

USA Superaxes Suhr Standard & Tyler Studio Elite

THERE COMES A TIME WHEN ANY MUSICIAN, whatever their gig, just needs a *really good* guitar. Suhr and Tyler make exactly that, but they're barely known in the UK. Why should the Yanks have all the fun? Review by Dave Burrluck

SUHR RRP: £1595

TYLER RRP: £1995

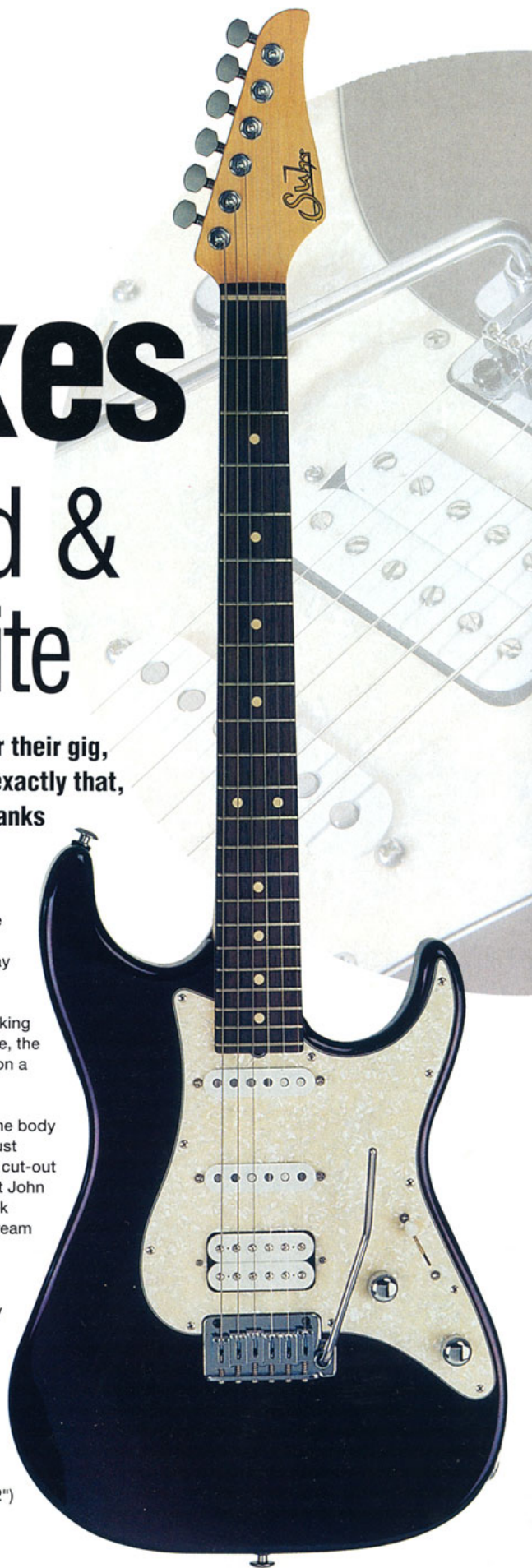
SUHR STANDARD

Based close to Fender's Corona factory in California, John Suhr was the maker behind Pensa-Suhr, who's most famous guitar is probably the maple-topped Stratty-looking thang that seemed a permanent fixture hanging from Mark Knopfler's neck round the time of Dire Straits' mega-platinum *Brother In Arms* LP. After a spell with the Fender Custom Shop John set-up his own shop to produce a limited range of clearly Strat-inspired guitars with numerous custom options. On review is the Standard, basically the start-up model.

From the moment you pull this one from its case, strap it on and plug in, believe me, you're experiencing some of the finest luthery available today. The Strat-styled alder body, in its immaculate black cherry metallic finish, is a tad thinner than normal with slightly thinner, more modern looking horns, a trim edge radius, and very generous forearm and especially deep rib-

cage contour. The heel is chamfered towards the treble side while the back of the treble cutaway is shaved away – both facilitate high-fret playing comfort. While it employs a standard Strat-looking white pearl faced scratchplate, the output jack is side-mounted on a chromed metal plate.

