



A FLASH PIECE OF KIT OR A BIT OF A SHOCKER? PAUL SALTER HEADS FOR THE CENTRE OF A SIX-STRING STORM

As with cars, many of us get a bit soppy about our guitars. We give them names and suppose that if they can soak up the experiences of the gigs we play, then maybe the pizza grease, beer spills and sweat that are infused into their fingerboards and pickup windings will give our instruments a little bit of soul.

If you believe that guitars can soak up mojo, then you'll be interested to know that guitar manufacturer Saint Blues started out on Elvis Presley Boulevard, right opposite Graceland, in Memphis, Tennessee. Could a guitar knocked-up in a factory in Walthamstow ever have the same mystique?

Even in the days before the company existed, it's founders, Mike Ladd and Tom Keckler, were building guitars for the King himself, as well as a host of other A-listers, including Eric Clapton, Albert King and Billy Gibbons, down in the land of the Delta blues. So what happens when you move manufacturing to another country? Most Saint Blues guitars are now hand-made in Korea, although things still start and end in Memphis. The guitars are still designed by Tom Keckler and are shipped back to his workshop to be inspected and set-up, but is this enough to maintain that special vibe?

BODY & NECK

It's possible to discern the influence of both the Fender Telecaster and Gibson Les Paul in the shape of the

White Lightning's body, but the narrow waist and flat butt end, which give the lower bout a somewhat 'squashed up' aspect, give the guitar a look all its own. This shape is shared by several other Saint Blues models and has become something of a hallmark, with an identity of its own.

The compact, resonant, slab-like ash body has an immediate, no-nonsense appeal. There are no Stratocaster-style contours on the front or back of the body, but the black binding is impeccably fitted and nicely contrasts with the white finish, which also appears on the face of the headstock. Overall, it's an elegant and practical body shape that works well both seated and standing.

The neck meets the body with a fairly standard bolt-on joint and a square heel, using four screws and a metal plate in traditional Fender fashion. The rest of the neck also fits this vibe, being crafted from a single piece of maple with a high-gloss finish, with a slim yet comfortable C-shaped profile near the nut that flattens slightly toward the body.

It's topped-off with a generous slab of rosewood fitted with 21 medium frets set on a 25.5-inch scale length. These have been fitted and finished to a very high standard and lend the White Lightning an upmarket feel. We're not overly struck by the lightning flash inlay that bridges the first fret but, like the conventional dot fret markers, it's very well done. We should also mention that the White Lightning comes with a fitted, tweed-covered hardcase, a top-quality

extra that should keep this axe in good shape for many years to come.

HARDWARE & PARTS

The White Lightning is fitted with a bridge that, again, shows a Fender influence. With a thick baseplate, through-body stringing and six individual bent steel saddles each balanced on two Allen key screws for height adjustment, it's more 'hardtail' Strat than Tele. Intonation is taken care of by the screws running along the back edge of the baseplate, which provide a good range of adjustment and should cope with most string gauges without problems.

Up at the headstock, a set of Wilkinson tuners, styled after the Kluson Deluxe machines found on vintage Fenders, has been chosen. These vintage-style machineheads aren't to everybody's taste and don't have the effortless movement and silky smoothness of more modern, upmarket types, but nevertheless they work very well.

One of the great highlights of the White Lightning is its pickups. These three nickel-covered P-90-style single-coils are custom-wound for Saint Blues and are wired to a five-way selector switch. The rest of the control configuration is a little less conventional. The first three controls are individual volumes for each pickup, with the fourth being a master tone. The first volume knob, however, is also a push-pull pot that transforms it into a useful master volume control. The tone control is also push-pull, and engages a passive overdrive effect. →

GBINFO



SAINT BLUES WHITE LIGHTNING

PRICE:	£867.10
BUILT IN:	Korea
SCALE LENGTH:	648mm (25.5 inches)
NUT WIDTH:	43mm (1.69 inches)
STRING SPACING AT NUT:	35mm (1.37 inches)
BODY:	Ash
NECK:	Hardrock maple, bolt-on
FINGERBOARD:	Rosewood, 305mm radius (12 inches)
FRETS:	21 medium
PICKUPS:	3 x custom-wound St Blues P-90, nickel covers
CONTROLS:	3 x volume, 1 x tone, 5-way selector, master volume & passive overdrive push-pull pot switches
BRIDGE:	Six-saddle through-body, nickel
STRING SPACING AT BRIDGE:	53mm (2 inches)
MACHINEHEADS:	Wilkinson Deluxe 15:1-ratio, nickel
WEIGHT:	3.2kg (7lb)
FINISHES:	White (shown), crystal cabernet, black
CASE:	Tweed-covered hard case included
LEFT-HANDERS:	Coming soon
CONTACT:	Damn Fine Distribution
PHONE:	01869 346 519
WEB:	www.saintblues.com

