

Under Dark Skies

Fender in the latter CBS era

Everyone has heard the now-buzz-words “pre-CBS” when talking about vintage Fender guitars. You know, when you want a primo Fender, it’s gotta be pre-1966, and that chronological difference means thousands of dollars for buyers. But why? What did CBS do to ruin our precious Strats and Teles? Well, for one thing, they took away a neck bolt from the Strat, that’s what!

But, that was actually Leo Fender’s idea...hmm.

Well, big headstocks and bullet truss rods!

But, Jimi Hendrix played transition Strats with big headstocks...and he’s pretty great...



The Hendrix “Woodstock” Strat, look at that gloriously huge headstock!

Seriously though, it’s fairly well known that Fender’s build quality took a dive during the ‘70s, especially as the decade ended. The company’s bank account was feeling it, too, so CBS had to do something to get people buying again. It was to this end that Dan Smith was hired, fresh from experience with Yamaha’s American branch, to revitalize the brand. His remembrance of CBS’s Fender is not a good one; a corporate entity with “no soul at the top” that didn’t listen to

the players on the inside or out. But Dan Smith was the man for the job, and the Strat was restored to its former glory. Ah, four bolts, as nature intended... But he didn't stop there! He, and others, knew that people loved Fender for the late '50s early '60s guitars that made the brand a household name, so Fender began releasing reissues, but they didn't make them in California.



OK, maybe CBS did go a little far...

Fender Overseas

One of the things Dan brought with him was his experience with Japanese manufacturing. So with startup funding from Yamano Music and the use of the Fujigen Factory (of Ibanez fame), Fender Japan was born! If you've ever played an '80s MIJ (Made in Japan, *not* crafted) Fender, you know of their many merits. Even the MIJ Squiers from this time are considered fabulous pieces by many. So, here is Fender in the early '80s, with Dan Smith saving the brand, and a brand new production facility that's ready for anything. A perfect opportunity to try something new. It was time for Dan Smith's *Masterstroke*...



A 1984 Fender Esprit Elite

It seems fitting that the guy who brought back traditional designs to Fender's legacy models would be the guy who would spear-head one of the most "un-Fender" guitars in the back catalog. As always, Fender was seeking a new opportunity to siphon some business away from their main competitor, and Dan made his play at just that with the Master Series. When you look at the Flame or Esprit, you see a carved maple top, a set neck, and...*shuddering in fear*...3-per-side tuners! This is not your granddaddy's Fender, and no mistake. But are they worthy of the hallowed brand?

Yes

Yes! They are! After getting a chance to play a beautiful Chrome Red Esprit Elite, I can honestly say I was floored by the instrument. It plays beautifully and sounds awesome. Fender Japan's attention to detail and expert craftsmanship shines like the glossy finish. The Schaller designed pickups (that look suspiciously like Ibanez Musician pickups, hmmm) sound amazing, with a thick warmth and lots of body. The addition of coil tapping provides further tonal possibilities as

well. This all not to mention the fine materials and design, making these guitars as beautiful to the eyes and fingers as they are to the ear. The Esprit was meant to be a sort of alternative to Gibson ES models, with a larger, chambered body and symmetrical cutaways. The Flame was supposed to compete with the Les Paul, with a smaller body and slightly asymmetrical cutaways, though it was still chambered. As usual, there were different levels of the two models you could choose from: Standard, Elite, and Ultra. Both models had the same features for each level, with Elites having Snowflake inlays, a fine tuner bridge, and expanded electronics. The Ultras were the top of the line, with bound ebony fretboards, split block inlays, spruce tops, and gold hardware. Whichever the level, players ended up with a versatile, well built guitar with a gorgeous look. Fender even found an endorsee! Robben Ford, of Yellowjackets fame, who was featured with an Esprit. Whelp! That's all you need right? A well-thought out series of beautiful guitars that play and sound amazing with a famous endorsee to lead the charge! The Master Series was ready to take the world by storm, but did it?

