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THE GUITAR PLAYER'S BIBLE

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Tyler Hollowbody Studio Elite Retro & Classic £1,999 & £1,949

Does James Tyler's new hollow-body design actually improve performance?
We put a pair of new models through their paces by Simon Bradley

Back in issue 257, we caused a spot of controversy at the conclusion of our review of the Tyler Studio Elite HD: the phrase describing the guitar as being '...as close to perfection as we've seen in a very long time' did result in a few letters and e-mails winging our way: did we actually mean that admittedly grand statement?

So allow us to confirm that we did mean it and, what's more, we stand by what we said: a Tyler remains top of our own 'must-buy' list. However, as befits similar operations across the world,

James Tyler and his small but dedicated team of master luthiers – based in Van Nuys, California – have been continuing their quest to design and build what they'd class as the perfect electric guitar. These two models, both based on existing designs, are worthy of a closer look simply because both are hollow: not chambered, not semi-acoustic, but genuinely hollow.

"The body is made in two halves on a Fadal digital CNC router, a top half and a back half," explains James Tyler. "It's not chambered, but completely hollow

inside – from the inside tip of one horn all the way around to the inside tip of the other horn. It's a little over one-quarter-inch thick, and follows the outside contours. The walls around the pickup and tremolo cavities are the same thickness too."

So what was the inspiration behind the concept? "Well, I wanted to see if I could get a more resonant guitar with weight reduction as a key benefit. The success of the project has amazed all of us here and the players who sit down and spend time with the guitar almost



adding their own brand of expertise. James was understandably reluctant to discuss details about the pickups, so we'll let our ears be the judge.

Hollowbody Classic

The basic inspiration behind the Classic is clearly the early sixties Fender Stratocaster. Consequently, the spec includes an 11-screw three-ply scratchplate complete with five-way lever pick switch, flat-mounted angled jack input and so on. The hollowed body is swamp ash rather than the traditional alder and, as ever with guitars built by low-production, high-quality companies, the range of finishes is extensive. Tyler, with the famous Burning Water and Psycho Vomit options on certain models, makes no bones about its sky's-the-limit ideals, and although finishes such as classic sunburst are available, we love the subtle shades simmering away in the trans-burgundy hue of our example.

To continue the vintage theme, the vibrato here is Trev Wilkinson's VSV model, a design that includes a block fashioned from a similar leaded-steel alloy to older Fenders. What's more, the saddles are stamped from solid steel and rolled into a sort of exclamation mark design that allows the string to be fed at a slightly more shallow angle than a classic Strat. Makers such as Hamer, Suhr, Zion and more use the VSV and it certainly operates beautifully smoothly here: the push-in arm is always a better bet than its screw-in sibling, and tuning stability is aided by the locking Sperzel tuners.

Where the Hollowbody Classic, like just about every Tyler guitar, comes into its own is with the neck. Now, we'll concede that it's difficult to deal with any item that tends to incite all sorts of unscientifically emotional responses in absolutes but we'll say that the feel of any Tyler neck has to be the best available today. As well as the sheer quality of workmanship and materials involved, this is down to the subtle shaping of the fingerboard between each fret to mimic decades of playing wear – the feel here is genuinely out of this world.

Of course, that paddle headstock and unusual logo will always cause a stir. With some trepidation, we asked James to comment: "I thought this was over by now!" he told us. "I was the first custom builder to stop using the Fender headstock way back in the 1980s. I've been using this same headstock since then and have absolutely no plans to change it. I suppose some people might be happier with the seemingly well-accepted Kramer Pacer headstock design, but I'll stick with what I have."

One thing's for sure: the headstock enables identification of the guitar's maker from 50 paces, and considering →

always
change their
order to hollow.

"Tariqh Akoni, who worked this last year with stars like Josh Groban, Huey Lewis and LeAnn Rimes, recently got a hollow Classic, as did Dann Huff. Sessionist Tim Pierce and Wayne Krantz have each had hollow guitars too."

There are certain other refinements on these two instruments, not least the first appearance of Tyler's new single-coils on both. Each offers a trio of vintage-style JTV units wired on-site that, as James eloquently puts it, "hum as God intended them to do", although the central pickup of each configuration is reverse-wound with reverse polarity, for hum-cancelling in mixed positions.

