

KINGS OF THE ROAD

Trevor Wilkinson is a huge fan of the guitar-building giants that shaped the instruments we still play today, but his engineer's eye and designer's instinct always manage to bring something new to the table. So when two British blues stalwarts join forces with the guitar guru, you get a rather interesting - and very different - pair of instruments

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Fret-King Corona DBR & JV £649 & £649

What We Want To Know

1 Who are JV and DBR?
Producer and studio musician John Verity fronted 70s rock band Argent, while Danny Bryant has followed in the footsteps of his old hero Walter Trout, performing high-octane blues-rock shows for an ever-growing fanbase.

2 We've seen this look somewhere before, so what makes them different?
In a nutshell, Trevor Wilkinson! He's a master at making updates for today's players. Verity and Bryant have different sonic requirements, so he's worked with each player to create their ideal signature.

3 They look expensive...
These models actually come from the affordable Black Label range, built in Korea. The Blue Label line (built in the same Korean factory) is a tad pricier, while the Green Labels (hand-built in the UK) are intended for the fatter-of-wallet.

Fret-King is one of those rare brands that champions honest-to-goodness pros, out on the road just getting on with it. It's a philosophy that's drawn respected veterans Geoff Whitehorn, Jerry Donahue, Gordon Giltrap and others into the fold, alongside talented up-and-comers such as Chantel McGregor and recent Young Guitarist Of The Year, James Bell. While it's great to have a few superstars on your books,

often it's the busy pro player that lugs gear up and down the country, putting it through its paces in pubs, clubs, recording studios and at festivals, who really shows if equipment can cut it or not.

Danny Bryant and John Verity are two such six-stringers, at a point in their careers where they know what works for them and what doesn't. Fret-King players already, both jumped at the offer of a signature guitar. Their needs, while sharing a

common thread in the Corona model, are actually quite different: while John requires the best single-coil axe he can find, Danny wants power and variety, so has his loaded with three different pickup styles.

Fret-King Corona JV

Although very much a classic Californian-style three-pickup double-cut, a few hidden design ideas make the Corona JV rather more unusual. Here's Verity with some background detail: "When Trev and I first met I was using a US-made Classic with noiseless pickups. Trev asked me if I was happy with it and I said pretty much so, but it lacked a little bite and presence, plus I found the maple fingerboard a bit sticky. We agreed to get together and



Wilkinson's own hardware includes the WPV two-point floating vibrato



The Rivals

If you're a fan of the **Fret-King Corona** but prefer the tone of a humbucker at the bridge and P-90 at the neck with a single coil in the middle, then head straight for the **GW Geoff Whitehorn** model (£629).

talk about my 'ideal guitar', but by the time we did, I had gravitated back to three single coils; I just wanted the bridge pickup to have a bit more spank and for the guitar to be a little less prone to hum, especially in the studio."

Wilkinson's solution was ingenious and elegant. Buried beneath the pickguard is the 'Power-coil'. This is a dummy pickup wired with the others in humbucking mode. "The dummy coil thickens up the sound while retaining the classic single-coil sweetness," says Verity. "And it cured the hum at the same time." We'll check out the sound for ourselves later on.

With its centre-jointed American alder body marginally more offset in outline than its

Buried beneath the pickguard of the Corona JV is the 'Power-coil' - this is a dummy pickup wired with the others in humbucking mode

obvious inspiration, a wavy edged pickguard that complements a batwing headstock, plus a maple neck with 22-fret maple fingerboard, there are just enough stylistic tweaks to distance the Corona from... well, Corona. The Verity model's neck is unstained maple, while subtle gold fittings complete the look. "I've always been a sucker for Two-Colour Sunburst - blame those early Buddy Holly pictures," grins Verity, "and it looks great with

the parchment scratchplate and gold hardware - not too much bling." We agree!

