

The Twang Heard 'Round the World

A History of Fender's Fabulous Telecaster

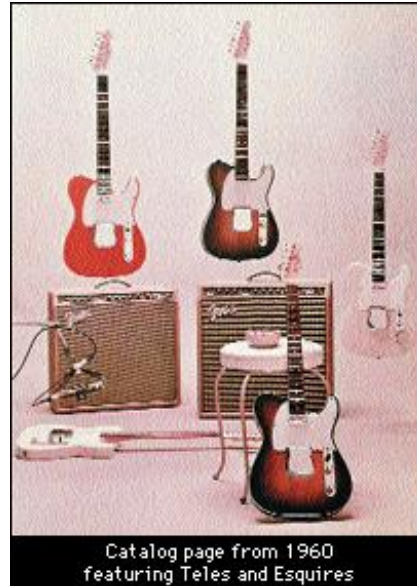
By Richard Smith

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For '50s-era guitarists who would soon be playing rock and roll, the Fender Telecaster hit the music industry with the impact of the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs. Leo Fender's so-called "plank" ushered in the era of the commercially successful solidbody -- echoing the immense industrial and social impact of Henry Ford's Model T. While Ford was never one of Fender's idols, the car maker bestowed the wonders of the automobile upon the masses by standardizing a sound design, streamlining production techniques, and lowering costs. Likewise, Fender's "Model T" -- initially called the Esquire, then the Broadcaster, and finally the Telecaster -- was a powerful, affordable tool that helped a vast community of working guitarists ignite a cultural revolution.



Catalog page from 1960 featuring Teles and Esquires

The tumult was so far-reaching that Gibson was compelled to introduce the Les Paul to compete with the Tele -- and Leo himself was inspired to develop the Stratocaster in an attempt to make its older sibling obsolete. These three models are still modern music's most important guitars -- and they all have Leo Fender's 1949 "standard guitar" prototype to thank for kick-starting their enduring glory.

THE ARCHTOP ERA

As twilight fell on the Big Band era toward the end of World War II, small combos playing boogie-woogie, rhythm and blues, western swing, and honky-tonk formed throughout the United States. Many of these outfits embraced the electric guitar because it could give a few players the power of an entire horn section. Pickup-equipped archtops had reigned in these late-'40s dance bands, but the increasing popularity of roadhouses and dance halls created a growing need for louder, cheaper, and more durable axes. Players also needed faster necks and better intonation to play what the country boys called "take-off lead guitar," and Rickenbacker Bakelites and other '30s-era solidbodies failed to deliver. Custom-made solidbodies such as Merle Travis' Bigsby -- as well as kitchen-table contraptions like Les Paul's "Log" -- pointed in the right direction, but were beyond the means of the average player. The demand for better electric guitars was as obvious as their reality was elusive.

ENTER LEO FENDER

Fender recognized the vast potential for an electric guitar that was easy to hold, easy to tune, and easy to play. He also recognized that players needed guitars that would not feed back at dance hall volumes like the typical archtop. (Many guitarists had to stuff rags into their elegantly crafted guitars to stop the howling.) In addition, Fender sought a tone that would command attention on the bandstand and cut through the noise in a bar. By 1949, he had conceptualized the perfect tone -- a clear, bell-like sound with distinct highs and lows, but devoid of muddled midrange frequencies that Fender considered "fluff" -- and began working in earnest on what would become the first Telecaster at the Fender factory in Fullerton, California.

Although he never admitted it, Fender seemed to base his practical design on the Rickenbacker Bakelite. One of the Rickenbacker's strong points -- a detachable neck that made it easy to make and service -- was not lost on Fender, who was a master at improving already established designs. (He once said, "It isn't a radically different thing that becomes a success; it is the thing that offers an improvement on an already proven item.") Not surprisingly, his first prototype was a single-pickup guitar with a detachable hard rock maple neck and a pine body painted white (see *Encore*, page 160). The seeds of revolution were sown.

THE ESQUIRE

Don Randall, who managed Fender's distributor, the Radio & Television Equipment Company, recognized the commercial possibilities of the new design and made plans to introduce the instrument as the Esquire Model. (Although Randall -- the company's de facto namesmith -- gave the Esquire its moniker, Fender supported the name, saying that it "sounded regal and implied a certain distinction above other guitars.")

