

Fret-King C.S. Semitone De Luxe

Fret-King has won a reputation for offering professional class guitars at affordable prices. They claim to offer a vintage 'feel' too. But the Country Squire Semitone De Luxe sets itself a high mark to aim for. We asked **Lewis Turner** to investigate.

4.5

STAR RATING



SPEC CHECK

Trevor Wilkinson is well known for designing top quality hardware products such as tuners and trem systems that are used on countless guitars from many top manufacturers. It was just a matter of time before he designed his own guitars and Fret-King is the result. We've looked at quite a few Fret-Kings since GI started and have always been knocked-out by the exceptional quality and very fair prices. The semi-acoustic C.S. Semitone De Luxe we were sent for review this time certainly represented quality build - we could tell that the second we took it out of its case. In fact we needed to do a double-take as it seemed really well built and finished for the money.

Fret-Kings come in series with names like Green Label, Black Label, Blue Label and so on. At the top end, a Green Label version of one of these Country Squire (CS) Semitones isn't a particularly cheap guitar (it's designed to take on the very best in the business) and for a brief moment we wondered if we'd been sent one of those. But no - this was a Black Label version and really quite affordable. That was certainly a promising start.

This guitar certainly looks cool: familiar, yet also unique. The body shape is classic but it has interesting alterations: the scratch plate, pick-up selector housing and headstock all have slight quirky variations to them rather than the "norm". There's a neat f-hole at the top, for example, again



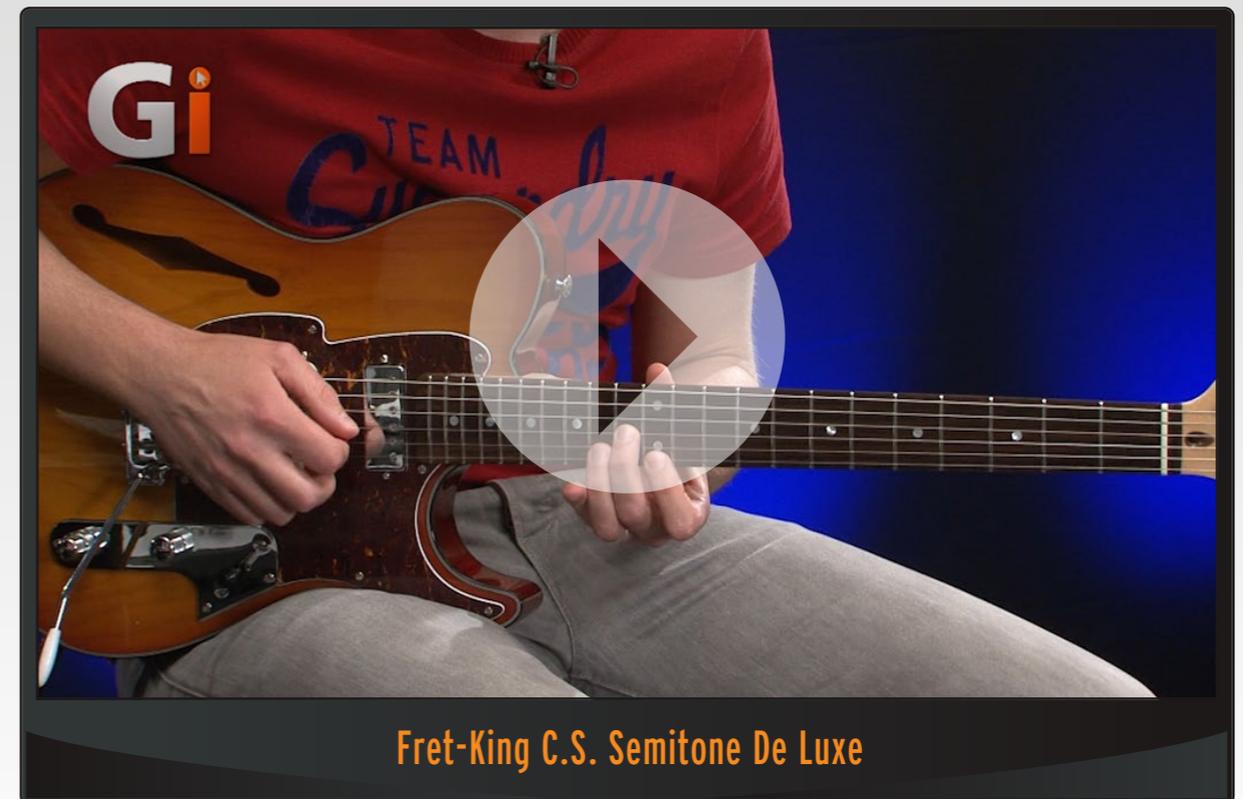
just slightly different and eye-catching, not weird!

