

MODDING & UTILITY

Go the extra mile with these tone-enhancing solutions

Words: Dave Burrluck & Trevor Curwen



Black Ice Boost

Think of onboard boosts and EQ, and you'd assume you need a battery to power them, right? Well, not if you're using old-school transformer technology. Like the Focus switch on Yamaha's Revstar II, the Black Ice Boost does just that, and the unobtrusive black box is small enough to fit in a pretty tight control cavity. It offers two levels of boost (which are switchable) or you can just run the one whose sound you like the best. Does it work? It sure does, with two levels of very usable thickening. It impressed the boffs at Cream T enough for them to fit the Boost into the latest Astra 'Decades' model (on review in this issue, see page 8). A no-battery zone!

Price: £89 Website: www.blackiceoverdrive.com



Radioshop Pickups Telecaster Wiring Mod

A couple of years ago we put together one of Trev Wilkinson's T-style kits, which has been the host to many mods, hardware changes and experiments. It ended up with the original 1950 to '52-era circuit (from CharlesGuitars.co.uk), which allows you to blend the Tele's two pickups together, a really roasty Keef sound but with no tone control to tame that bright-edged Tele tone. Then we got a call from Radioshop Pickups in Wales who had just released its hand-wired Telecaster Wiring Mod, which, via a dual concentric tone pot, gives the classic Tele selections, with volume and tone control, *plus* that pickup blend. On behalf of blend-lovers out there, thank you! Prayers have been answered.

Price: £140 Website: www.radioshoppickups.com



MY YEAR IN GEAR

ANSWERING THE CULL by David Mead



"I think that the most significant event in terms of gear this year has not involved buying but selling – although I am poised to make a rather important purchase in the near future. But more of that in a minute... There comes a time in every guitarist's life when we have to admit to ourselves that there are instruments tucked away in a cupboard that 'might get used at some point', which haven't, in fact, left the confines of their cases for a very long time. This was me around springtime '24.

"And so it was that I decided to review my personal collection and take nine guitars, an amp and several effects



pedals to the auction rooms and wave them a – slightly emotional – farewell. But there is a twist to this sorry tale as I have a significant birthday coming up soon and the funds gathered from the auction will be spent on something six-stringed and extra-special. Although, I must admit that option anxiety has taken over my life. Good problem to have, but..."

PHOTO BY PHIL BARKER



Two Notes Captor X SE

One thing that many of the YouTube channels focusing on guitar have in common is the Universal Audio Ox Amp Top Box sitting in the background, which may lead some to think that it's the only load box with speaker emulation in existence. Not so: Two Notes has been in that business for over 15 years now and it celebrated with the Captor X SE, a special edition of this reactive load box that takes input from amps up to 100 watts and connects to your mixer or audio interface via balanced XLR outputs. Its dynamic IR (DynIR) cabinets and effects, all easily edited in the included app, add digital flexibility and professional-studio sound quality to any valve amp.

Price: £499 Website: www.two-notes.com

FIRST PLAY



**CREAM T ASTRA
CUSTOM 'DECADES'**
£2,499

WHAT IS IT? Reimagining of a modern T-style with dual-control circuits, pickup swapping and a passive boost

Breaking The Mould

The Astra 'Decades' aims to stand apart from the generic T-style. So if you want more sounds, not to mention pickup swapping, you just might fall for its charms