While the new Fender Master Series Esprit and Flame guitars bear a superficial resemblance to other popular electrics, a closer examination reveals a myriad of subtle detail refinements. Taken all together, they add up to a totally new—and uniquely versatile—tool for the contemporary guitarist. Some of the major features shared by Esprit and Flame models include:

- Tone Chambered Bodies.** Although appearing to be totally solid, the guitar bodies feature strategically shaped and positioned hollow channels carved in the body. These unique tone chambers allow the instruments to “breathe,” increasing resonance and sustain and producing a fuller, rounder tone. A side benefit: weight is reduced and overall balance is improved.
- Special Split-Coil Pickups.** (Available on Elite and Ultra models) Fender could

have given the Esprit and Flame models an acceptable humbucking sound simply by fitting “off the shelf” pickups. Instead, the pickups and electronics were the subject of a complete design study, utilizing input from top players. The result was an entirely new pickup system, with separate designs for bridge and neck (different string spacing at bridge and neck locations were even accounted for). The bridge pickup features extra windings for a hotter, mellower sound without harshness, while the

Modern classics reinterpreted with the touch of Fender genius



Thanks to a new wiring arrangement, when both pickups are used in single-coil mode they are automatically in a hum-canceling configuration.

Custom Hardware. All models utilize new bridge



Three-axis adjustable bridge allows for side to side spacing in addition to height and intonation adjustments.

designs developed by Fender especially for the Master Series. Each string is individually adjustable for side to side spacing (in addition to standard height and intonation adjustments) allowing the instrument to be set up exactly to player preferences. Roller-type string saddles combine with adjustable tailpiece height and



Angle-compensating tailpiece for “micro” fine tuning adjustments is featured on Elite and Ultra models.

a unique angle-compensating string attachment to achieve superior playability at any desired tension setting. In addition, Ultra and Elite models include “micro” fine-tuning adjustment on the tailpiece for more precise tuning.

Unique “TBX”™ Tone Control System. Included on Ultra and Elite instruments, the advanced patent-applied-for TBX tone control features a unique dual-mode operation. Over the first half of its rotation, it functions as a conventional tone (high-frequency rolloff) control. When advanced past the midpoint, it actually changes the resonant

peak of the pickup, producing a bright, ringing tone unlike that ever heard from a guitar of this type. Thus Esprit and Flame players truly get the best of both worlds: humbucking sustain and warmth, plus Fender’s penetrating edge.

Refined Body And Neck Construction. Only select hardwoods are used in the Esprit and Flame. Alder bodies (a first for this style of instrument) combine with carved Spruce or Maple tops, set-in Maple necks with Ebony or Rosewood fretboards to provide unmatched warmth and resonance along with superior stability and sustain. The dual cutaways feature a special angled shape which combines with the low-profile heel to allow much easier access to the highest frets. The net result is sound and play-



Pickups may be used in humbuckers or switched for brilliant, single-coil “Fender-type” sound ability unlike any other guitars on the market—a fact which can be easily demonstrated by listening carefully to the un-amplified sound of the instruments.

Fender? Is that you?

No

If you ask Dan, it was CBS's fault again, if indirectly. The dark CBS days would come to a close almost as soon as Dan and the boys were bringing Fender out of those dark ages. In 1984, the year after the Master Series dawned, CBS would sell Fender to its own employees. Apparently the pangs of that transitional time meant bad things for the fledgling series. That didn't stop them from trying to keep it alive, if only in a different form, with the Esprit evolving into the Robben Ford Signature. It managed to survive into the new millenium, but all of its iterations were discontinued by 2001. As is normally the case, I'm sure the reasons for the series' demise were manifold, but I can't help but suspect that haunting fear of difference from the guitar buying community. Think about it, Fender was making good ol' fashioned Strats again, and you could

even get an awesome reissue from Fender Japan at the time! Yes, I fear Fender may have been suffering one of many blows for daring to be different. This story is further tragic because there does not seem to be any reissues, or any interest at all in these awesome guitars. Indeed, I would not have known about them at all if that Esprit hadn't stumbled its way into our shop. This is one in particular that I feel deserves a revival, or at least a bit more spotlight. If you stumble across one, give it the attention it deserves; you won't regret it!



Robben Ford with his Esprit-style signature

A quick side note

The Fender D'Aquisto model was also advertised as part of the Master Series, but it saw more recognition and was revived several times over the years. Still, a really cool, slightly obscure guitar in its own right!