In April 1950, Radio-Tel started promoting the Esquire -- the first Fender 6-string officially introduced to the public. The company prepared its Catalog No. 2, picturing a black single-pickup Esquire with a tweed form-fit case. Another picture showed Jimmy Wyble of Spade Cooley's band holding a blonde Esquire. These debut models, with a planned retail price of \$139.95, exhibited the utilitarian shape of thousands of Fender guitars to come.

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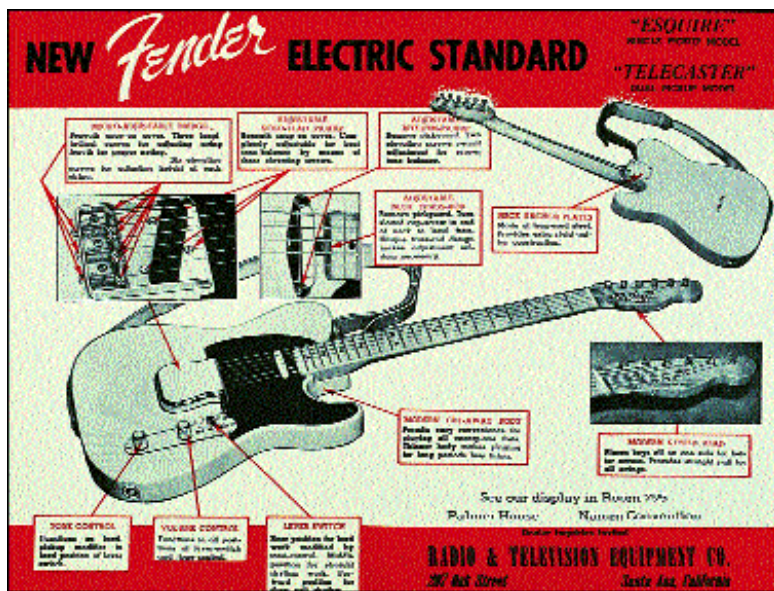
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"The Esquire guitar features a new style of construction which vastly improves the useability of this type of instrument," Randall wrote. The claim was further embellished by stating that the guitar could be played "at extreme volume," and that the fast neck was an aid to easy fretting. Randall added, "The neck is also replaceable and can be changed by the owner in approximately ten minutes time. This feature eliminates costly repairs and refretting." Fender believed that the neck was strong enough to resist warping without a trussrod. If a neck did warp, he planned to mail the customer a new one in a shipping tube.

Unfortunately, the necks didn't turn out to be as tough as Fender claimed. Randall reported that the necks on his samples had warped badly while traveling to the 1950 summer trade shows, and asked that the new guitars be outfitted with reinforced necks. Initially, Fender had been contentious about the extra effort it would take to design and manufacture reinforced necks, but then a test guitar in his lab suffered the same problem. Faced with mounting evidence that his guitar truly needed a reinforced neck, Fender bought a routing plate to install trussrods on October 3, 1950.

Randall's primary marketing ploy was to establish the Esquire in music instruction studios, reasoning that the affordable, practical guitar would be a hot commodity in those circles. In addition, a healthy response for the one-pickup version would prime the market for the more expensive two-pickup model that Fender already had in mind.

In fact, Fender's choice of a 3-position lever switch -- which allowed three distinct guitar tones -- probably coincided with his plans to add a rhythm pickup. Fortunately, the Esquire's body design easily lent itself to both one- and two-pickup configurations. Ultimately, all production models had cavities routed for two pickups because Fender wanted players to have the option of adding a pickup in the future. (The one-pickup models hid an empty cavity under the pickguard.)

The two-pickup Esquires were manufactured with the second (rhythm) pickup positioned under the strings near the end of the fingerboard. Fender shielded the rhythm pickup with a metal cover to cut high harmonics and to emphasize fundamental tones. A handy blend control knob mixed the rhythm pickup signal with that of the lead pickup when the pickup selector was in its lead position. Putting the selector in the middle position activated the rhythm pickup alone. In the forward position, the rhythm pickup was also selected, but along with a capacitor that rolled off high frequencies. (Fender called this sound "deep rhythm," and reasoned that guitarists could use the position to play bass lines.) Dual-pickup Fender guitars featured these same electronics until 1952.

