



# Fender American Ultra II Telecaster

The workhorse is newly shod for the modern player but still packs the tones that made it famous

By Jonathan Horsley

**▶ A PENNY FOR** Jimmy Bryant’s thoughts. Oh to have a time machine to travel back and present the original master of the Fender Telecaster with this just as he was about to track 1954’s 2 Guitars Country Style.

Just what would Bryant have made of this, Fender’s seminal, groundbreaking yet utilitarian electric guitar design reborn in the American Ultra II series as a high-performance six-string? Speedy West would’ve fallen off his seat. What would Albert Collins have made of it, or Muddy Waters?

We have grown accustomed to thinking of the Telecaster as Fender’s hammer; the workhorse. But great guitar designs can be refined without losing a sense of themselves (Keith Richards prefers his Teles with just five strings).

That’s what Fender has been doing since time immemorial, and it’s what it is doing with the American Ultra II series, a range also including the Stratocaster, Strat HSS, the relatively new Meteora offset, and variants of the Jazz Bass and Precision Bass.

See the Custom Shop if you want to live out that time machine dream, 1962 all over again, or the American Vintage II range, which picks a date and era of Fender design and riffs on it.

The American Ultra II Telecaster is not that; it is a sequel that pushes the boundaries of modern refinement.

As soon as you take it out of its molded (and stackable) hard-shell guitar case, you can get the drift; the Ultra Contours, the belly cut, the forearm sculpting, all the timber that’s been whittled away from the lower cutaway and the heel to improve upper-fret access.

Or it could be the 1-ply anodized aluminum pickguard that tells you we have started a new chapter for the model. The original was launched just in time for the rock ’n’ roll revolution.

The American Ultra II makes its debut in the era of AI, Big Data, shrinkflation, ChatGPT, Netflix and chill, TikTok shredding and crypto. But don’t worry, there’s still something familiar. This is not a pair of Ray-Bans that connect to Google; it’s still a Telecaster. But what does it add to the Telecaster story?

## Build quality

The American Ultra II series models all have a lot in common. We have select alder bodies. The necks are all quartersawn maple, which as the timber enthusiasts among you will know is more expensive, more stable. In this case that neck and fretboard all one in the same.

Ebony fingerboards are offered with other finishes. The Modern D neck shape is a leitmotif and key selling point of the range, with each neck bolted to the body just as Leo had intended them, and finished in Ultra Satin as, surely, every player will want a neck to be. Spoiler: this is a thoroughly agreeable neck treatment that is one of the most, if not the most, tactile playing experiences you could imagine.

For all the 21st-century details – the Fender logo in gold, the locking Fender-branded tuners, the Luminlay glow-in-the-dark fret markers down the side of the fingerboard, “Ultra Rolled” fingerboard edges and of course the 10” to 14” compound radius fingerboard – you strap this up and it feels like a Telecaster.

I have an American Ultra II Stratocaster HSS right here for comparison, dressed similarly in Ultra Burst with gold pickguard, and it feels like a different guitar, even if its neck is fundamentally the same.

A pair of Ultra Noiseless Vintage Telecaster single-coil pickups assume their usual position at the neck and bridge, and there is a three-way slider switch to select them, volume and tone controls, and an S-1 switch on the volume pot that, when engaged, bypasses the pickup selector to run both pickups in series.

Fender has used agreeably knurled metal knobs for this purpose. Like the rubber-gripped skirted knobs on the AmUltra II Strat, they are real quality. The switches, too, they clunk confidently into place; this is luthiery as engineering.

There’s no quibble with the finish or the factory setup. This is the Corona, California facility operating at the top of its game. Fret edges are on-point. The frets, indeed, are worthy of comment. They’re nickel, not stainless steel, but polished with such vigor you



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might think they were.

For all the modernization here, Fender has not gone full Charvel with these (FMIC already owns Charvel) so the AmUltra IIs are not hot-rodded per se. The frets are medium jumbo, and there are only 22 of them, no need to go full two-octave here. The Graph Tech Tusq nut is cut nicely, with Fender using short-post locking tuners to improve the break angle over the nut.

The bridge is full of surprises. It’s one of those modern adjustable six-saddle designs, an antidote to the bane of traditional Telecaster tuning compromises. And it is finished in chrome to match the tuners. But it is brass, “chromed brass”, so we’ve theoretically got a tone profile similar to those old-school Teles we all know and love – three brass barrel saddles and the truth.

Vintage enthusiasts have all kinds of peccadillos when it comes to Telecaster specs, and that’s fine, but surely we can all agree that being able to adjust the truss rod via the headstock is an improvement.

## Playability

Full disclosure: I was looking forward to playing the American Ultra II Telecaster but John 5 ruined it for me. The Stratocaster HSS had got me hooked on the neck. Anyone could get used to that fit and finish. And yet, just before strapping up the Telecaster, I made the mistake of watching John 5 demo it, a spectacle that would leave most of us feeling inadequate, as though we are playing the guitar with boxing gloves on. Needless to say, he makes the most of the high-performance platform.

But here’s the rub. The American Ultra II Telecaster makes you a better player. Or at least makes you think you are. There’s something so accommodating about it; how it sits, how balanced it is, how those rolled fingerboard edges offer a subtle but telling contribution to the playing experience. It’s a guitar that gets out of your way and puts the wind at your back.

