



Custom Dreams

With guitars seemingly getting more expensive by the day, is a bespoke build now just a thing for the very well-off? We go in search of a more affordable route. Power to the people!

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker



VINTAGE PROSHOP V72 CUSTOM BUILD £1,299

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What You Need To Know

- 1 What's the deal?**
Simple: the UK ProShop takes a standard Vintage lookalike and upgrades it, typically with an aged-looking nitro finish and premium parts. Originally, these were just one-off Unique builds, conceived by the ProShop team, but now they offer a custom-build service, too.
- 2 Your build is a lot more expensive than the standard model.**
Yes, as we explain, our build is based on the Vintage Reissued V72 that retails just under £500. However, our build actually needed a purpose-made body, a custom handmade control plate, a custom-shaped scratchplate, not to mention Wilkinson R Series pickups, boutique-quality electrics and, of course, a complete aged refinish.
- 3 Does it have to be relic'd?**
No, you can choose what finish style and colour you want. However, the ProShop's manager, Nathan Sharp, does tell us that around 95 per cent of their orders are for aged-looking guitars.

1. This 'cut-off' bridge started life as a full-size Wilkinson T-style bridge until the ProShop got its saw out. The intonated Wilkinson Duplo saddles have also been aged

How many times have you looked at or played a new guitar that you really like only to find out that you can't buy it in the colour you want? Or you've fallen for a guitar's charms with one exception: its neck shape. On it goes, but increasingly this one-size-fits-all approach is a prerequisite of the modern production guitar, wherever it's made. Options, even on some pretty pricey production instruments, aren't usually expansive, to say the least, and before you know it you're shown the Custom Shop route and a final price that is simply out of reach. It doesn't help if you like your guitars to look like they've had a bit of a previous life; relicing and ageing will add another level to that price. Just ask Tom Murphy.

Affordability, however, has always been the key proposition for John Hornby Skewes' Vintage brand: lookalike guitars for the masses. The thing is, they can play rather well and sound rather good for the cash, not least with a little after-purchase tweakery or modding. But the Vintage ProShop concept – which was started by the brand's USA distributor then adopted in the UK in 2020 – takes things a little further by creating customised and often relic'd versions of the standard models.

Initially made as one-off Uniques, or small limited runs for its worldwide dealership network, in mid-2023 the UK ProShop introduced a custom-build service and, based on one of the standard Vintage models, you can now spec the details,

the finish, parts and pickups, and create a custom guitar you can actually afford.

Of the Unique builds we've seen so far we've been impressed with the craft for the cost. And if the ProShop can really make what you want, it's worth consideration, isn't it? We put it to the test...

Starting Point

The first thing you need to do is narrow down your choice of T, S, JM, LP, SG-style models in the Vintage ranges. Although we've played plenty of those models over the years, the V72 is a new one to us: a chambered T-style with a single f-hole. The ProShop configurator on the website is simply a series of drop-down menus to choose from, and gradually we dialled in our custom specification.

Inspired by plenty of boutique builds that we'd been eye-balling on Instagram, in basic terms we decided on a lightly aged finish, with a cut-off T-style bridge, a PAF-y style humbucker at the bridge with a P-90 in the neck position. We also fancied something a bit more bespoke, requesting an aluminium control plate with a three-way toggle switch replacing the usual lever, a partial coil-split for the bridge humbucker and some witch-hat (as opposed to Telecaster) knobs.

While Vintage makes heavy use of Wilkinson hardware and pickups, having tested and been impressed by Trev's upmarket R Series pickups last year we thought we'd keep things in the family, selecting a Caliber 5257 soapbar single coil for the neck and a Caliber 5761 PAF-alike humbucker in the bridge position with that coil-split for good measure.

Once your order is submitted, the ProShop team can take a look and fine-tune any potential problems and price it up. They consulted Trev Wilkinson on the pickup choice and, as the bridge pickup we'd suggested is only available with a vintage-style hook-up cable, he suggested the slightly higher output Caliber 7484 (see Under The Hood over the page) as that comes standard with the necessary four-conductor hook-up wire and should give a stronger single coil-split. They also suggested using the compensated brass Wilkinson Duplo saddles – and, on paper, we were done. We confirmed our order in late August 2023 and pretty much three months to the day, an unassuming cardboard box arrived.