One great advantage of a Wilkinson-designed guitar is the customary inclusion of Wilkinson-designed hardware. So, it's no surprise to find a WPV steel-saddled, two-point floating vibrato and his laughably simple but incredibly good E-Z-Lok tuners. "I'm not a trem divebomber, but I hit the bar from time to time," says Verity. "And I have no tuning



A dummy coil beneath the scratchplate reduces hum and adds thickness



The sculpted neck heel offers access, and the extended tenon join adds stability

problems despite having a pretty aggressive hand.”

Light in weight and comfortable to hold, one thing you instantly notice is that the JV feels nothing like a Fender. This reviewer fondly recalls late 70s bolt-on-neck Gibson Marauders and S-1s, and the JV is more redolent of those than a Strat. Those Gibbo necks were great, too! The satin finish is glitch-free and the neck sits wonderfully in the hand, while well-dressed frets and a flattish 'board leave bending and vibrato unimpeded. A rounded heel prevents the usually obtrusive corner from digging into the palm and scotching top-fret excursions, and the slightly exaggerated cutaways add to this sense of freedom.

Sounds

Wilkinson addressed Verity's request for a spanky-toned guitar with gusto. Dummy coils are not new – Fender employed them back in the 80s with its Elite Strat – but here, it works brilliantly. Overall, there's a feeling of both girth and presence to the expected three-single-coil, five-way selector array of tones. They don't exactly sound active, like EMGs, but there's definite sparkle and 'immediacy' to the tone that's perhaps more akin to John

Suhr's hum-cancelling backplate idea, which we've also tried and liked. All this provides a super 'in your face' quality, but there's plenty of low-end clout, too, aided by the Power-coil's humbucking boost effect. We can see exactly why a studio player such as Verity would like it so much.

Fret-King Corona DBR

Since Danny Bryant's guitar is also a Corona, the basic construction details apply, so we'll concentrate on the prime areas of difference: Bryant's pickup and neck choices. His involvement with the brand goes way back, so he's chuffed with his new baby: "I've been playing Fret-King guitars on every live show and recording session since I acquired my first Corona SP60 back in 2005," he enthuses. "So to have my own model is a huge honour."

We have to say the DBR looks regal in Candy Apple Blue (this time over a three-piece alder body), and Bryant has chosen a vintage tint to his maple neck, also with separate 'board. The obvious visual difference is the fistful of pickups that adorns the guitar. The slanted 'humbucker' at the neck is in fact a pair of single coils wired together, while the bridge P-90 is stacked, also allowing it to 'buck the

There's so much tonal variation here it's not true, from power rock to funky blues, and the intuitive nature of the whole setup is a huge bonus

hum'. In the middle is a WHS single coil, and the four power plants are wired to single volume and tone pots, plus Wilkinson's clever Vari-coil; as it's turned down, the P-90's humbucking tones fade to single coil, a great secret weapon for any guitar.

The DBR's neck profile is vintage 'V' and, mated to a fingerboard with 22 medium-jumbo frets, provides a different feel entirely to the Verity model. Although quite pronounced, the V is feathered nicely into the meat of the neck so there's no uncomfortable ridge. V-shape necks demand more of a 'dig in' attitude to get the best from them, and while in no way a struggle, this one does not play you; it demands you put in some effort to get the most out of it – as Danny Bryant does.

Sounds

Plugged in directly after the Corona JV (both through a Marshall 1974X) the DBR's inherent voice is, if anything,