Words Dave Burrluck **Photography** Phil Barker

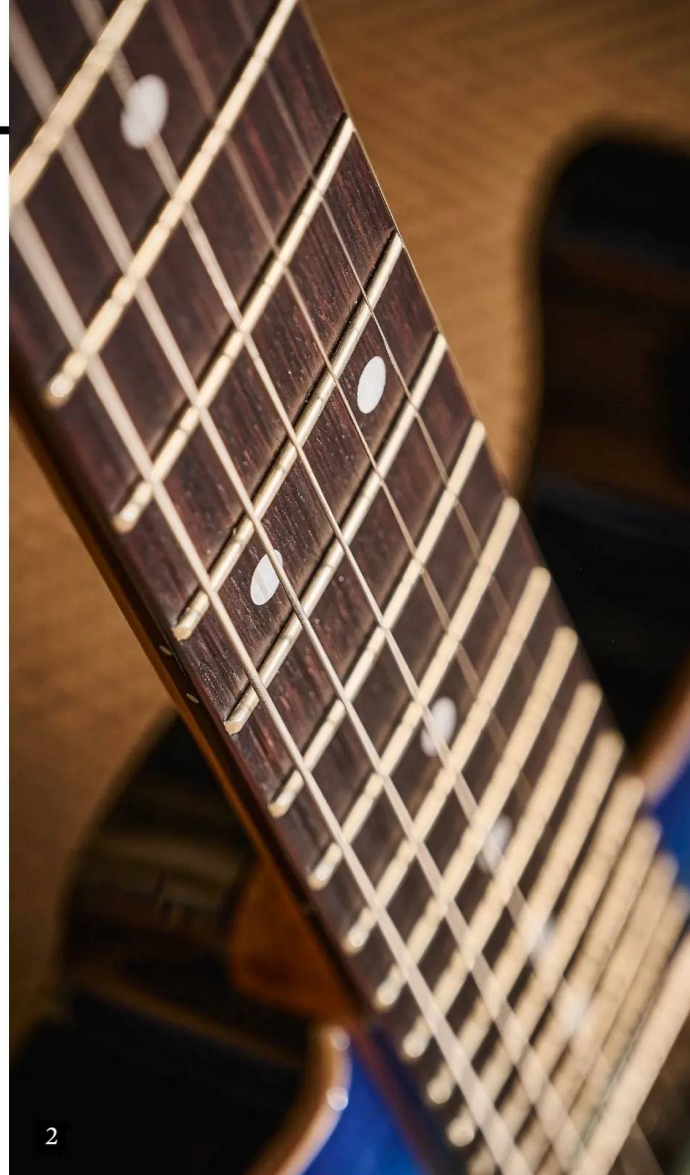
When Cream T owner, Tim Lobley, told us he was working on a 'modern' T-style guitar earlier in 2024, we can't say we were overexcited. Plenty of makers have done that and we shudder to think how many mucked-about-with 'Telecasters' there are out there across the price points. In truth, Tim was thinking along the same lines: what could Cream T bring to the 'posh' T-style table? It turns out that "quite a lot" would be the answer.

As you can see, the Astra certainly looks the part and its outline isn't just a redraw around a Fender, with a shorter treble horn and slightly wider cutaway. We get a forearm curve and deep ribcage contour, too, and in terms of specification it follows the posh S-style Polaris that Cream T launched at the tail end of 2023. So there's the lightweight obeche body capped with a thin AAA figured maple cap to which a rather fine roasted and flamed quarter-sawn maple neck is screwed on. The modern elements continue with a nicely contoured round-nosed heel, its inset aged aluminium neckplate etched with the serial number and brand logo, not to mention the absence of a Telecaster-style pickguard





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1. Like on the Cream T Polaris, we have this modern-style headstock that houses a set of Gotoh rear-locking tuners and well-cut Tusq nut. Truss rod adjustment is at the other end of the neck

2. The neck here is figured roasted maple (again like on the Polaris) with a deep caramel colouration. We get the same relatively subtle compound radius and sensible medium jumbo frets, all impeccably installed

3. With this launch-edition Astra you get a Cream T Cream Of The Crop humbucker, plus a non-magnetic 'Dumbucker' to (in theory) recreate the feel of a single-pickup guitar

leaving that maple figuring in a choice of four pretty modern-looking 'burst' colours. As with the Polaris, these colours are only over the maple top, while the rest of the body (including on our Sirius Blue review model) is a gloss opaque black. Similarities with the Polaris model continue with a dot-inlaid rosewood (as here) or maple compound radius fingerboard, well-fitted and polished pretty big frets, and blue Luminlay glow-in-the-dark side dots.

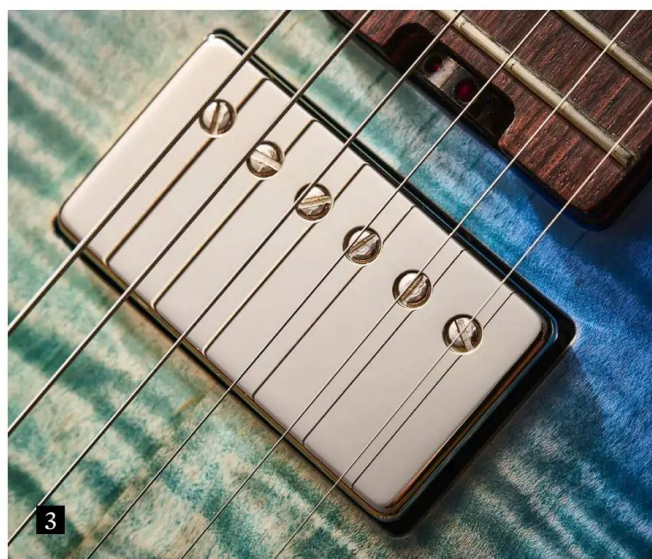
That Gotoh bridge plate with its trio of 'In Tune' compensated saddles shouts Telecaster, as do the chromed, knurled control knobs. But what on earth is going on with those two three-way lever switches and that mini-toggle switch?