2. Because we ordered this Wilkinson R Series P90 for the neck position, the ProShop had to get a new body made up. To continue the aged appearance, the pickup covers for this soapbar and the covered bridge humbucker are also treated

Our first impression of our new custom build is that the UK ProShop team has raised its level



Vintage
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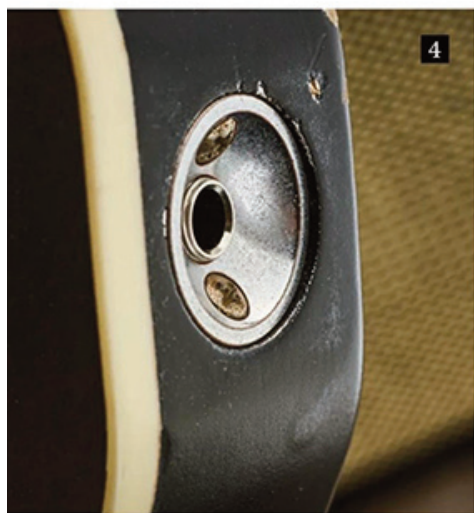
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3. Fender amp knobs and a Gibson-style toggle pickup selector mounted on this bespoke aged aluminium control plate all contribute to the boutique style of the custom build

4. One of the many non-standard details is this Electrosocket mounting for the output jack – a typical mod many players carry out on their T-styles



The Reveal

Having just evaluated one of Vintage's 2023 ProShop Unique builds, the Black Icon, as an introduction to this piece in our last issue's Wishlist, the heavily beaten T-style with Bigsby certainly impressed, not least that it costs £1,199 with a smart gigbag, a quality leather strap, a pick box and certificate of authenticity, and even a T-shirt included. Our first impression of our new custom build is that the UK ProShop team has raised its level. Whether it's the less-distressed finish, that boutique-y control plate or the cut-off bridge, it's hard to say, but we'd wager if we had a 'cool' category in our ratings, it'd achieve a good score.

The lightly aged body finish looks like it's been around a bit and we have a similar vibe to the dark-stained neck finish, creating the illusion an old guitar that's been played a lot but not abused. The white binding is all cleanly scraped around the top edge of the body, plus we get some nice touches like the circular Electrosocket output jack surround. In fact, the hardware is all nicely done in terms of its light ageing, even if the control plate looks like it might have been custom-cut from weathered material; it's only the metalwork on that toggle switch that looks a little new, as if it might have been recently replaced mid-tour. Again, like that previous Black Icon, the scratchplate looks a little new, but that'd be easily sorted.

Feel & Sounds

Irrespective of the visual appeal, it's the feel and weight that immediately impress. At 3.09kg (6.8lb), thanks to that cambered body, it's almost 20 per cent lighter than that previous Black Icon with Bigsby we had on the scales. In typical T-style, there's no body contouring, although the heel has a rounded nose and a neckplate to match. Strapped on or seated, this is a comfortable piece, a guitar you want to play anywhere.

Dimensionally, the neck is a little wider at the nut than a few old Fenders we've evaluated at 43.4mm, while the depth is closer to 'old Fender' in the lower positions – 21.8mm at the 1st fret and filling out but not overbig by the 12th at 24.4mm. The standard V72's neck profile is described as a 'soft C', but this feels more like a 'full C' with relatively broad shoulders. The neck back is smooth in feel, less satin than some with a slight texture that will probably burnish up with playing. Again, though, it simply feels like an already well-used vintage bolt-on.

The rosewood fingerboard has a 254mm (10-inch) radius and a good deep colour; the top edges are very nicely rounded, appearing almost scalloped in higher positions. Frets are of a medium jumbo size, reasonably wide but not overhigh (2.73mm wide by 1mm high), and it's strung with 10s and a mainstream string height of 1.5mm on the treble side, just under 1.8mm on the



bass side. Regardless of the price, there's some excellent work here and it's a really nice player. To be very picky indeed, the nut could be rounded a little more to meet Seth Baccus-like boutique standards, but the strings' grooves are perfectly cut. We ain't complaining.

Now, all of this illusion and craft is wasted if the guitar doesn't sound as good as its apparent use suggests. There's a lively T-style bright-edged ring as you'd expect unplugged, and just plugged in on the neck P-90 things are immediately encouraging:

ProShop builds are aimed at a real world where the escalating cost of premium pieces can be very hard, or impossible, to justify

there's a very full-toned jazzy/blues voice here – and a hint of hollowbody – with the volume pulled back a little, and a much more forceful, clear but thick voice with the wick turned up.

