



St Blues Mississippi Bluesmaster & Bluesmaster IV £439 & £499

ST BLUES MISSISSIPPI BLUESMASTER

PRICE: £439

ORIGIN: Korea

TYPE: Single-cutaway, bolt-on electric

BODY: Mahogany with coloured front, double edge single-ply cream binding

NECK: One-piece mahogany, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH: 628mm (24.75-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.8mm

FINGERBOARD:

Rosewood, pearl dots, 305mm (12-inch) radius

FRETS: 22, medium

HARDWARE: Thru-strung Strat-style fixed bridge, Kluson-style 'safti-post' vintage tuners

STRING SPACING,

BRIDGE: 55mm

ELECTRICS: Two 'SB P-90' single-coils, three-way toggle pickup selector switch, volume and tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb): 3.2/7

OPTIONS: The Mississippi Bluesmaster is also available with dual zebra-coil humbuckers (same price) and flame or quilt veneer top (adds approximately £25)

RANGE OPTIONS: The Bluesmaster II (from £439) features dual T-style pickups; the Bluesmaster IV uses a more T-like outline and also costs £439. The USA custom-made range will cost from approximately £2,500

LEFT-HANDERS: No

FINISHES: Black top (as reviewed), gold top

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Cult Memphis brand makes a welcome return with the Bluesmaster. Still got soul? by Dave Burrluck

Before the likes of *Guitarist* magazine got going, many readers – like this reviewer – would pour over the USA guitar titles like *Guitar Player* and *Guitar World* to find out about our instrument. Frustratingly they'd be packed with info on guitars that simply weren't available in the UK. And in the days before the internet you had little hope of ever playing one. Such a brand was St Blues. If our memory serves correctly, a small ad in *Guitar Player*, a simple black and white shot, was all we had to go on but it's strange how things stick. Maybe it was the mixture of Les Paul and Telecaster – common enough today but pretty rare a couple of decades ago – that caught our eye. It just looked neat.

The birth of St Blues goes back to the late sixties when Charles Lawing and Tom Keckler were working at Mike Ladd's Guitar City in Memphis, on what is now Elvis Presley Boulevard. On a Led Zeppelin tour Jimmy Page had the duo overhaul some guitars and they even built a one-off as a gift to Elvis Presley from his father, which he can be seen playing in *Aloha From Hawaii*. They designed the original Bluesmaster, which was sold by Strings And Things in Memphis, before Keckler left to help start Schecter Guitars in Los Angeles. This eventually led to the creation of the St Blues guitar line in 1985 that was distributed throughout the USA and lasted until 1989. The brand attracted a number of big-name users – among them Eric Clapton, Billy Gibbons, Rick Derringer and Psychedelic Furs' John Ashton – and was resurrected by Legendary Gear, with Keckler and Lawing as advisors, in 2006.



Purposeful looking isn't it? The Mississippi is a no-fuss guitar

Earlier this year St Blues appointed Synergy Distribution as its UK outlet and initially the now Korean-made guitar range will be available (though not the basses). It is hoped that, later, we'll see the upmarket custom-made instruments available too.

Mississippi Bluesmaster

In terms of reference we have little to go on but the Mississippi Bluesmaster is still as pretty as we remember. It's also

quite petite as the lower base of the Les Paul-esque single-cutaway outline is flattened off creating a more angular, Fender-inspired element to the design. Hardly a classic, of course, but it is immediately memorable. The two-piece centre joined mahogany body is standard Tele thickness at just over 45mm. It's edged with a single-ply cream binding to the top and back and there's no comfort contouring at all. The front face is black-painted, the



ST BLUES MISSISSIPPI BLUESMASTER & BLUESMASTER IV £439 & £499

ELECTRICS  GUITARIST INTERACTIVE



ST BLUES BLUESMASTER IV

As Mississippi Bluesmaster except...

PRICE: £499

BODY: Two-piece ash with figured maple veneer top bound with single-ply cream binding
NECK: One-piece maple, bolt-on

SCALE LENGTH:

648mm (25.5-inch)

NUT/WIDTH: Bone/42.8mm

FINGERBOARD:

Rosewood, abalone dots, 305mm (12-inch) radius

FRETS: 21, medium

ELECTRICS: One HB-II humbucker and two SC-II single-coils, five-way lever pickup selector switch, volume and tone

WEIGHT (kg/lb):

3.98/8.75

OPTIONS: Maple fingerboard

FINISHES: Darkburst quilt, cherry, honeysunburst flame (as reviewed), trans black quilt, black

MISSISSIPPI	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED Original style; tidy construction; earthy sounds</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED Pickup heights needed tweaking; incorrect tone capacitor</p>	

→ back, sides and neck are all left natural.

Unusually, mahogany is selected for the 628mm (24.75-inch) bolt-on neck – fixed to the body in standard style with rectangular neck plate. The one-piece neck has a good ‘C’-shaped profile that’s chunky but well carved and not overly big. The rosewood ‘board is cleanly executed with medium gauge frets (approx 2.4 x 1.2mm) and although a little more TLC to the fret ends and fingerboard edge would really improve the feel, for the price it is all more than acceptable.

BLUESMASTER IV	TEST RESULTS
Build quality	★★★★★
Playability	★★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★
<p>■ WE LIKED Versatile tone selection; affordable ‘boutique’ vibe</p> <p>■ WE DISLIKED Pickup heights needed adjustment; poor quality five-way switch</p>	

There’s a general attention to detail, however, that’s impressive. The ‘safti-post’ vintage-style tuners are a perfect choice while the fixed Strat-style bridge has tracks for the outer saddles to stop any movement. The pressed steel saddles have slight V’d string break points to stabilise the string spacing and, importantly, the saddle

height screws don’t protrude above the saddles. It’s nickel-plated too giving a nice unified vintage vibe. Another minor point is the strap buttons are of a large diameter, not the standard Korean fare, which should help to keep your strap firmly fixed to the guitar.