The maple neck is fixed in traditional fashion although the body end truss rod adjustment is just about visible through a slight cut-out in the scratchplate. With what John calls an 'even C medium' neck profile we have a real mainstream shape – not too thin, not too thick in depth – but with a beautiful section, slightly V'd on the shoulders with a lovely comfortable, curved back. Stylistically you could play anything on it: thumb around, thumb behind... whatever, all helped by the super-silky satin-feel of the maple back. The rosewood 'board is peppered with clay dot markers on its 305mm (12") cambered face; the medium

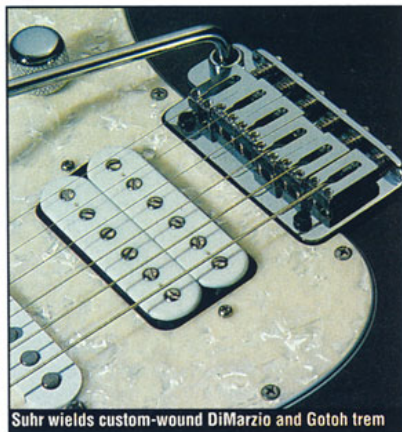


CHECK OUT...

First to the obvious: **FENDER** have been known to make a couple of high-end Strats (oh, really?). Let's start with the Roadhouse (from £879), basically an American Standard with Seymour Duncan bridge humbucker. Next up is the American Deluxe Fat Strat (£1099 with alder body, £1199 with ash body). It's the closest Fender get, in their main production to the custom-detail of brands like Suhr and Tyler. Apart from using proper tonewood bodies (solid, unveneered timber), the Deluxe Fat Strat uses Fender's Vintage Noiseless single coils with a DH-1 humbucker at bridge; other refinements include Schaller locking tuners. For a more vintage vibe, the American Vintage '62 Strat (from £1149) comes highly recommended from this quarter. Both the Eric Clapton and

Buddy Guy Strats have an active mid-boost (£1199 and £1249 respectively), the Jeff Beck Strat pairs two Lace Sensor pickups at the bridge for humbucking power. Fender's **CUSTOM SHOP** Strat kicks off with the American Classic Strat (from £1299), the Showmaster has a carved-top alder body with bridge humbucker (from £1799), **contact** Arbitrator ☎ 0181-202-1199.

SCHECTER's Trad is another high-quality Strat-a-like from £1295 with bridge humbucker, **contact** Sound Control ☎ 0191-232-4175. **TOM ANDERSON** also use the Buzz Feiten Tuning System, their comparable model is the Classic which starts around £1800 and, of course, there are numerous custom-options, **contact** Sounds Great ☎ 0161-436-4799.



Suhr wields custom-wound DiMarzio and Gotoh trem

gauge frets (approx. 2.3mm wide x 1.2mm high) are finely installed and polished – the ends as smooth as butter. The Buzz Feiten Tuning System? Yeah, you guessed it: like Tom Anderson, John Suhr is a big fan. The headstock outline, a French-curve away from a trad Fender, features a simple Suhr transfer on its face and the good man's signature and hand-written serial number under the clear finish on the headstock back. The Sperzel locking tuners, Tusq nut and an incredible set-up continue the quality intent.

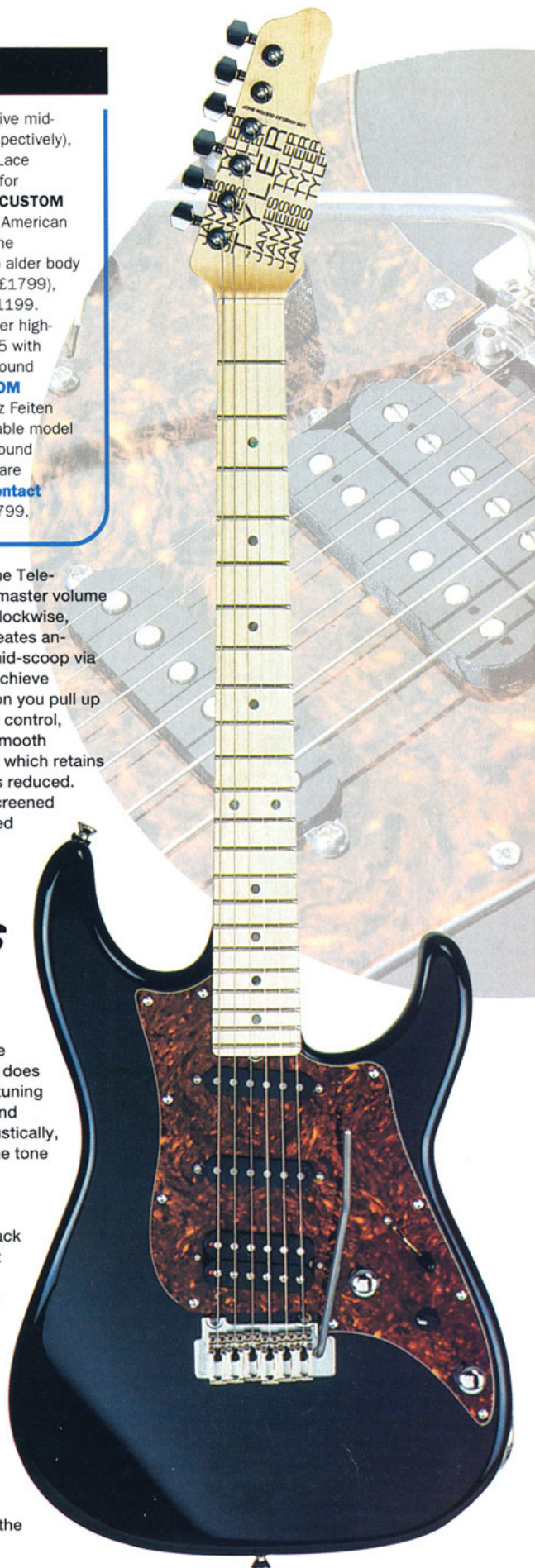
The two-post Gotoh vibrato is Strat-derived, the arm push-fits into a collared hole with Delrin cushion inset and grub screw tensioner. Each saddle is solid, not pressed, steel and the three-spring set-up, and tapered sustain block, allow generous in-tune waggle.