Although the single-pickup guitars used capacitors to mimic the mellow sound of a rhythm pickup, the real thing sounded better. Jimmy Bryant, who epitomized the new wave of postwar electric-guitar wizards, liked the jazzier sound of the dual-pickup guitar, as did Fender himself.

THE BROADCASTER

The factory finally went into full production in late October or early November 1950. However, as Fender wanted his best guitar in the hands of professionals as soon as possible, the factory produced only dual-pickup Esquires. Fender's decision compromised Radio-Tel's earlier marketing strategy, forcing Randall to hold orders for the single-pickup Esquire and come up with a new name for the two-pickup model. The name Randall chose was "Broadcaster." No one is sure of the exact day he coined the name, but it coincided with the introduction of the trussrod, as no authentic non-trussrod Broadcasters are known to exist. (Dealers who insisted on Esquires had to wait until the single-pickup guitars went into full production in January 1951 and were delivered the following month.)

Musical Merchandise magazine carried the first announcement for the Broadcaster in February 1951 with a full-page insert that described it in detail. The guitar had what Randall called a "Modern cut-away body" and a "Modern styled head." And what player could resist the "Adjustable solo-lead pickup" that was "completely adjustable for tone-balance by means of three elevating screws"?

Finally the industry had an up-to-date production solidbody. (Fender sold 87 Broadcasters on the guitar's initial release in January 1951.) Many people took note -- including Gretsch, who claimed the Broadcaster name infringed on the company's trademark "Broadcaster." Faced with this fact, Randall wrote a letter to his salespeople on February 21, advising them that Radio-Tel was abandoning the Broadcaster name and requesting suggestions for a new one. On February 24, Randall, who had some good ideas of his own, announced that the Broadcaster was renamed the "Telecaster."

The Broadcaster-to-Telecaster name change cost Radio-Tel hundreds of dollars, and derailed the initial marketing effort. Brochures and envelope inserts were destroyed, and some unlucky worker had to clip the word "Broadcaster" from hundreds of headstock decals with a pair of scissors. For several months, the new twin-pickup guitars sported nothing but the word "Fender." Years later, collectors would coin the term "No-caster" for these early-to-mid-'51 guitars.

TELE TWEAKS

In 1952, Fender replaced the Telecaster's blend control circuit with a conventional tone control. Now the switch's rear position selected the lead pickup, the middle position selected the rhythm pickup, and the front position delivered the "deep rhythm" sound. Teles were equipped this way until the mid-'60s, when the modern switch setup was introduced: the middle position selected both pickups, the front position selected the rhythm pickup, and the rear position selected the lead pickup.

One drawback of the 1952 to mid-'60s wiring is obvious today: The wiring made a two-pickup combination impossible unless the player delicately positioned the spring-loaded switch between settings. However, once players learned this trick, they received a tonal surprise: Different models produced different dual-pickup sounds, depending on the rhythm pickup's magnetic polarity. The "between" setting -- which helped define the mystique of vintage Telecasters -- could offer the robust tone provided by both pickups or produce a snarly growl similar to the Stratocaster's half-switch sound. (James Burton, playing his '53 Telecaster, exploited this unique tone on Ricky Nelson's "Travelin' Man.")

However, it was the Tele's lead pickup that captured the hearts of most players. Early "level-pole" units offered outstanding tone with significant bass content and non-offensive highs (although manufacturing inconsistencies caused a small number of these pickups to produce an out-of-balance, bass-heavy low-E sound). In mid-1955, Fender staggered the polepiece heights as he had on Strat pickups. The results were mixed. The volume balance from string to string was better, but the Tele's overall sound was harsh.

The earliest guitars featured steel bridges that were ground flat on the bottom. By the end of 1950, Broadcasters boasted brass bridges with the same tooling marks as the earlier steel ones. In 1953, the factory began notching the two outer brass bridge pieces under the low E and high E, which allowed a lower adjustment for these strings. By 1954, Telecasters employed steel bridges again, but they were rounded and made from a smaller-diameter stock than the 1950 bridges. By 1958, the bridge pieces were changed yet again to a threaded stock with less mass, and the factory stopped putting the strings through the body. As a result, late-'50s models represent the shrillest-sounding and perhaps the least desirable Telecasters made during the pre-CBS (pre-'65) era.

