

First Impressions
S-type looks,
but it's a
thoroughbred
Burns



This is no copy guitar with Burns trimmings: it comes with redesigned Tri-Sonic pickups, as beloved by Brian May, but in miniature form. Review by Huw Price

Burns

Cobra

According to Burns, a lot of development has gone into this guitar. The premise was to create a model that would appeal to younger players who might be less enchanted by the Burns legacy. The simplest approach would have been to load it with generic hardware from a Far Eastern parts bin, slap on a split pickguard and hope that the brand name would do the rest.

Instead Burns decided to resurrect their old batwing headstock in compact form, complete with a perspex name plate. There's no Rez-o-Tube vibrato, although this one shares the front knife-edge pivot seen on other Burns. The really big deal is the mini Tri-Sonic pickups – so first, a bit of history.

Although they look like metal-covered Strat-style pickups, Tri-Sonics are very different. The magnet wire coil is formed into an oval and fitted around three magnets, joined together through magnetic attraction. The assembly sits on a flat metal base, and the holes in the metal cover reveal a black plastic layer since there are no individual polepieces; the holes are simply cosmetic.

Lots of people assume that Tri-Sonics were so named because they were usually fitted in sets of threes. The real reason is that the pickup senses string vibration from the sides as well as the top – in other words, they pick up in three directions. Strat-style single coils have a more focused magnetic field, but since Tri-Sonics sense string vibrations over a



The beloved batwing headstock and perspex plate are back – and the matching headstock looks a treat



Burns-branded tuners are smooth and efficient. The maple neck carries a two-way bi-flex trussrod

Tri-Sonic pickups sense vibration from the sides as well as the top, making them rich and harmonically complex

wider area, the tone is often described as richer and more harmonically complex.

Until now, installing Tri-Sonics in another guitar meant body routing and pickguard modification because they're physically larger than Strat-style pickups. Not any more. These are regular-size, and Burns turned to Adrian Turner of Adeson Pickups to redesign them without sacrificing the sonic characteristics of the originals. Turner used the same

components, including a tape-wound bobbin-less coil and ceramic magnets, with a narrower footprint and increased depth. Surely this changes the sound? Well, Turner says the mini Tri-Sonics sound very slightly brighter than the originals, but the difference is marginal. This is especially true in series/humbucking mode, which is possible on the Cobra thanks to a push/pull switch on the treble pickup tone control. In case you're

FACTFILE

COBRA

Description: Solid body electric guitar. Made in China

Price: £249

Build: Basswood body, bolt-on maple neck with 22-fret rosewood fingerboard

Electric: Three mini Tri-Sonic pickups, five-way pickup selector with push/pull 2 & 3 pickup series switching, master volume, bridge tone and middle/neck tone controls

Left-hander: No

Finishes: Red, white, blue and black

Scale Length: 648mm/25.5"

Neck width:

Nut 43mm

12th fret 52mm

Depth of neck:

First fret 16mm

12th fret 19mm

String spacing:

Nut 36mm

Bridge 52mm

Action as supplied:

12th fret treble 3mm

12th fret bass 3mm

Weight: 3.75kg/8.25lbs

Contact: Sutherland Trading
0292 088 7333
www.sutherlandtrading.com

THE COMPETITION**SQUIER****Classic Vibe Stratocaster**

Fender really raised the game with this wonderful '50s inspired model, complete with alder body, maple neck and Alnico III single coil pickups

RRP: £279.99

VINTAGE**V6MFR**

Another well-made alder bodied S-type with a maple neck, Wilkinson hardware and locking tuners

RRP: £239

YAMAHA**Pacifica**

A well-established S-type model with a humbucker and two single coils, plus a great range of colours

RRP: £195

interested, Burns will be selling these mini Tri-Sonicas as drop-in replacements for S-type guitars at £65 per set.

When the bridge pickup is selected the push/pull switch adds the neck pickup in series, and when the middle/bridge in-between position is selected all three pickups are combined. With the push/pull in the push position, the Cobra is configured like a regular S-type with a five-way switch, though the middle and neck pickups share a tone control.

The basswood body is a regular S-type with the usual curves and contours. The red finish looks good with the split green pickguard, matching knobs with verdigris lettering and the matching red headstock. The Burns-branded diecast tuners are of a very decent quality.

A generous slab of dark rosewood forms the fingerboard, with a 10" radius and medium frets. The bolt-on maple neck has a bi-directional truss rod and it feels fantastic, with a lovely slim early 1960s Fender feel, and the setup on our review guitar was spot on. As well as being supremely easy to play, the vibrato holds its tuning superbly.

SOUNDS

Although this is to all intents and purposes a Strat copy with Burns Tri-Sonic pickups, there's nothing about it to betray its budget price. It feels exceptionally well constructed and the unplugged tone is extraordinary. The Cobra sounds balanced, deep and woody,

The knife-edge vibrato works superbly and the strings return to pitch every time



Extra texture: a clever push-pull tone knob adds bridge/neck and all three pickup options to the regular five choices

There's nothing to betray the budget price. It's exceptionally well made and the unplugged tone is extraordinary

with a sweetly textured high frequency chime and lots of natural sustain.

The mini Tri-Sonicas are billed as high-output low-noise pickups, and they were so quiet I had to re-check the specs to make certain they were single coils rather than stacked humbuckers. Reverse winding and polarity is quite a common method of bucking the hum in the in-between positions, but these are consistently quiet in all five settings.

The first word that comes to mind is 'refined'. These pickups have plenty of top end, but no harshness or wiriness. Output is pretty much on a par with vintage-spec Strat single coils, but the Tri-Sonicas aren't as snappy or wiry. The string-to-string output levels are very nicely balanced, with a hint of natural compression that makes chords jump out with plenty of punch; thanks to the even response, single-note runs are a breeze.

In clean mode the bridge pickup combines a hint of quack with a throaty, scooped midrange. The mids fill out in the middle position and the neck adds an extra degree of mellowness without sacrificing any of the transparency. The in-between settings are spot on too, with just the right amount of phasiness and treble roll-off for a top-notch Robert Cray or early Knopfler vibe. So there's a tonal

consistency across the pickup settings rather than three wildly differing sounds.

Adding the neck to the bridge in series mode fattens things up without disproportionately raising the output level, although the tapered knob is hard to grip. This feature is particularly effective when you start getting into overdrive and fuzz, and the mini Tri-Sonicas can cope with crunch because they never lose their clarity and definition.

VERDICT

Not everybody is going to appreciate the Burns style, but we think this is a real looker. It's also a pretty remarkable guitar; you'd be hard-pressed to find any S-type that plays or sounds better at this price. Burns will be 50 years old in August, and if the Cobra is anything to go by it'll be a happy golden anniversary. ☺

FINAL SCORE

Build Quality 18 / 20

Playability 18 / 20

Sound 19 / 20

Value for money 19 / 20

Vibe 18 / 20

TOTAL 92%

Good for... Brit pop, indie, rock, blues, funk, punk, ska

Look elsewhere... metal and jazz fusion