The honeyburst finish, with tortoiseshell binding and scratch plate on our sample, coupled with the natural headstock, give the CS a classic look overall and the finish and attention to detail throughout were excellent. Constructed from a two-piece centre-jointed American alder body with an alder top, Canadian hard rock maple neck and rosewood fingerboard it certainly has a solid tone platform. The extended tenon neck/body joint and chambered semi-acoustic body add a natural voice, promising great tone consistency throughout.

The first thing you notice is that the Fret-King has fantastic natural

resonance and sustain when unplugged, helped, no doubt, by the f-hole and the lightness of the wood. Access to the higher end of the fretboard was made much easier with the sculpted heel and slim horn and overall, the guitar felt very well balanced. Wilkinson E-2 Lok tuners provided fantastic tuning stability helped by the smoothness of the Graphite nut.

The 22.5" scale length, 22 medium jumbo frets made the guitar a breeze to play. The neck was small with a comfy profile, the action was set perfectly and there were no intonation or fret buzz issues anywhere on the neck. Pickups comprise a WDG mini double coil in the neck, a WHS single coil for the middle and a



WHHB double coil for the bridge, all controlled by a 5-way selector switch.

The De Luxe also holds a secret, the Wilkinson Vari-coil. Set in a dual concentric pot with the tone control, this allows either the bridge, or neck double coil pickups to roll smoothly and

progressively to single coil operation. Place the selector switch down to the bridge position, roll the Vari coil back, the tone on, and it's direct to classic single coil bridge tone. Roll the Vari-coil forward and the hotbucker leaps to life. With this, the 5-way switch and



partnership of single coil and humbuckers, this Fret-King gives you a wealth of tones and sounds to play with.

This guitar is aimed at the Country market, but that is far from all it can do. Many classic tones are available from it the CS and it does them all very well indeed. The bridge is a Wilkinson WVT vibrato, which features a heat treated steel baseplate with two springs per brass saddle. Our one came set up floating, meaning I could raise string pitch by around a tone on the third string. The bridge felt light and operated smoothly and effortlessly, I gave it a fair amount of stick and am pleased to report that I had no tuning issues, such as G strings sticking

and going sharp, the bridge, nut and tuners all working in perfect harmony to provide a stable instrument, no matter what amount of unison bends or whammy bar tricks you throw at it!

This was my first experience of a Fret-King guitar. I'm very familiar with Wilkinson equipment and rate it highly, so I had high expectations for the guitar and I'm happy to report that it is an exceptional bit of kit and comes at a very attractive price indeed. For not really very much money at all (well, not for a pro quality guitar) you're getting fantastic tones and great playability, with a multitude of sounds from the top notch pickups.

If you are looking for those classic Country tones, the Fret-King CS Semitone De-Luxe delivers them in spades and much, much more besides. I wasn't the only GI reviewer to get my hands on this sample. In fact it made a serious impression on a bunch of people who, let's be frank,

get to see an awful lot of guitars and who you might expect to be a bit 'so what' when a new one comes along. But not a bit of it in this case. In fact there is now a big battle as to who is going to buy it first! Go check one out now! .

Gi

Pros:

Great variety of tones
Effortless playability
Solid tuning stability
Great looks

Cons:

None at all