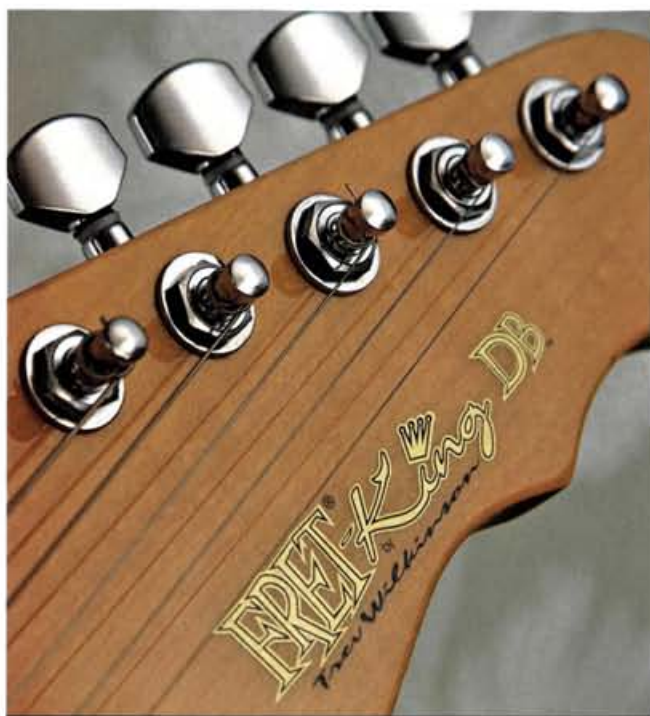
even heftier. The bridge P-90 is fat and full of colour but remains articulate, even with a Boss Blues Driver kicked in. Flip across to the neck single coil and it's the sound you'd automatically expect, but in no way dwarfed by the size of the P-90. With both neck pickups on things get even bigger; clean, the tone is warm but with no fuzzy edges, and with the Driver engaged it arrives somewhere between Clapton's signature boost and Gary Moore's *Still Got The Blues*. If it's Texas blues you want, try the middle position; this selects one neck single coil along with the bridge P-90 for a lovely balance of warmth and cut, especially when using the Vari-coil to dial a smidge of humbucker out. All the pickups sound individually great, but position 2 (bridge and middle together) is now more baritone than tenor; knock back the tone pot, kick in the Blues Driver and you're in Schenker City! There's so much here it's not true, from power rock to funky blues, and



The P-90 is stacked, and turning the Vari-coil down fades it to a single coil



It looks like a 'bucker at a glance, but is actually two single coils wired together



E-Z-Lok staggered-height locking tuners and stagger-drilled block help tuning

The Vari-coil is the secret weapon, offering variety without the hassle of mini-switches or push-pull pots

the intuitive nature of the whole setup is a huge bonus. The Vari-coil really is the guitar's secret weapon, a brilliant way to achieve variety without the hassle of mini-switches or push-pull pots. As Bryant concludes: "The DBR incorporates aspects of every great usable sound I've ever wanted. From crystal-clear single coils to a full-on screaming humbucker, from a fat vintage-sounding P-90 to a country-style twang, this guitar really does it all – and with class." Yep, we'd go with that.

Verdict

If you thought all three-pickup, double-cutaway guitars were the same, think again. These two instruments, while occupying the same physical template, offer dramatically different propositions. John Verity's Corona JV is a classy toned vintage-style six-string that seems to have a little more of everything – it's as though Wilkinson has discovered an

extra gear on a favourite classic car. Verity certainly agrees: "Since I got the first production model it's become my main guitar, just as it came in the box. It's nicely played in now after a few months' steady gigging and, of course, it gets better, as all nice guitars do."

Danny Bryant's DBR, on the other hand, is as mean a machine as you'll find within this configuration. For the modern blues-rocker, it's perfect, but we can see many a function-band guitarist ditching two or three instruments to replace them with just this one. Bryant sums his feelings up, saying simply: "Trev Wilkinson has created the guitar I always dreamed of someday finding."

Yes, of course the guys would say all that, wouldn't they, but at this price we'd find it hard to point you towards two better all-rounders for the money. They might be chalk and cheese but they're classy chalk and scrummy cheese! **G**



Fret-King Corona JV

PRICE: £649 (inc gigbag)
ORIGIN: Korea
TYPE: Double-cutaway six-string electric
BODY: 2-piece centre-jointed American alder
NECK: Canadian hard rock maple
SCALE LENGTH: 648mm (25.5")
NUT/WIDTH: Graphite 43mm
FINGERBOARD: Maple, 254mm (10") radius with abalone dot inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Gold Wilkinson WV9SB 2-post floating vibrato; Wilkinson E-Z-Lok, staggered height locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 56mm
ELECTRICS: 3x Wilkinson WVS60 Alnico V single-coil pickups with dummy Power-coil to eliminate hum and boost output; plus volume, 2x tones and 5-way selector
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 3.6/8
OPTIONS: None available
RANGE OPTIONS: Black Label Corona models include the GWR Gregg Wright (£699) with S/S/P-90 and black hardware; the GW Geoff Whitehorn (£629) with P-90/S/H; the Corona SP (£599) with S/S/P-90
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Two-tone Sunburst
JHS & Co
01132 865381
www.fret-king.com