The Mississippi Bluesmaster is available with both open-coil humbuckers or soapbar P-90-style single-coils as here. The rear-mounted controls are laid out Tele-style with a three-way toggle replacing the Tele’s three-way lever; both the volume and tone have knurled Tele-style knobs and the squared, thin-metal output jack is side-mounted. The wiring cavity is neatly shielded with paint and foil and →

You’re immediately at home in a sweaty blues club [with the Bluesmaster IV] but you have a little more power on tap and some good, percussive rhythm/Texas blues tones



The Bluesmaster IV is more Gibson inspired, despite the Tele-style control plate

ST BLUES MISSISSIPPI BLUESMASTER & BLUESMASTER IV £439 & £499

ELECTRICS  GUITARIST INTERACTIVE



The neck is fixed standard-style with four machine screws and rectangular plate



The Mississippi has a mahogany neck: unusual for a guitar of this general ilk

The rivals

Fender Classic Player	
Baja Telecaster	£449
Epiphone Les Paul 1956 Goldtop	£399
Vintage Advance Series AV6	£319

The Mex-made Classic Player is designed by the Fender Custom Shop's Chris Fleming for an updated take on a fifties Tele, including Custom Shop Twisted Tele and Broadcaster single-coils with four-way lever and S-1 switching. Phew! Epiphone's Les Pauls seem to get better and better with production, for the most part, now coming from China. This soapbar P-90-loaded beauty will get you into the original vibe in metallic gold only. Vintage's Advance AV6 throws in three stacked Wilkinson soapbars (with roll control for single-coil to hum-cancelling option) and vibrato – simply great value for your hard-earned cash.

→ it's all tidily done – a seemingly minor detail but one that gives the impression of thought-through quality.

SOUNDS: Just as the construction is a hybrid of different styles, so is the sound. It's very comfortable and lightweight strapped on – a good guitar to gig. As we've often said a good P-90 and strong Tele pickup can sound pretty similar, and here we get a good example of that Tele/P-90 stew. The bridge pickup needs some tone control taming; as supplied it also needed a little more push compared to the louder and fuller neck pickup. As usual with P-90s there's not a great deal of adjustment to be had, but by pulling down the neck pickup as far as we could and raising the bridge unit things sound more balanced. So there's Tele-like twang and chunk aplenty but strong hints – especially from the neck pickup – of the wiry, edgy-yet-smooth P-90 tone that impresses us every time. Wind down the volume and the twin pickup mix offers textured Fender-funk – and it's hum-cancelling – wind up the wick again and wail. Only the tone control, fully 'off', lets the performance down with an unusable waffley tone instead of a nice 'woman tone' bark: sounds like the wrong value capacitor to us. Overall though this guitar suits blues, country and twangy rock, and does it all with some very welcome character.

Bluesmaster IV

If the shorter scale and mahogany/P-90 configuration of the Mississippi Bluesmaster is clearly more Gibson-inspired, the Bluesmaster IV with its longer 648mm (25.5-inch) scale is more boutique Fender-style with a two-piece ash body, maple neck, Tele-

The Bluesmaster suits blues, country and twangy rock, and does it all with some very welcome character

style control plate and scratchplate-mounted pickups. The IV employs the same body outline as the Mississippi but it's bound on the top edge only, and we have both forearm and ribcage contours. The scraping on the binding is slightly less precise here, although the quilted maple veneered face adds a nice bit of posh and it's noticeably weightier than the Mississippi. The more boutique vibe extends to abalone dot inlays, but generally the neck is close in feel.

The cream-coloured single-ply scratchplate works well with the Tele-style control plate – here a Strat-style five-way lever pickup selector (with Tele knob) is used – but the chamfering of the scratchplate's edge is a little wayward, as is the fit around the neck area which very slightly throws out the pickup positioning. It's a minor detail but there is room for improvement.

SOUNDS: Slightly more generic sounding, the IV has a more powerful mid-range rock bite at bridge with some (initially) slightly sharp-edged, Strat-alike neck, middle and mixed tones (again hum-cancelling). The middle and bridge selection doesn't split the humbucker so we get a good powerful but honky mix. Again, you're immediately at home in a sweaty blues club but you have a little more power on tap and some good, percussive rhythm/Texas blues tones. Once again

the pickup heights need a little work; there are some double-note wobbles from the single-coils but adjustment is easy and pulling them down a little also loses some of the spiky highs. In fact, a few minutes spent tweaking this sample made the world of difference. There'll be many players that miss a vibrato on this model but, conversely, there's a simplicity that provides stable tuning right from the off.

Niggles? Well, that five-way seems a little flimsy and crackles a bit which doesn't inspire confidence and would need changing in the near future.

Verdict

On the one hand neither guitar will set the world alight, but we suspect that's not the point. Instead these are workmanlike, affordable guitars that you just throw in your gig bag and head off to your blues jam session with. The Mississippi Bluesmaster has the more unique sound – a hybrid, raw Tele-esque tone with a little more squash. Once tamed with the tone control it's lively and a little punky – just how we like 'em!

The Bluesmaster IV is more generic sounding but the pickup combination covers a lot of ground. Both guitars needed a few tweaks, but although the IV's five-way lever switch should be binned at the earliest possible opportunity, it's the only blot on an otherwise positive landscape. Working guitars with an earthy, bluesy twist – we could all do with one of those. 

St Blues Mississippi Bluesmaster

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★

St Blues Bluesmaster IV

Guitarist RATING ★★★★★