Quite uniquely, in our experience, there are two different circuits and that centrally placed mini-toggle switches between them. With that switch in the down position we have a circuit that's in the style of the original single-pickup Esquire. It only uses the bridge single coil, and in position 1 only the volume is engaged. In the middle position, we have the tone control in circuit, and in position 3 again it's only the volume that is in circuit but with a pre-set treble roll-off originally intended to sound bass-guitar-like.

Flick that mini-toggle upwards and the second circuit is engaged – what most of us know as the modern Tele setup of bridge, both and neck pickups, with the volume and tone functional in all positions. In this circuit, a pull switch on the volume splits the neck humbucker.

But there's more: pull up the tone control in either circuit and you introduce

4. Scanned from a 1957 Telecaster, the bridge single coil is well voiced. The Gotoh walled bridge, meanwhile, features the very popular 'In Tune' compensated brass saddles



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5. Yup, two three-way lever controls – one for each circuit, which is selected by the central mini-toggle switch. Pull up the tone control to engage the Black Ice Boost and the volume to coil-split the humbucker. Not as complex as it looks!

Feel & Sounds

The Astra is lightweight at just 3.02kg (6.64lb), and its subtly altered shape and those contours help it feel very comfortable and less plank-like than the original Fender. The neck feel is also in the modern camp, a well-shaped “medium C”, says Cream T, and we’d agree, although as is quite often the case that flatter fingerboard does give

6. Along with the Cream Of The Crop humbucker we also get a non-magnetic ‘Dumbucker’ (which comes in a bespoke leather holster) for the true Esquire-style drive using Circuit 1

the impression of the neck being a little thinner than it actually is. It’s essentially the same neck you’ll find on the Cream T Polaris as it’s dimensionally very similar with a nut width of 42.5mm (with 36mm string spacing) and a depth of 21.1mm at the 1st fret and 22.3mm by the 12th. There’s zero neck flex, and overall tuning stability is really good, along with a pretty vibrant, lively acoustic response.

Initially, the control circuits take a bit of thought, though it all becomes intuitive very quickly. On Circuit 1 in position 1 we have the brightest voicing of the bridge single coil, while the added tone control in position 2 just pulls back those sharp highs a little, plus you can pull the tone back to round the highs further. Position 3 brings in that pre-set treble roll-off, which isn’t quite as woolly as rolling the tone fully off and is a pretty usable thick rhythm or quite fruity lead voice, especially with a little crunchy gain.

Circuit 2 brings in the neck humbucker, a pretty classic ‘balanced’ PAF-alike that splits well enough, although it voices the slug coil whereas voicing the neck-facing screw coil might be a little more Tele-like. The pickup mix, then, doesn’t quite have the width of a classic Tele, particularly in



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GEAR — OF THE — YEAR

The greatest tones from 12 months of testing and digesting all that's great in guitar in 2024

Words Jamie Dickson Photography Olly Curtis

It's been one of those years where you feel a shift in the tide of guitar culture. And tides don't generally change violently but simply flow or ebb until you turn round and realise a new vista has been revealed by the change in the waters. Over the past 12 months of reviewing gear in *Guitarist*, we've seen the past and the future united with more harmony than before in guitars such as the Powers Electric A-Type on this very page but also in deftly designed pedals such as the J Rockett Airchild that capture the spirit of classic gear in a sharp, compact and usable form.

As always, our Gear Of The Year contenders have been drawn from the ranks of guitars, amps and effects that won either a *Guitarist* Choice Award or the coveted 10/10 Gold Award. So if you find a piece of gear in the following pages, you know it's passed our most rigorous scrutiny and emerged a worthy winner in the tone stakes. From affordable entry-level electrics to must-have mods, we hope our victors in this year's *Guitarist* Gear Of The Year edition will bring new sounds and inspirations to your own music making. So, without further ado, it's time to name the champs...