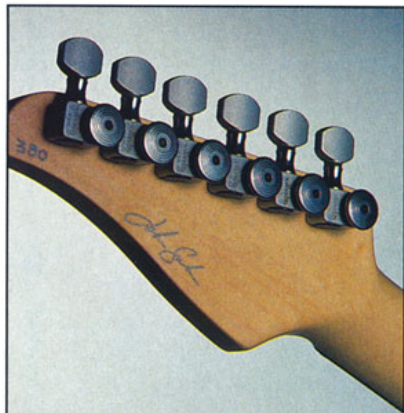
While John produces his own JST single-coil pickups – two V60s are used in neck and middle position – the open-coil 'Bucker' humbucker at the bridge is custom wound by DiMarzio. The 5-way pickup selector is conventional, except that when it combines the bridge and middle pickups the humbucker is split so only the neck-facing coil is voiced.

Deceptively simple too are the Tele-knobbed controls, basically master volume and master tone. Fully anti-clockwise, however, the tone control creates an even-more-Strat-sounding mid-scoop via a passive filter network. To achieve standard tone control function you pull up the tone control. The volume control, meanwhile, features a very smooth sounding treble bleed circuit which retains the highs when the volume is reduced. Internally the guitar is well screened and needless to say the mixed pickup positions are hum-cancelling – only the solo single-coils produce hum.

● SOUNDS

This guitar feels extremely good, and the Buzz Feiten Tuning System – well, in my book anyway – creates that extra percentage tuning-wise that the careful construction does for the feel. I'm a fan of this tuning system as applied on high-end guitars like this. Played acoustically, the projection is slight but the tone is balanced and lively which relates directly to the amp'd sound. The neck pickup is superb, percussive in its attack when you dig in, mellow, but not dull, when you stroke it. The highs are crystalline but never sharp: sweet with bite. The neck/middle mix adds a chunky, hollowed percussion with oodles of quacky attack; the lone middle pickup is more strident – a brighter version of the neck pickup. The Bridge and middle mix is subtly brighter than the neck/middle mix tone while the





Sperzel locking tuners help keep the Suhr true to pitch

bridge humbucker ups the output for richer power that's not over midrange-heavy and retains those articulate highs and a good balance. With the tone control down and fully anti-clockwise we get a mellow midrange reduction for that extra quacky 'produced Strat' tone; pull the control up and it acts like a standard passive treble roll-off that's very nicely graduated between light and dark; fully rolled off, the treble cut is quite severe.

At volume, well, it's very hard to put down. A vintage Strat with extra bridge pickup kick yet the playability avoids all the old-Strat problems: no high-fret choking. The vibrato stays nicely in tune and you feel really at home. No frills, no gimmicks just great tone and feel. It's what a pro (Strat) guitar should be.

TYLER STUDIO ELITE

Based in Van Nuys, California, Tyler Guitars is a team of four builders, headed by James Tyler himself, producing only 12 instruments per month. Every instrument is pre-ordered (in this case by the UK distributor), and the current wait is six months. The guitars are held in high esteem by many LA and Nashville studio musicians, the most notable being Michael Landau and Dan Huff, both of whom have their own Tyler 'Classic' models.