LIGHTNING STRIKE

DETAILS

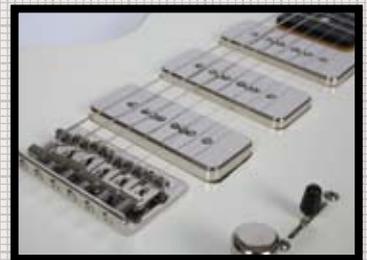
LIVELY, VERSATILE
SOUNDS FROM A
WELL-MADE GUITAR



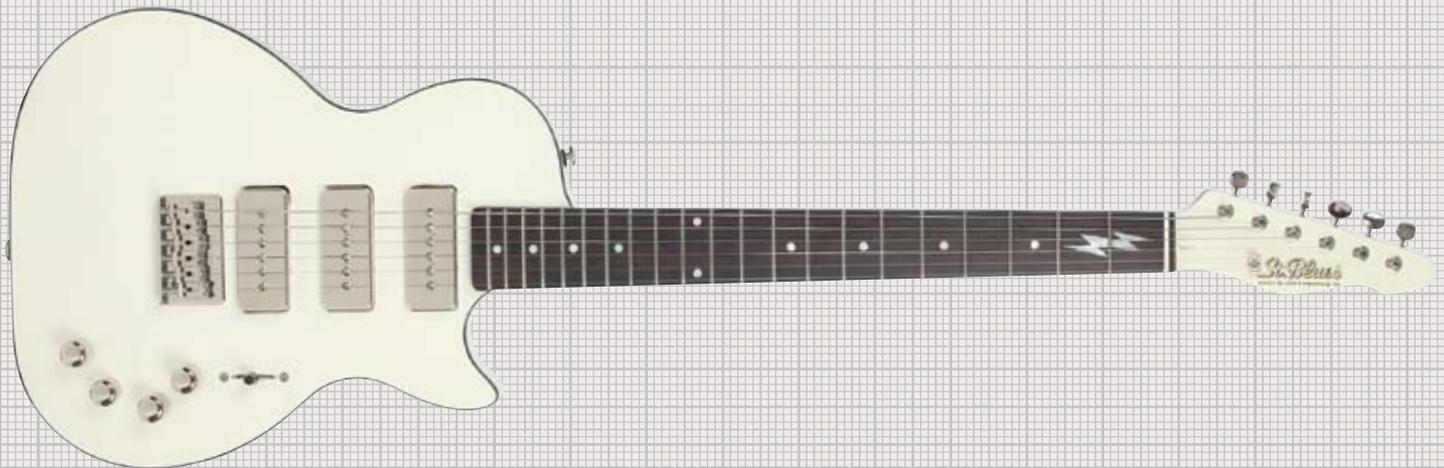
■ While the White Lightning is built in the Far East, it is designed and set-up in the USA



■ Saint Blues has used a traditional bolt-on neck attached to the body by four screws



■ Three custom-wound P-90 pickups give the White Lightning plenty of bluesy tone and bite



GBVERDICT

SAINT BLUES WHITE LIGHTNING

GOLD STARS

- ★ Great tones
- ★ Slim playable neck
- ★ Lovable vibe

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

A wide range of styles, but blues and rock in particular

GBRATING



SOUNDS

This particular sample has been strung with a set of 10s, which suit the guitar well. Combined with the extra stiffness of the scale length, you get loads of resonance when you dig in hard with your pick. It's not so much the body, but the neck certainly hums away in sympathy with the strings.

Like all good P-90-style pickups, these units don't just fall between the characteristics of humbuckers and Fender-style single-coils, but manage to combine some of the best aspects of both. Sometimes you'll hear tales of noise issues with P-90s, but this is no more of a problem than with a Strat or Tele, even with loads of gain.

The beauty of P-90s like these is that they work so well with both clean and overdriven tones, and can even be used for metal. With a traditionally styled guitar like this, however, the average user will be more restrained with the gain and will doubtless be deeply satisfied with what pours from the White Lightning when combined with a classic valve amp and a sympathetic stompbox or two.

The bridge pickup is a little cracker,

like a humbucker in terms of oomph and clout, but with sharper detail and clarity. It wears overdrive like a well-tailored suit, producing sweet highs and an extremely tidy low end. It's thick too, but in a well-developed, muscled way, rather than seeming bloated or unfocused.

The other star is the neck pickup. A lot of the bridge unit's kick is still present, but transformed into a darker, more complex tone. If the bridge pickup is a fiery bourbon, then the neck P-90 is an aged cognac with a sweeter, woodier depth, but just as much kick. It gives a far superior blues tone than many a humbucker, in our opinion, responding to overdrive in a more natural manner.

The rest of the positions yield equally chunky results, though they don't really expand the guitar's tonal palette much – those looking for Strat-style 'in-between' tones should look elsewhere. However, the built-in overdrive is certainly useful. The passive circuit doesn't boost the signal at all, nor does it produce valve-like clipping, but it works a charm for an instant touch of bluesy breakup.

GBCONCLUSION

INSPIRING TONES & FEEL-GOOD FACTOR

■ After spending some time with the White Lightning, we've come to the conclusion that it really doesn't matter where the pieces of maple and ash were actually shaped – this is a guitar with real character and soul.

Whether tackling crunching rock rhythms or smouldering blues lead lines, it's capable of showing guts, passion and excitement. The sound it produces is inspiring and full of energy, even when you wind back the volume for the clean and sweet tones that lurk at those lower settings. The trio of P-90 pickups prove to be a really viable alternative to humbuckers in terms of power and suitability for overdriven sounds, but they still retain much of that single-coil clarity. Apart from blues and rock, you can crank out well-rounded tones that will serve for just about any genre of music going. There's loads on offer here, and it's all remarkably good. **GB**