and volume certainly moves to a more traditional humbucking voicing. And that's key to the versatility: with that volume pulled back you'd swear you're hearing something more like an SG; pull the controls full up and we're back to that fuller Fender-like voicing, not least with positions 2 and 4 on the five-way.

As PRS does so well, the blurring of the lines between humbucker and single coil is not only versatile but very musical. Used with a basic pedalboard, the SE NF3 is the perfect driver moving from full-sounding, clear but far from sharp-edged 'single

CREATING CLASSICS

We catch up with PRS's COO, Jack Higginbotham, to get the lowdown on this second version of the NF3

Looking at the NF3, us old-timers might be reminded of that original 1990 EG. What was your involvement in that EG design and did you have that in mind when developing the SE NF3?

"Good eye and good memory! The original EG was my first 'project management' job at PRS after having run the woodshop for a couple of years. I put together a small crew and managed the woodshop, finish and assembly at night. That was also the first night-shift at PRS, so we learned a lot on many fronts. That being the case, that [EG] guitar has always had a special place in my heart and there are a few folks here that share the attraction to the spirit of that instrument.

"The new NF3 was actually originally going to go down the EG road. We were working on single coils, building on what we learned with the SE Silver Sky, but at the same time we were deep in developing the Narrowfield pickups for the NF53. Paul [Reed Smith] was in my office, saw the prototype and made a comment about putting NF pickups in it. That made complete sense to me and the team because the Narrowfields offer a similar tone, with the benefits of 'no hum' sound while carrying more PRS DNA. So then we changed directions."

Would you agree that the Silver Sky was John Mayer's design and the SE NF3 is PRS's own take on the S-style?

"I would say that the Silver Sky would not have happened without John and some very key elements of the guitar are all him. Reversing the

headstock, resizing the bird inlays, dialling in the exact sound he wanted, getting the neck to feel just right for him. But the execution of the guitar was all PRS: figuring out exactly how to get at what John wanted in a way that maximised the essence of the guitar.

"The NF3, to me, is not our take on a S-style: it is its own thing. If you recall, when the original NF3 was released, the DC3 was introduced at the same time. The DC3 was much more of a S-style guitar. I understand how it may be perceived by the market as being our answer to the Stratocaster, but that's not my intention with this guitar."

The pickups here seem modelled on those on the NF53. It must have been a lengthy and costly job to replicate those. How close would you say these are to the USA pickups?

"Very close in concept, very different in execution. Again, building on how we did the Silver Sky pickup and then the SE Silver Sky, we borrowed from our research and testing and came up with an 'SE way' to achieve great results using more

available and affordable parts. [Director of New Products Engineering] Rob Carhart and [senior project engineer] Jon Wasserman also took the opportunity to redesign the moulds for easier assembly. The end result is shockingly close, but how we got there was different."

What is the actual purpose of the extra steel slugs, and why go for this layout rather than the more standard slugs of the original (and still current) Narrowfield?

"Well, those middle slugs are all about Paul's foray into TCI. It is very similar to how we are achieving the results in the NF53, pretty much the same methodology."

Were you not tempted to add this guitar to the USA Bolt-On line-up? And are there any plans to do so?

"That's a great question with a murky answer! I think at the very beginning of this, we'd thought of this guitar being in our Bolt-On category, but as it morphed to an EG platform, which was something I was enthusiastic about and had a lot of passion around, it shifted to SE. Also, the beginning of this development was around the launch of the SE Silver Sky, so we had just worked out a lot of processes with bolt-on guitars at PT Cort [PRS's manufacturing partner in Indonesia] so that made sense. Ultimately, it made great sense to make this an SE guitar and, as of now, there is no plan to bring it into the USA line-up." [DB]

"The NF3 is not our answer to the Stratocaster: it is its own thing"

Jack Higginbotham



Jack Higginbotham and the PRS team originally looked back to the early 90s single-coil EG model for inspiration before changing direction



These new-design Narrowfield DD 'S' have their origins in the pickups used on the T-inspired NF53. However, they are the first of this style to be manufactured in Indonesia and are hum-cancelling



As we've seen with the recent SE bolt-ons and unlike previous models such as the CE and that original EG, the neck join here is more Fender-like and the cutaways more incurving

coil' that has more than enough body in the voicing to rattle your cages with some high-gain distortion. Aside from being hum-cancelling, these Narrowfields on this platform are genuine genre hoppers. It's a real all-rounder.

Verdict

Despite the huge success of both the USA and SE Silver Sky, this new SE NF3 comes across as very much a PRS guitar, not a retooling of someone else's design. From the more PRS-like body style, to the scale length and pickups, it's a very credible introduction and it is perhaps a little surprising that it's solely in the SE line when it could quite comfortably sit alongside the Silver Sky and Fiore, not to mention the NF 53, in the USA Bolt-On range. But it's testament to the quality of the build, and the design of these hum-cancelling pickups, that you don't feel in any way short-changed, irrespective of its origin or price. It's a very full-sounding 'Stratocaster'-type but with huge stylistic potential.

If we were to be picky, then the simple 'seven-sound' mod would expand your choices, not least allowing you to voice the neck and bridge pickups together. Indeed, installing that simple mod and a set of the SE locking tuners would really bring the NF3 dangerously close to the USA guitars. It really is that good.

The blurring of the lines between humbucker and single coil is versatile and very musical

What's next, then? An SE version of the more T-inspired NF 53? Or the SE NF4 with a standard humbucker at the bridge? How about that thin satin finish we've seen on the SE CE 24? Who knows what the future holds, but this is a platform with plenty of legs. Long live the EG! **G**



PRs SE NF3

PRICE: £979 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Indonesia

TYPE: Double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on

BODY: Poplar

NECK: Slab-sawn maple (w/ scarfed headstock), Wide Thin profile, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 635mm (25")

NUT/WIDTH: Friction reducing/43.1mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, 'old school' pearloid bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed non-locking tuners – nickel-plated

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: 3x PRS-designed Narrowfield DD 'S' humbuckers, 5-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume and tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.35/7.37

OPTIONS: Maple fingerboard (with grey pearloid bird inlays)

RANGE OPTIONS: Other SE bolt-ons are the Silver Sky (£979), CE 24 (£695), Swamp Ash Special (£979) and CE Standard Satin (£499)

LEFT-HANDERS: Not this model, though a lefty SE Silver Sky has been announced for autumn 2024 release

FINISHES: Ice Blue Metallic (as reviewed), Gun Metal Gray, Metallic Orange, Pearl White – gloss body finish, satin neck back

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9/10

PROS Hard-to-fault build; perfect playability and setup; great vibrato; hum-cancelling DD 'S' Narrowfields sit between classic single coil and low-output humbuckers; very versatile

CONS Bit pricey for a non-signature SE; a pull switch on the tone control would introduce the T-style bridge and neck pickup combination