Aside from the decidedly un-Strat-like scratchplate, headstock outline and, obviously maple fingerboard, the core of this guitar, construction-wise, is very similar to the Suhr. But, from the moment you strike your first chord, you realise it's a very different ride...

Made from alder, the opaque black body is equally well-finished. The edge radiusing is larger, more vintage-Fender, but other than that the outline, comfort contouring and heel area chamfering is near identical save for additional chamfering on the bass-side cutaway to squeeze in an extra percent of high-fret playing comfort.

Not everyone will enjoy the headstock's rather lumpy shape or the James Tyler logo's. But the 22-fret maple neck is quartersawn for maximum stiffness, with a

FACTFILE

SUHR STANDARD RRP: £1595 (inc case)

USA-made double-cutaway solidbody electric with Buzz Feiten tuning system. Alder body, bolt-on maple neck with 22-fret rosewood fingerboard. Chrome hardware: Sperzel locking tuners, Gotoh 1099T vibrato with solid saddles. Suhr JST pickups: JST Bucker humbucker (custom made exclusively for Suhr by DiMarzio) at bridge, JST V60 single-coils at neck and middle. Five-way pickup selector switch, master volume and master tone with passive mid-range scoop via pull/push switch.

Options: The reviewed Standard is the 'base' guitar; the same spec'd instrument with tone chambers and either ash or alder top would be £1895. An obvious upgrade would be the same Standard guitar but with highly figured top and gold hardware for approx. £1995. No cost options on the Standard include basswood body, rosewood or Pau Ferro fingerboard, three different neck profiles, fingerboard radius (eg. 7.5", 8.5" and 10"), increased nut width, fret-size, various hardware and some electronics and pickup changes.

Range options: The Classic, a more standard Strat-alike, starts at £1595; the chambered version costs £1895. A sort of Mark Knopfler era Pensa-Suhr-style from John would cost around £2995. The Scott Henderson model costs approx. £1695 and the Classic T (a Tele-style) goes from £1595.

Left-hand options: Not confirmed at press-time.

Colour options: Black cherry metallic (as reviewed) is one of approx. 30 colours – opaques, translucent and 'bursts' currently offered.

Contact: Stellar Distribution, PO Box 477, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE5 1WQ. ☎ 0191-267-3061

TYLER STUDIO ELITE HD RRP: £1995 (inc case)

USA-made double-cutaway solidbody electric. Alder body, bolt-on quartersawn maple neck with 22-fret maple fingerboard. Chrome hardware: Sperzel locking tuners, Wilkinson VSV vibrato. Custom wound Seymour

Duncan pickups: Trembucker (a 'JB with more clout') open-coiled humbucker at bridge, two custom wound (based on SSL-1's) single-coils at neck and middle. 5-way pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone, active midrange boost. Rear-placed compartment for 9V battery.

Options: Loads... including ash body (£40), AAA bird's eye neck (£40), Schaller Floyd Rose (£145), gold hardware (£100) mid-boost pre-set button (£60) etc.

Range options: Tyler have a much larger range of guitar models than Suhr. Currently available in the UK are the Studio Elite (from £2075) which is basically identical to the Elite HD on review but with stacked 'single-coils', and lead/rhythm circuit. Tyler's paint jobs (and names!) are legendary: how about the Studio Elite Psychedelic Vomit (£1895) and Burning Water (£1995)? The Tyler Classic is more conventional Strat-alike, the basic model costs £1850, the Michael Landau Classic is £1895 and the Dan Huff Classic is £2150.

Left-hand options: All models no extra charge.

Colour options: Black (as reviewed) is one of numerous opaque, metallic, translucent and 'burst' offered. Add £100 for unusual hues like 'haz-mat sewage fiasco shmeat'! Contact: Stellar Distribution, PO Box 477, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE5 1WQ. ☎ 0191-267-3061

Dimensions (in mm unless stated)

| | SUHR | TYLER |
|------------------------|-------------|-------------|
| Scale Length | 648 (25.5") | 648 (25.5") |
| Width of neck | | |
| ...at nut | 42.4 | 42.3 |
| ...at 12th fret | 52 | 52 |
| Depth of neck | | |
| ...at 1st fret | 21.2 | 21.1 |
| ...at 12th fret | 23.3 | 24.5 |
| String spacing | | |
| ...at nut | 35 | 35 |
| ...at bridge | 52.5 | 54 |
| Action as Supplied | | |
| ...at 12th fret treble | 1.2 | 1.8 |
| ...at 12th fret bass | 1.5 | 1.8 |
| Weight (kg/lbs) | 3.4/7.5 | 3.6/8 |