We were slightly worried that the hot bridge humbucker might be a little too 'rock', but it actually sounds more hot-vintage to us and – helped by the placement a little away from the bridge saddles – it has a clear and very subtly rounded high-end and enough kick and a slightly punkier edge

5. The ProShop team started with an unfinished neck before recreating some ageing and applying the new logos

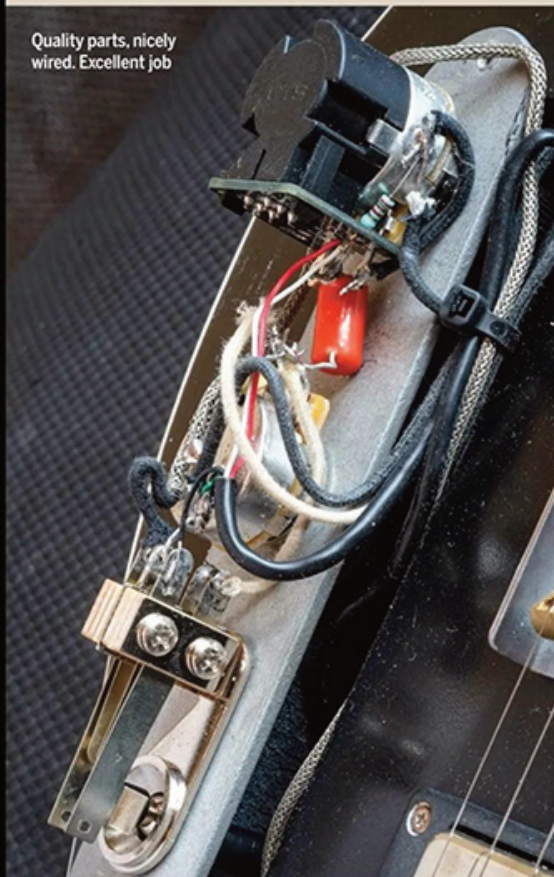
UNDER THE HOOD

Does the quality continue on the inside?

Take a look at the insides of any boutique-level guitar and you'll invariably see quality components and cloth-covered wire all very tidily done. It's part of the craft, not least if you're paying £3k upwards. The control circuit here, which was specified as part of the custom build, definitely belongs to one of those guitars: a Switchcraft toggle switch, CTS 500kohm audio taper volume and the PCB-style CTS 500k pull-pot for the tone. There's an Orange Drop .022µF cap in there, too, along with a 2.2k resistor to achieve the partial split of the bridge humbucker, PRS style.

As to those pickups, the Wilkinson R Series Caliber 5257 is apparently based on a P-90 from a Gibson ES-125 owned by Trev and uses "an original-style bent nickel silver backing plate and wooden spacers under its rough cast Alnico V bar magnets, wound with AWG.42 plain enamel wire". It has a measured DCR of 5.77k at output and is direct-mounted to the body, too.

Our first selection at the bridge was the very-PAF-alike Caliber 5761, but that is only available with single conductor hook-up, no good to split. Trev had suggested the 7484 and we'd assumed that would be the 43AWG 14.5k bridge version, although, as we mention in our sound test, it didn't sound like that! Cleverly, Trev had sent over the neck pickup, 42 AWG with a measured DCR of 9.55k, and 6.32k when split, which reflects the 'hot vintage' style that we hear. Wire gauge aside, both 7484s use an Alnico V magnet with nickel silver backplates and covers and four-conductor hook-up.



Quality parts, nicely wired. Excellent job



Another nice detail is the rounded nose to the heel with its matching neckplate. Like all the hardware, the ProShop team ages the parts in-house

for really rootsy styles, not to mention some dirtier classic rock. The coil-split, which actually voices the screw coil, is a surprise. It's definitely a third, very usable voice – a strong T-style or almost early PAF-like voice that has bite and a wiry focus. It's far from a thin anaemic option that you'd rarely use. A classic pickup pairing, three very strong sounds with very soulful, classic mixes. What's not to like?

Verdict

This is a very endearing, characterful instrument: it's a guitar that looks and feels old, played-in and used but is perfectly fit for purpose. Its sounds are almost timeless, from authentic late-50s jazz/blues on the neck soapbar through gritty 60s jangle from the mixes when pushed; you'll also find rather beautiful soul and funk played cleaner. With the coil-split engaged, a highly usable duality at the bridge provides Fender-y single-coil attack, plus a very well-voiced full bridge humbucker that brings in some muscle. It's an unshowy piece, a perfect gigging partner that'd sit in pretty much any band you could imagine.