"We're beginning to build and wind our own pickups," James says. "Over the years I've had many people wind pickups for me: Seymour Duncan, Lindy Fralin, John Suhr, Tom Anderson, and DiMarzio. Now we're starting to do it all in-house, so we have more control over it and we can experiment and develop new things."

Indeed, a trio of John Suhr singles had been an option for a while, as had units custom-wired by Seymour Duncan, but it's good to see Tyler taking the bull by the Alnicos and



TYLER HOLLOWBODY CLASSIC

PRICE: £1,949 (inc case)
ORIGIN: USA
TYPE: Double-cutaway, hollowbody electric
BODY: Hollowed swamp ash
NECK: Maple, bolt-on
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5-inch)
NUT/WIDTH: Graphite/42mm
FINGERBOARD: Rosewood
FRETS: 22
HARDWARE: Gotoh/Wilkinson VSV tremolo, Sperzel locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 55mm
ELECTRICS: Three Tyler JTV single-coils (middle reverse wound/reverse polarity), five-way lever pickup switch, volume and two tone controls
WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.8/6.1
OPTIONS: The solid standard Classic, with an alder body and Kluson tuners costs £1,849
LEFT-HANDERS: Yes (CPOA)
FINISHES: Trans burgundy (as reviewed). Other colours available
Guitarguitar
0191 261 1568
www.tylerguitars.co.uk

HOLLOWBODY CLASSIC	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

- **WE LIKED** The classic vibe and top-class playability
- **WE DISLIKED** Beware those slightly over-harsh amp settings

→ just how good Tyler guitars are, this writer at least isn't too concerned about the look.

SOUNDS: As with certain parts of the spec, the basic tone of the bridge pickup sits somewhere between that of a Strat and Tele: it has the cut and bite of the former with the unadulterated twang of the latter. As James has alluded to, a hollow body will add resonance, but that associated lack of tonewood will also unavoidably result in a certain loss of the lower ranges and there's no getting away from the harsh nature at times – especially with higher-gain amp settings.

Horses for courses, as ever, and positions two and four are truly gorgeous, especially with a good clean tone and dollops of rich reverb thrown in for good measure. Mark Knopfler-imitators will be delighted that even the most cack-handed rendition of Sultans Of Swing sounds pretty good, such is the 'Strat-and-then-some' tone.

However, that strident middle-position tone is a little too lacking in sheer 'oomph' for our liking and, if a high-octane Gary Moore scream is your goal, you may need some treble filters unless you set your amp just right.

Hollowbody Studio Elite Retro

Here, instead of sticking as close as possible to the classic Strat ideal, the Studio Elite Retro is much more of a de rigeur Tyler guitar. Featuring the sunburst finish we mentioned earlier, and boasting a slightly elongated tortoiseshell pickguard (thanks to the space afforded by the side-mounted jack), the body is high-grade alder.



The brand new 'V' profile of the Retro Studio Elite, in all its glory

Below: Tyler's innovative hollow-body design, naked and exposed



Below: The perimeter measures just over one-quarter-inch in thickness



All five pickup settings on the Studio Elite allow you to really stretch your technique with whatever crazy chord voicing you'd care to attempt: the tone is that good!

All three JVT pickups, resplendent with their vintage mint-green covers, are angled slightly towards the bridge. The bridge unit itself is sited slightly further away from the VSV vibrato when compared to the Classic (from its central point, just under 34mm compared to 36mm). The maple neck of our example features Tyler's new 'V'-profile neck and James is typically relaxed about its genesis.

"Well, I haven't put any great effort into [the researching of neck profiles]. Over the years, I've found a few shapes that I, and a lot of other people seem to like and I work off of those."

Probably the most famous 'V'-profile can be found on the Clapton Signature Strat, and although the neck of this Tyler fills the hand in a similarly agreeable way, the apex of the wood is slightly rounder – a good thing

The rivals

HOLLOWBODY CLASSIC	PRICE
Fender US Deluxe Ash Strat	£1,099
Anderson Hollow Drop Top	from £2,395
G&L Legacy Special	from £1,089

The combination of the S-1 switching system with three Samarium Cobalt Noiseless pickups makes this Strat seem rather futuristic: needless to say it's not. Anderson's version of 'hollow' equals 'chambered', but the instrument is great all-round. The Special is a cool version of G&L's S-type Legacy range with three dual blades



TYLER HOLLOWBODY STUDIO ELITE RETRO

As Classic except...