Country and bluegrass virtuosos might frown upon it because it’s just not sport. I’ve got a Classic Baja Player Telecaster for comparison, a much loved guitar; great, hulking slab of ash that it is, and while it still feels like Telecaster land with the AmUltra there is something almost obnoxiously easy about how it plays without feeling like someone has slipped you a Charvel Style 2 when you weren’t looking; in other words, that 10” to 14” compound radius is well judged, contemporary but not radically so.

It simply feels like sensible dimensions for a playable guitar, for those inspired by the Jumpin’ Jack Flash riff and Rising Force alike. And furthermore the speed does not come at the price of comfort. There is a lot to love about the primal wood slab of a ‘50s Tele but, goodness, this is nicer after an hour of playing. And hey, with all this playability, maybe that John 5 stuff is achievable. Maybe.

## Sounds

The American Ultra II might be souped-up for slinkiness but it presents a familiar set of core sounds. The control circuit is similar to the Classic Baja Player Tele, with the S-1 switch presenting a fourth voice presenting those two single-coils in series for a tone that’s kinda funky, appropriate for country, and interesting when you’ve got some effects on it. Let your compressor pedal do its worst and it’ll be great for the former, but with some drive and a bit of flanger it’s kind of psychedelic.

But what the world needs from a Telecaster is twang and this one’s got it in abundance. That bridge pickup has all the moxie you would want from a Tele. Even if it hits you will that slim-jim high-end cut it’s got a lot of personality, pure Nashville fried chicken when picked closer to the bridge, and Led Zeppelin I when played with amp overdrive at high volume. The clarity is forensically detailed.

It’s interesting putting this side by side with



## GUITARWORLD VERDICT



**A radical revamp of Telecaster playability reaffirms a commitment to classic Tele tones in Fender’s modernized take on the solid-body electric that started it all. Those Noiseless Vintage pickups give it a high-fidelity, EQ’d quality; the Tele as the best version of itself. It’s a workhorse for the biggest job you’ve got.**

### PROS

- + Tip-top US-build and quality hardware.
- + Good weight and unparalleled playability.
- + Tones that would excite any Tele player and hum-free performance.

### CONS

- Finish options a wee bit underwhelming.
- You get what you pay for but Player Plus series does modernism at a budget.
- No left-handed model.

### SPECS

**MADE:** USA  
**TYPE:** Six-string electric guitar  
**BODY:** Select alder  
**NECK:** Maple / quartersawn, Modern D, bolt-on  
**FINGERBOARD:** Maple, 10” to 14” radius  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 25.5”/648 mm  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Graph Tech Tusq / 42.8 mm  
**FRETS:** 22, medium jumbo  
**HARDWARE:** Locking tuners, Chromed brass hard-tail six-saddle string-through bridge, 1-ply gold anodized aluminum pickguard  
**STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE:** mm  
**ELECTRICS:** Pickups, controls, switching  
**WEIGHT:** 7.23lb/3.3kg  
**OPTIONS:** Ebony fingerboard with Texas Tea and Solar Flare finishes (same price), silver pickguard on Texas Tea and Avalance, black on Sinister Red and Solar Flare  
**LEFT-HANDED OPTIONS:** No.  
**FINISHES:** Ultraburst (as reviewed), Avalanche, Sinister Red, Solar Flare, Texas Tea  
**CASES:** Fender Hardshell case

the Baja Tele, a Mexican-built Custom Shop collaboration with a Twisted Tele pickup in the neck and a Broadcaster-style vintage single-coil at the bridge. It is a great-sounding instrument. But the AmUltra II Tele sounds a little more dialed in by comparison, more hi-fi – if that makes sense. The Noiseless pickups help. They really are effective. This is a quiet guitar.

That said, there’s nothing sacrilegious about the sounds you’ll get out of this thing. We have 21st-century playability but the tones would not spook anyone who had made the quantum leap here from the ‘50s.

The pickups are perfectly balanced. That middle position, with both pickups in parallel, is a great rock rhythm sound. The neck pickup is precise and punchy, addictive. Dial back the tone and put a hint of grit on the amp and it sounds great for jazz.

And, as yer man, John 5, ably shows, it can take plenty of gain. Telecasters always have but with those Noiseless pickups that is now a very real option.

## Verdict

Fender’s state-of-the-art Telecaster is not cheap. It has competition, too, and it is coming from inside the room, so to speak, from Fender-owned Charvel, from Fender’s own Player Plus series, which does a similar job at half the price. But does it do it quite as well as this? More to the point, does anyone?

It is hard to find a more playable T-style than this. This American Ultra II series builds upon the good work of the original AmUltra models that launched in 2019.

It takes the Telecaster further while playing to its strengths. It’s still a workhorse, still hugely versatile, offering reference tones to unleash in all kinds of musical styles and a speedy, up-to-the-minute ride.

The finish options are a disappointment, at least by Fender’s high standards (no one does a solid color better). But if what you are looking for is classic Telecaster tones, no hum, the X-factor of that S-1 series mode and a guitar so playable that you might need to put the brakes on yourself and remember to play to the count, then this is it.

Tactile, streamlined, impeccably put together, there’s no way Jimmy Bryant wouldn’t have dug this.