But players who have owned and played a string of high-end, high-quality contemporary instruments, or good vintage pieces, aren't really the target audience here. Instead, these ProShop

Its sounds are almost timeless, from authentic late-50s jazz/blues on the neck soapbar to gritty 60s jangle from the mixes

builds – the Unique one-offs or our custom build – are aimed at a real world where the escalating cost of those premium pieces is very hard for the majority to justify, and for many even impossible.

Does our custom build match the detailed quality of the Fender Custom Shop or numerous premier small-shop builders? No. But can the ProShop team take a competent (if rather generic) guitar and turn it into a more unique instrument with a characterful aged finish and your choice of pickups and parts? Definitely. More simple makeovers, or a less convoluted custom request, would cost you considerably less, too, yet you'll still be getting a totally unique and fit-for-purpose instrument – and if you choose the custom-build route, it's *your* design, too. What would you say be? **G**



VINTAGE PROSHOP V72 CUSTOM BUILD

PRICE: £1,299 (inc gigbag)

ORIGIN: Built in the UK

TYPE: Single-cutaway thinline electric

BODY: Alder, chambered

NECK: Maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")

NUT/WIDTH: Graph Tech NuBone/43.4mm

FINGERBOARD: Rosewood, pearloid dot inlays, 254mm (10") radius

FRETS: 22, medium jumbo

HARDWARE: Wilkinson cut-off T-style bridge with compensated brass Duplo saddles; Wilkinson WJ55 split-post vintage-style tuners – aged nickel/chrome plating

STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 52.5mm

ELECTRICS: Wilkinson R Series Caliber 7484 covered humbucker (bridge); Caliber 5257 soapbar single coil (neck), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume, master tone (w/ partial coil-split switch)

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.09/6.8

OPTIONS: Check the Vintage ProShop website for custom build options plus a range of available Unique builds priced from £749 to £1,999

RANGE OPTIONS: In the standard non-ProShop Vintage Reissued range the V72 (£489) features a T-style bridge with single coil and a neck mini-humbucker. The V72H features dual humbuckers and a hardtail through-strung bridge. Both are available in Flame Tobacco Burst only

LEFT-HANDERS: To order

FINISHES: Lightly aged, low-gloss Black over White nitro to body – lightly aged acrylic sealer neck finish



9/10

PROS Excellent interpretation of our custom order; superb neck, fingerboard and fretwork; very good Wilkinson R Series pickups; a very endearing old, played-in vibe

CONS The scratchplate does look a little new and some of the finish details aren't as period-accurate as some, but we're splitting hairs: the feel, sounds, playability and vibe are all superb

Call In The Pros

More used to doing our own makeovers in The Mod Squad, we sit back and let the Vintage ProShop do the heavy lifting for our custom build

Words Dave Burruck

The Vintage brand celebrated its 25th anniversary back in 2020 and today exports its wide range of inspired-by models worldwide. As the company's success proves, there are an awful lot of us that buy and play budget instruments.

This writer's V62 was purchased well over a decade ago from Cash Converters for around £60. It was one of the early Vintage 'relics' and far from accurate or believable. But with a considerable amount of modding – including trying to reduce the relicing, stripping the neck finish and oiling and waxing it, plus a fret dress and polish, a lot of fingerboard edge rolling, a steel block Wilkinson vibrato with added titanium saddles, a bone nut, oh, and a set of Bare Knuckle '63 Veneer Board single coils and posh wiring loom – it's a guitar that's often gigged and recorded with. What we and many others have done is, in fact, the foundation of the ProShop.

The three-strong team – manager Nathan Sharp, his brother Chris, and Neil Robshaw – moonlight in the ProShop alongside their other duties at parent company John Hornby Skewes' HQ in Garforth, Leeds. "We're probably looking at making around 300 ProShop guitars a year – that's quite a lot of work for our team on top of the other things we have to do

here," laughs Nathan. "But obviously it's not all one-off bespoke builds like yours. There are the limited runs we do where it's more of a simple upgrade from the stock model, something different for the customer, where we're not talking about the eight to 10 hours or more spent producing an individual build."

This all affects the final cost of the guitar, of course: the fewer work hours and the fewer parts that are upgraded, the more attractive the end price. Not that we gave that any thought at all when we were asked to order up a custom ProShop model for review that we'd based on the Vintage Reissued V72...

