

Much hubbub is made about Fender under the leadership of CBS, with the oft maligned era giving rise to the famous “pre-CBS” qualifier in the vintage Fender market. The atrocities committed against our beloved ‘casters during the CBS regime are many and heinous (according to most ...well, according to some), and thankfully there was an end to the madness when CBS sold Fender to its employees. But every story has heroes as well as villains, and there was no shortage of gallantry and villainy before the end of the CBS saga. This article will focus on the battle for the chastity and sanctity of the Fender Stratocaster, and those that sought to restore the battered beauty, and those that sought to warp it beyond recognition.



A beautiful, innocent 1954 Stratocaster

Opening Blows

It has been hashed and rehashed time and again, so we won't spend too long on the subject here, but we simply must recount the Strat's transition from beautiful instrument to twisted abomination (according too... Oh never mind, you get it). Leo Fender sold his namesake company to CBS for 13 silver pieces, *I mean 13 million dollars excuse me*, in 1965 and already, the Strat was under attack. The elegant and tastefully sized headstock was enlarged to cartoonish proportions, and that was just the beginning. Soon, the Strat would lose its most

precious fourth bolt, and gain a hideously protruding truss rod now called a “bullet” truss rod; a fitting name for this assault on the innocent Strat! And on top of all that, the penny pinchers at CBS caused a general decline in quality, leading to a shallow husk in place of an American classic. And sadly, dear friends, this was not even the worst CBS had in store for our beloved Strat...



*A 1976 Strat with a bloated headstock, a missing neck bolt, and even a hardtail bridge...
Disgusting*

A Shining Hero

But the darkest day was preceded by a glimmer of hope, emanating from a shining hero of the Fender mythos: Dan Smith! Smith came from triumph under the banners of Yamaha, and was hired by CBS to repair Fender's image and restore their dwindling sales. And Smith was the man to do it, for he knew that success could only be found in restoring Fender's legacy models to their pre-CBS glory. So it was that in 1982 the Smith Strat was released, with the fourth bolt restored, the bullet unloaded, and swollen headstock reduced to its former glory. These Strats are faithful returns to the legends that preceded them, leaving the violations of the previous decade in the past and proceeding toward a hopeful future. Or so it should have been...

The Most Heinous Blow

The end of 1982 saw the end of the *real* Smith Strat, and the birth of a most hideous imposter, resembling a Strat but being in truth a monstrosity. While the annals of history remember all Strats from the early '80s as "Smith Strats", nothing could be further from the truth. One is a monument to the glories of the past, while the other, the other is... Just look! See for yourself!



Oh! The horror! The abysmal, disgusting horror! Where's the backplate?! Two knobs?!?! And no jack plate?!? This is no Strat, this is an affront to nature! Destroy it! Burn it! Wipe it from existence!!!! It must be BANISHED from all reckoning! FORGOTTEN FOR ALL TIME AND MEMORIAM!!!!!!!!!!

In All Seriousness

Ahem...pardon the outburst...

But seriously, the term Smith Strat is tossed around a good bit, but it is ludicrous to think that the man who started the Japanese reissue series and returned the Strat to a more 1960s spec, would be the same man to propose the 2-knob Strat. I also find it fairly telling that, while many know the name Dan Smith, no one can recall the name(s) of the designer(s) of the 2-knob. I suppose whoever took part in its design was not eager to put it on their resume. To be fair, however, the 2-knob is not a horrible instrument. It still retains some of the Smith changes, like a smaller headstock and 4-bolt neck, and the Freeflyte top-loader bridge functions well. The lack of a back cavity makes for tighter sustain, akin to a hardtail Strat, and the playability and feel is all there. It just isn't the Strat anyone wanted! That's not to say it isn't valuable, with the rare "Bowling Ball" 2-knobs being prized collector's pieces, and the standard versions selling for a good bit themselves. So whether you're eyeballing a true Smith Strat or a 2-knob, you're looking at an important link in the iconic model's history, and any Strat collector should seek them out and add them to the line-up!

A Brief Disclaimer:

The writer of this blog is a dyed-in-the-wool Strat man, and owns and cherishes a 1973 Sunburst. So all disparaging remarks above are purely in jest, and all disparaging marks made below will incur unbridled wrath.

Just kidding, but be nice to '70s Strats.