PRICE: £1,999 (inc case)

BODY: Hollowed alder

FINGERBOARD: Maple

HARDWARE: Wilkinson

VSV tremolo, Kluson

tuners

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 2.75/6

OPTIONS: The solid

standard Studio Elite,

with otherwise the same

spec, costs £1,949

FINISHES: Tobacco

sunburst (as reviewed).

Many other colours

available

STUDIO ELITE RETRO TEST RESULTS

Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

■ **WE LIKED** The awesome new neck profile and classic single-coil tones

■ **WE DISLIKED** Any changes we'd suggest can be found within Tyler's custom options

→ considering this profile can be an acquired taste. The final spec contrast is the provision of classic Kluson machines and a graphite nut.

SOUNDS: Due to the tonal nature of alder, plus the siting of the pickups, accusations of harshness become completely redundant here. You're left with all the Strat-type tones that we've all heard on our favourite records and, thanks to the feel of the neck that we've just about run out of superlatives for, this is a viable alternative to that dream Fender Custom Shop model.

In fact, silky smoothness is a reasonable description of the guitar as a whole. All five settings are rounder and bereft of even the merest hint of abrasion, allowing you to really stretch your technique with whatever crazy chord voicing you'd care to attempt: the tone is that good.

As you'd expect, there's plenty of resonance, both acoustically and when plugged in, which benefits any style and the only criticism we'd have is that the VSV is set slightly flat when compared to the more liquid set-up of the Classic. That's personal taste, of course: what should be obvious by now is that this guitar is one of the best of its type we've tried in aeons.

Verdict

Due to the lack of various optional extras, the price of both instruments is below the £2,000 mark, putting them



The Wilkinson VSV vibrato features rolled saddles for improved tone


closer than ever to their Fender equivalents and, as we've said many times before, an increased choice is always a great thing for those of us with a limited amount of money burning holes in our pockets.

Can a Tyler compete with the wealth of history that even the most basic of Fender Custom Shop models can offer? We'd suggest that it could, although it would be a lucky player indeed who'd be able to afford and use both, so a choice has to be made.

Coming back to specifics, the guitars' hollow bodies have both benefits and downsides. The lightweight construction and additional resonance to the tone are offset by the at-times abrasive nature of the Classic. But the feel of the necks, plus the gamut of options Tyler offers, does make us feel

much better about this side of things – and there's no doubt that the Studio Elite Retro sounds even better than the Classic, and we loved the additional heft and feel of the new 'V'-profile neck.

We review a Bad Cat rig on page 137 of this issue, and we plugged the Elite into this amp to really spoil ourselves. Don't let anyone tell you that money doesn't buy quality: our humble testing area reverberated to some of the best classic Strat-inspired tones we've ever had the pleasure of playing with.

We'll leave the final word to James as he tells us of his future plans: "I'm now planning on riding my Buell motorcycle, racing my Corvette, and taking a nap." Good for you, you deserve it: could you just leave the guitars with us? 

The rivals

HOLLOWBODY STUDIO ELITE RETRO

Anderson The Classic from £1,995

Fender Classic Player V-neck Strat £1,099

Blade Texas Standard Pro from £399

Anderson's take on a vintage-styled Fender Stratocaster includes a trio of vintage-voiced single-coils, retro styling and a mind-boggling list of custom options that can be worked through online. As well as the suitably vintage V-profile to the neck, this particular Fender Stratocaster offers a bevelled scratchplate into the equation. Basically, if you want a fifties vibe on a modern Fender, then this is it. Blade's Texas Standard Pro is not exactly a Tyler in the construction or tone stakes, but it's a great price for a guitar that includes vintage mint livery and a trio of Blade single-coils that can be voiced on the fly via the always-excellent VSC circuit

Where the Hollowbody Classic, like just about every Tyler guitar, comes into its own is with the neck – the feel of any Tyler neck has to be the best available today

Tyler Hollowbody Classic

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

Tyler Hollowbody Studio Elite Retro

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★