

The Year was 1964...

It is by now certified legend that four Brits would cross the Atlantic in 1964, and forever change the course of popular music. The Beatles' appearance on the Ed Sullivan show is remembered as the beginning of the British Invasion, and bands on both sides of the pond were scrambling to grab a slice of the sensation. Sporting "long hair", a blues based sound, and electric guitars, The Fab Four did not just rock the charts, they inspired a surge in popularity of guitars in general, and it wouldn't be just the Japanese guitar boom that took cues from the boys' brands of choice. Whether it was an Epiphone Casino, a Gretsch Country Gentleman, or a Rickenbacker 325, the common thread in John and George's guitar picks was hollow-body electrics, something that most brands could already offer, but that one brand was entirely devoid of.

Keeping Up with the Trend...

By 1964, Fender was by no means a minor leaguer in the guitar world, in fact, pre-Beatles America was dominated by Surf Music, which was positively *swimming* with Fender guitars. And even before The Ventures and Dick Dale, Fender was making their stake in the Rock mythos in the hands of Buddy Holly, but through it all the company's electric guitar output was entirely solid bodies. When the invasion hit in '64, Fender had even just recently had a marketing misfire with their Surf Rock centered Jaguar campaign (though the model would continue production and come into its own, but that's for another post!); clearly the tides were changing, and Fender needed to stay on top of the wave.



Nope, no solid bodies here

It was to this end that Fender hired luthier Roger Rossmeisl, a German who had learned luthiery from his father, and further mastered his art in Mittenvald, a municipality in Bavaria known as a center for violin and guitar building. Speaking of The Fab Four, Rossmeisl became a quick success in America, having designed both the 325 and the 360/12 for Rickenbacker, among many others. The man behind some of The Beatles' most iconic guitars was the perfect man to give Fender a hollow-body to compete in the new market. The product of Rossmeisl's work was the Fender Coronado; every bit of hollow-bodied glory Fender was looking for, but retaining the company's typical 25.5" scale length and bolt-on neck. The Coronado I was a true hollow-body with no solid core, unlike the ES-335, and this first iteration also rocked just one outsourced DeArmond single-coil pick-up, an unusual move for Fender. The bodies and necks were made of maple, with the exception of the now highly sought-after Wildwood versions of the Coronado II and Coronado XII, which were made of laminated beechwood. A Coronado bass was also released in the same year, also with one single-coil pick-up. Fender's

hollow-body had arrived, expertly designed, and ready to seize the company a piece of the burgeoning market.



Well, lookie there!

In the Hands of the King...

Despite Rossmeisl and Fender's efforts, the Coronado wasn't the golden goose they had expected. Early players complained that the aforementioned true hollowbody combined with the single-coil pick-up made for some pretty big feedback issues. Also, Jazz players, who constitute a large chunk of the hollowbody-buying public, did not take kindly to the bolt-on construction. One of the solitary early sightings of the model saw the Coronado Bass in the hands of The Lemon Piper's Steve Walmsley in a video for their hit song "Green Tambourine" in 1967. The Ohio band was a sort of amalgamation of

bubblegum pop and psychedelia; a good start for the Coronado, but certainly not reaching notoriety levels that Fender had hoped for.

The '60s shined a spotlight on dozens of musical giants, but few could attract more of that light than the juggernaut that was Beatlemania. One of those few would have been The King, Elvis Presley. While his musical career had taken an unintended hit from The Beatles' rapid success (and the resulting success of their followers), he was no less an icon than he was in the '50s. His return to music after his military service was triumphant, but the King's real goal was to continue his acting career, and after a brief and unsuccessful stint in the dramatic, he produced 27 different films in the '60s. These movies were panned critically for their formulaic structure (you know, cool protagonist, pretty girls, singing, etc.) but hardly any of them could be called a bomb or failure, and most of them had accompanying soundtrack albums that were popular as well. Yes, it seemed Mr. Presley was a "sure thing" in Hollywood, with his movies promising box office success almost without fail. And it so happened that, in 1968, The King dained to play a solo on the closing tune of his newest movie *Speedway* with no other instrument than the Fender Coronado.

Speedway is a typical Elvis film; he plays Steve Grayson, a generous and benevolent NASCAR driver who gets into some trouble with the IRS. He is assigned a charming IRS agent played by Nancy Sinatra, and wouldn't you know it? Even the IRS can't resist The King! This film was a predictable story, and was predictably panned. It was, in fact, one of the few Elvis films that really

were bombs, returning \$2,000,000 of its \$3,000,000 budget. But who cares! He played a Coronado! In the film's final musical number, "There Ain't Nothing Like a Song", he snatches up a Coronado just in time for a solo! ...Well, he did hold it in his hands, while simultaneously holding Nancy Sinatra.... And he did feign playing the four bar solo, after which he turned the guitar into a hand percussion instrument while singing the rest of the song... But it counts! Elvis Presley=Coronado hero!!!



Who needs a strap?

Needless to say, a box office bomb with a few seconds of screen time does not a legendary instrument make. Alas, the Coronado would never see the lofty heights that Fender hoped it would, and Gibson and Gretsch continued to dominate the hollow-body market. But hey, Fender was still selling a truckload of their solid body titans, so they could afford to keep the Coronado going until 1972, when it was sadly discontinued. But that's not to say that this underappreciated axe was never used by some other great players; Jimmie Vaughan, Dave Davies, and even Thom Yorke and Colin Greenwood from Radiohead have been seen rocking Coronado guitars and basses. And wouldn't

you know it? Fender even brought the model back in 2013 in the form of the Coronado Modern Player, with a pair of Fideletron pick-ups (familiar look and name, eh?).



Who owns Gretsch again?

In conclusion...

So it may not have been the smash hit Fender wanted it to be, but the Coronado's legacy will live on, it seems. Was it Fender's solid body reputation that fettered player's curiosity? Did the feedback issues give it a bad reputation that it couldn't shake? Or was it just that the Coronado didn't arrive in time for the trend? Who knows... But if The King couldn't make it royal regalia, it is likely no one could have. The Fender Coronado is a shining example proving that it's better to take a risk and set the trend, than to play catch-up and miss the bus.