Go Bespoke

"On your build, instead of using the standard V72 body, stripping and refinishing it, it was actually a new body that we got made at the Vintage factory and shipped over because it was a new pickup configuration," Nathan explains. "We do similar things but not with a P-90 soapbar route. Also, unlike the standard V72, there isn't a flame maple veneer on it because we knew we were going to do the black finish for you. So we had to wait to get that body in, then it was a case of spraying it as fast as we could to meet your deadline.

"Actually, after I'd put the white primer coat on I thought it looked so good I was going to give you a call and suggest we left it like that! It was lovely, the paint was just dropping into the grain – there was virtually no finish at all."

As we write in our review, the neck and fretwork is very nicely done. "You can thank me for that," chuckles Nathan. "I kept the neck quite natural looking with the staining and the wear. The neck finish is actually an acrylic, like a sealer; it just keeps it very natural feeling, rather than going to town with a heavier lacquer."

So, if the basic chassis of our build upset the apple cart a little, our boutique-y concept hardly helped, not least the specified aluminium control plate with its three-way toggle, rather than the standard three-way lever switch.

"Neil made that for you – he whittled it out of some aluminium we had," continues

"We're making around 300 ProShop guitars a year – but it's not all one-off bespoke builds"

Nathan. "He shaped it then I aged it, like all the parts, in-house. It's not an acid process, it's more natural. We've custom-built a rotary device that you can put various types of hardcore in, stones and things, and water, and then we time how long the parts are in process. If you leave them in there all day you end up with parts that look as battered as anything – then we leave them in longer [to soak] to achieve the rusting. The aged parts are then stripped down and re-oiled ready to go on the guitars. The Bigsby that we do all come out different, the way the process attacks the black paint that's on there. It gets some very natural wear patterns, but, yes, there's some stripping down afterwards."

Even the trendy cut-off bridge we specified caused a problem. "It is a Wilkinson bridge, but it was a full T-style bridge that we cut down, which loses the



This ProShop Unique build shows off a higher ageing level, but it still uses the same white undercoat/black top-coat as our custom order

1. The very cleanly machined body of our custom build had to be specially ordered from Vintage's factory in Asia
2. Once the undercoat was on, ProShop manager Nathan thought it looked cool as is. And so do we! This might be our next ProShop order...
3. The black overcoat goes on next. As ever, the guitar was fully finished before the team started the relicing process



Vintage's UK ProShop team. (left to right) Nathan Sharp, Neil Robshaw and Chris Sharp, take a break from building

branding on the front. Then, after ageing them, we added those brass Duplo saddles. The R Series Wilkinson pickups you requested came in clean, too, so we needed to age their covers."

By this point in our conversation, this writer is feeling rather embarrassed that we'd put the ProShop to so much trouble. But it didn't stop there. The V72 doesn't come with a tortoiseshell scratchplate, so Nathan got to work

"That started as a standard T-style plate, but because of the f-hole it had to be reshaped. Then I needed to recut the pickup hole for the neck P-90."

While many of the lower-priced ProShop builds will use the wiring looms of the standard Vintage models, our particular build specified CTS pots, a partial coil-split and an Orange Drop cap, which adds to the parts' cost, plus there's the additional

"[On custom builds] you're putting things together like a jigsaw and asking what looks right"

time needed to wire it all up. But there were still more things to get right.

"Your build went through a few changes," Nathan tells us. "It had a white pickup mounting ring for the bridge humbucker at one time. You see, you're putting things together like a jigsaw and asking yourself what looks right. So, before we'd put the scratchplate on, that white pickup surround, which matched the top edge-binding, looked great. But with the tortoiseshell it all began to look too

busy. That's why we went with the black pickup surround. I wasn't sure about those witch-hat knobs, either – they look like cooker knobs – but I now think they look right on that specific guitar."

All this work, the transformation, makes it difficult to assign a country of origin, doesn't it? "Well, we do now say 'Built in the UK' as it's probably about 80 per cent of the build process that is done here. And, of course, all the guitars are designed here in the first place. Also, we are literally hitting most countries with these builds; it's not just the UK. A lot of places are very excited to get guitars that are built in the UK at a price that's right for them: China, Japan, Germany, Sweden... pretty much any country you can name," Nathan concludes. "Hopefully, people will see the one we've built for you and say, 'Yes, I like that ... but can I have it with this?'"