GUITARIST RATING	★★★★★
Build quality	★★★★
Playability	★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

Guitarist says: A no-nonsense instrument that provides powerful but quiet operation with a host of sensible upgrades on a well-loved theme



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FINGERBOARD: Maple, 254mm (10") radius with black dot inlays
FRETS: 22, medium jumbo
HARDWARE: Wilkinson vintage style WVCB vibrato; Wilkinson E-Z-Lok, staggered height locking tuners
STRING SPACING, BRIDGE: 56mm
ELECTRICS: Wilkinson neck humbucker (2x single coils wired together), Wilkinson middle single coil, Wilkinson stacked P-90 at bridge; Vari-coil control plus single volume and tone pots and 5-way selector
WEIGHT (KG/LB): 3.6/8
OPTIONS: None available
RANGE OPTIONS: As Corona JV
LEFT-HANDERS: No
FINISHES: Candy Apple Blue

GUITARIST RATING	★★★★★
Build quality	★★★★
Playability	★★★★
Sound	★★★★★
Value for money	★★★★★

Guitarist says: A powerful and versatile instrument that, like the Corona JV, offers quality and bags of canny design upgrades for extremely sensible money

Designing The Dream

Trevor Wilkinson tells us how he approached the distinct challenges of John Verity and Danny Bryant's signature requirements

What do you enjoy about creating a guitar to a player's requirements?

"Both Danny and John have several double-cut, bolt-on style guitars but the Fret-Kings quickly became their main choice. This was a great thrill for me and proved that we can build a top-class guitar to rival any brand – and better it! Both had a dream spec, which is challenging, but when you get it right, it's hugely rewarding.

"John was always a 'three single coil guy' and while this pickup combination has created some of the most inspirational music, he found them lacking with regard to pushing effects, or the front end of an amp. So the quest was to give him the high-end sparkle that single coils deliver, but with a bit more 'oomph'.

"Danny was happy with neck and middle single coils, but he found the bridge P-90 superior for his style of playing – but if we could give him alternative tones without a myriad of switches then he was open to suggestions."

Tell us about Danny's pickup choices...

"I knew my stacked P-90 would give him the extra push he liked, but with a simple turn of the Vari-coil knob he could go down to a single-coil character. I then thought I would add an extra single coil at the neck so he could access this as both a true single coil and as a fatter neck humbucker. So Danny now has access to a neck single coil, neck humbucker, bridge and neck 'out of phase' sound (enhanced by using the Vari-coil on the P-90); he can still access the middle and bridge tone, plus he has the power of the stacked P-90 with the choice to wind it back to single coil. And he now has it all in one guitar, instead of carrying the three he would otherwise have needed."

The dummy pickup in John's guitar is a neat addition...

"There are many ways to get more 'oomph' from single coils, but invariably this leads to a change in the voicing. I had been working with peripheral sound-cancelling coils for a long time. These work well to reduce the hum, but when wired in series they increase the power of the pickup they are teamed with: it usually diminishes sparkle,



Danny Bryant, with a previous version of his signature Fret-King

especially in positions 2 and 4. So I developed a remote coil that gave John the hum-cancelling effect with the extra power he wanted, but without losing high-end sparkle."

Why is it important to champion guys like these?

"John and Danny are serious pros and between us I feel we can 'improve the breed',

so to speak. They don't have massive stage crews, but play their hearts out every night, and I believe they deserve the best we can design for them. Endorsees have always been a big part of a guitar company's needs, not only to help sell guitars but to also develop better products. We chose the Black Label series because it delivers the quality and performance Danny and John need, but at a price their fans can afford."