254mm (10") radiused separate-piece, abalone-dot inlaid maple fingerboard. It's deeper, less V'd in the shoulder with a more rounded section, what Tyler call their '59 neck backshape'. A vintage vibe? No. The Dunlop 6100 frets are huge (approx. 2.9mm wide x 1.4mm high) and feel really obtrusive due to really quite square ends. With thumb-behind playing styles this sort of width is *de rigueur* for widdle some rock workouts but the big neck contrasts that approach, creating a strange hybrid – sort of Jeff Beck meets Steve Vai. The satin neck back is rougher than the Suhr's (though to be fair it'll shine up after a few hours playing) and a quick rub with a fine

abrasive would have given it a silkier feel. Mind you, a lot of handwork is evident: the fingerboard edges are almost over-rounded between the frets and although strange on first encounter, the neck really grew on me. It's real easy to bend on and any percussive techniques – hammer-ons, pull-offs or tapping – are ridiculously easy.

Hardware is high-spec too: Sperzel Trimlok tuners and a two-post version of the now defunct Wilkinson VSV (it's now available from Gotoh) vibrato with it's pressed steel, lock-down saddles. Like the Suhr it's a three-spring set up though the vibrato's sustain block is standard thickness, not tapered, but down-bend still



Wilkinson trem and Duncan 'bucker power the Tyler



There's no missing who carved the Tele-ish headstock

goes all the way to slack and upbend, as set, is approximately a tone on the G string.

A five-way pickup selector splits the custom wound Seymour Duncan Trembucker (based on a JB, with more balls) voicing the bridge-facing coil when combined with the middle flush-poled single-coil which, along with the neck pickup, is custom wound and based on the SSL-1. Again the mixed positions, plus the Trembucker, are hum-cancelling and along with the master volume and master tone, with easily grippable Tele-style knobs, we get a small-knobbed control which when turned clockwise, introduces a generous active midrange boost. Below the vibrato cavity on the guitar's back is a separate flip-top compartment for the necessary 9V battery.

● SOUNDS

Like the Suhr, strapped on, this axe feels like an old mate. Acoustically it has more highs and similar acoustic volume. This additional brightness, clearly assisted by the bridge, maple 'board, and slightly 'active sounding' pickups, underpins the whole power-Strat tone. Consequently the neck pickup does sound a bit more '80s – brighter, less woody – than the Suhr's more vintage-vibe but by simply reducing

the guitar's volume and rolling off a little tone restores an older-style voice; it's that simple. The neck/middle mix continues the theme with a smart funk voice a tad glassier and brighter than the Suhr. The middle pickup is almost electro acoustic-like in its high end stridency, the middle/bridge mix is again bright but not unpleasant (nor vintage either) while the bridge humbucker is loud and more clouded in the midrange, thicker and tougher than the Suhr.

The midrange boost affects all pickup selections and on full is really quite severe. Of course, being a rotary control you can gradually add in its effect to slightly thicken the tone for a fuller, rounder voice especially if you roll-off some highs from the tone. Ultimately though, the Tyler just wants to rock. Yes, it can do a very passable vintage-Strat (as described), but the sprankier tone, not to mention the almost humbucker-like effect of the mid-boost, means that fat, screaming power every-ready. The bridge humbucker is more rock-ready than the Suhr and dialling in some mid-boost makes soloing fat and juicy. Conversely, call up the neck pickup and add in the midboost and we're almost into Les Paul territory. It is more aggressive sounding but the rude power is highly addictive.

VERDICT

Look: a great guitar is a great guitar, period. Strip away the price and image for a moment and once you've played and/or owned one it's hard to go back. John Suhr? Well, it's good to have you back. James Tyler? He's never been away and just continues to hand-build some of the finest performing guitars around, instruments that are high on function and low on bullshit.

While the Suhr guitar comes across on a par with Tom Anderson, the Tyler is fractionally less tidy but holds its own when it comes to

creating a wide ranges of tones that go, unashamedly, towards LA rock territory much more than the vintage-vibed Suhr. Both guitars use the Stratocaster as the base point but the refinements – both in outline and features – are player-led, though in a sense they both seem a mite unfashionable.

Put it this way: if your living depends upon it, then you need the best possible tool for the job. Just add these two to the 'high-line' list that includes the Fender Custom Shop, Tom Anderson, PRS, the Gibson Custom and a couple of Brit-makers too: professional tools, all of 'em. **G**