In 1959, Fender introduced the Telecaster Custom and Esquire Custom, fancy versions of the originals with white binding that helped protect the edges from wear. These guitars had Jazzmaster-like rosewood fingerboards, which looked more traditional and wore better than one-piece maple necks. Some early-'60s, pre-CBS Custom Telecasters had necks capped with maple fingerboards made in the same manner as the necks capped with rosewood. However, at no time during the pre-CBS years did Fender regularly produce Customs with the older-style maple neck. (The only exceptions may have been unlikely special orders.) While the standard Telecasters and Esquires came with blonde finishes, the Customs were offered with sunburst finishes. A few even had more expensive custom colors. Moreover, Fender made some Teles with mahogany bodies in the '60s.

THE PLAYER'S PERSPECTIVE

In the early 1950s, a broad spectrum of Tele players established themselves in combos -- even young blues legend-to-be B.B. King spanked the plank. With its versatile sound, ease of playing, and reasonable cost, what better guitar to yellow with perspiration and cigarette smoke? Most serious students could afford the \$189.50 price, ensuring a new guitar generation would grow up on Fenders. Still, most players preferred top-of-the-line instruments, and almost all professional jazz and pop players employed something other than a Fender. And after Fender introduced the Stratocaster in '54, the Tele wasn't even Fender's top-of-the-line ax.

Then an interesting thing happened. By the late '50s, the Telecaster was becoming an integral part of the session player's arsenal. California-based guitarist Howard Roberts endorsed Gibson and Epiphone but also played an old Telecaster on countless rock sessions, as did Tommy Tedesco. These players knew what models recorded best and pleased record producers. The Telecaster and its solidbody cohorts produced the teenage sound that proclaimed a guitar generation gap: old versus new, jazz and pop conformity versus rock rebellion. At the same time, the Tele was heard increasingly on pure country recordings, treading in the big-box domain of Chet Atkins and Hank Garland (who sounded anything but twangy).

As the '60s unfolded and rock guitar playing matured, the Telecaster's role, onstage and off, solidified. While the guitar played a small part in the rise and fall of instrumental rock and surf music, Steve Cropper played one with Booker T. and the MGs, as did the Ventures' Nokie Edwards. James Burton and Tele moved from Ricky Nelson's band to TV's Shindogs, all the while chalking up hours as L.A.'s premier session stylist in rock and country.

Much of the British Invasion had the look of Rickenbackers and Gretsches, but Eric Clapton and Jeff Beck recorded many of their milestone sides with the Yardbirds on a Telecaster and Esquire, respectively. Mike Bloomfield chose a Tele for his highly influential mid-'60s work with Paul Butterfield and Bob Dylan, and Jimmy Page played one on Led Zeppelin's first album and on the solo of "Stairway to Heaven."

As Roy Buchanan told *Guitar Player* in '76, "The Telecaster sounded a lot like a steel, and I liked that tone. I like the old Teles because of the wood, the way the pickups are wound, the capacitors, and the whole works."

THE TELE LEGACY

By the late '60s, it was clear the Telecaster had shaken the foundations of the music industry. The Tele -- and the host of solidbody models introduced as a result of its success -- changed the way the world heard, played, and composed music. Ironically, Leo Fender, who worked incessantly after '51 developing new models such as the Strat, Jazzmaster, and Jaguar (and then, in the '70s and '80s, formulating Music Man and G&L models), had a very hard time topping what he accomplished in his first go-round.

"Everyone thought his first guitar was his best, but no one would tell him that," said longtime friend and pioneering electric stylist Alvin Rey in the '80s. The Tele was Leo Fender's Model T, but, unlike the old Fords, it didn't go away. For thousands of guitarists, the Telecaster is still state of the art -- an enduring battle ax for rock, country, or anything amplified.

THE WHOLE STORY

For a more comprehensive tome on the history of Fender guitars, check out Richard R. Smith's *Fender: The Sound Heard 'Round the World* [Garfish Publishing]. In addition to curating the 1993-94 exhibition "Five Decades of Fender" at the Fullerton Museum Center and writing articles for numerous guitar publications, Smith worked with Leo Fender himself, testing the master's late-career prototypes.

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