

GEAR HERE Hot New Guitar Products

by Chad Johnson

ST. BLUES 61 SOUTH



The roots of Saint Blues guitars stretch back to the late sixties, when a young Jimmy Page, while on tour in Memphis, commissioned Tom Keckler to overhaul one of his guitars. Keckler began working on many other's guitars; he even built a one-of-a-kind guitar for Elvis Presley, which the King plays in the *Elvis, Live in Hawaii* video. He soon hopped on board the legendary Memphis music store, Strings & Things, repairing and building custom guitars with founder Charles Lawing. In 1983, he and Lawing launched the Saint Blues brand, beginning with the Bluesmaster.

While the Bluesmaster was played by some of the biggest names in the business, including Eric Clapton, Joe Walsh, Albert King, Billy Gibbons, and others, the company struggled financially and eventually closed its doors in 1989. However, in 2004, with vintage models fetching high prices and several articles in *Vintage Guitar* sparking new interest, a local Memphis investor decided to re-launch the company, and Tom Keckler was brought on to advise on design and production.

Since then, the company's lineup has extended to include five guitar models and one bass. Several models are available with different pickup configurations; among them is the 61 South. For this review, I received two 61 South models: one with two Tele-style single coils, and one with one Tele-style single coil and one P-90 (in the neck position).

FEATURES

The 61 South is a semi-hollow design in the trademark, single-cutaway St. Blues shape.

As mentioned, it's available in two pickup configurations (listed above) and three finishes: White Blonde, Honey Blonde, and Tobacco Sunburst. Both models feature master volume

and tone controls with a three-way selector switch. The ash body is double-bound, and the semi-hollow design obviously makes these guitars light as a feather. For the dual Tele-style single-coil model, either pickup can be tapped (cutting 25 percent of the signal) by pulling up on the volume or tone knob, respectively. On the other model, the bridge-position single coil can be tapped by pulling up on the tone knob.

The neck is hardrock maple and features a hand-cut bone nut and nickel 15:1 ratio vintage style tuners. The 61 South has a 25 1/2" scale length and is equipped with a nickel Wilkinson WTB bridge with staggered brass saddles. The finishes on both guitars I received (one White Blonde and one Honey Blonde) were pristine, and the White Blonde was quite striking.

SOUND & PLAYABILITY

I immediately enjoyed playing both of these guitars, even before plugging them in. The neck radius is on the flatter side, which made bends a breeze, and the frets were in pristine condition on both guitars. Plugged in, things only got better. The dual Tele-style single coil model was twangy as can be, delivering a beautiful bite at full strength and a cleaner articulate sound when tapped. The P-90 sounded muscular with a rounder bite and deeper attack. Played with a clean tone, this setting warmed up nicely for some jazzier sounds.

My personal favorite setting, however, was the Tele-style single-coil neck position, untapped. This provided a bell-like chime that I found hard to pass up. These guitars sounded and played nicer than many guitars I've played with higher price tags. With a distinctive look, comfortable playability, and a full sound palette, the 61 South is a sure thing at this price.

IN A NUTSHELL

- Double-bound, semi-hollow select grain ash body, hardrock maple neck
 - Available in White Blonde, Honey Blonde, or Tobacco Sunburst finishes
 - Two pickup configurations available: two Tele-style single coils (both tapped), or tapped Tele-style single coil (bridge) and P-90 (neck)
 - 25 1/2" scale length, hand-cut bone nut
 - Nickel vintage style tuners and Wilkinson WTB bridge
- \$1,160.00 (saintblues.com)

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