

First Impressions
A neat
H/S/H all-
rounder that
hardly shows
its techie
secret
First Impressions





An automatic self-tuning guitar from the fertile brain of Trevor Wilkinson, finally here after over a decade of work? Surely that's cause for celebration. Review by Huw Price

Fret-King

Super-Matic Self-Tuning Guitar

The Super-Matic's ATD HT440 self-tuning bridge is the definitive feature of this guitar. Trevor Wilkinson and the team at Auto Tuning Developments developed the system over a period of 14 years. It's described as a 'real time electro-mechanical device utilising ultra hi-tech micro gearboxes, designed to retrofit unobtrusively in to a standard S-type vibrato bridge rout (or similar) with a micro hex pickup'. The ATD bridge also invisibly incorporates all the microprocessor control circuitry.

The HT440 is elegant and unobtrusive. Looking at the bridge, you might not even notice that this guitar has an auto tuning system; the only giveaway is the low profile system pickup, looking like a slimline version of a Roland hex pickup, with a push button at one end and an LCD screen at the other. The screen is low and smooth, so you can rest the palm of your hand on it, and view it from any angle.

Despite the lavish instructions I wound up calling the distributors for advice, and snapping a string didn't help. Once you've grasped the way it operates it's quite easy, but it took me a while to get the hang of it.

The centre segment of the display should light up along with two green arrows. This indicates Autotune mode; as soon as you see this you have to release the button, then press it again to enter the preset section. Once '1' (preset 1) is displayed you can move through the presets by continuing to click that button, but if you pause too long the system



It's been 14 years in development, and the ATD HT440 bridge is a remarkable feat of engineering



Quality maple neck with the familiar Fret-King single-sided headstock and a set of non-locking machineheads

The HT440 unit is elegant and unobtrusive. Looking at the bridge, you might not even notice that this guitar has an auto tuning system

switches itself off. This is annoying unless you have memorised which tuning each of the preset numbers represents.

The presets are as follows - 1 Standard, 2 Drop D, 3 Open E, 4 DADGAD, 5 Open A and 6 Open G. As soon as the one you want is on the display, strum the open strings to initiate the auto tuning procedure. If you're not quick enough, the system will shut down again. A low whirring from the capstan motors

accompanies the process, and the display shows you each string as it's being tuned.

After one strum, a couple of the strings were usually a bit out; I found it best to strum the strings two or three times to allow the system to nail the pitch. Whatever you do, avoid checking the tuning by playing a chord while the system is operating or things will go pear-shaped. The ATD 440 works independently of the volume, so you can turn down to tune. ➤

FACTFILE

SUPER-MATIC

Description: Solidbody electric guitar. Made in Korea

Price: £1399

Build: Alder body with bolt-on maple neck, 24 fret rosewood fingerboard, diecast tuners

Electrics: Two Wilkinson WHHB233 humbuckers and one Wilkinson WHSM single coil pickup, five-way selector switch, master volume and tone controls, humbucker/single coil fader knob

Left-hander: No

Finish: Black or sunburst

Scale Length: 650mm/25.5"

Neck width:

Nut 42mm

12th fret 52mm

Depth of neck:

First fret 21mm

12th fret 23mm

String spacing:

Nut 35mm

Bridge 53mm

Action as supplied:

12th fret treble 2.5mm

12th fret bass 3.5mm

Weight: 4kg/8.8lbs

Contact: JHS

01132 865381

www.jhs.co.uk

THE COMPETITION

AXCENT Tuning Systems

This self-tuning system has been around since 1987 and it can be retrofitted to many electric guitar models. Jimmy Page has endorsed it, but the system requires extensive routing - and even after you supply your own host guitar, the cost is pretty daunting

RRP: up to \$5000

GIBSON ROBOT LES PAUL STANDARD 2010

A German company, Tronical, developed the motorised tuners used in Gibson's Robot and Dusk Tiger. Previously available for retrofitting, this system is now exclusive to Gibson and it offers six user-programmable tuning presets

RRP: £2398

The system works remarkably well once you get used to it, and checking it against an accurate tuner pedal gave impressive results. You can overwrite presets 2-6 with your own tunings, and the system can compensate for any tuning problems should you break a string. Unfortunately the review guitar had been subject to some temperature changes in transit and the intonation might have benefited from adjustment. I found myself tweaking the tuning by ear once I started fretting notes to get the Super-Matic playing sweetly.

The Super-Matic's two-piece body is carved from centre jointed American alder 'using heritage styling cues' - a fabulous way of admitting it's more or less an S-type. The neck profile is described as a shallow C. It feels more medium to me but it's very comfortable and the satin finish enhances the overall feel.

A slab rosewood board carries 24 medium jumbo nickel frets and pearl dot markers, and the Super-Matic features a H/S/H pickup configuration: the bridge and neck zebra humbuckers are Wilkinson WHHBZ33s with offset adjustable polepieces, and a Wilkinson WHSM 'vintage voiced' single coil plays piggy.

SOUNDS

Despite a minor grounding fault that caused the Super-Matic to buzz, the tones were impressive in quality and range. The bridge humbucker has a bright and clear bite with plenty of pick articulation and power. The neck is sweet and smooth with loads of vocal overtones and transparency. With its powerful but



The miniature LCD screen is unobtrusive and doesn't get in the way of your picking hand

If you swap tunings for dropped metal, Stonesy riffing or bottleneck, the ATD HT440's speed and accuracy would be useful and very convenient

bright single coil, the pickup arrangement is a versatile combination, but the second 'tone' control is actually a fader that gradually morphs the humbuckers into single coil mode. Somewhere along the way the coils start phase cancelling, so you can get ultra-Stratty tones even before you add the middle pickup in parallel. So the Super-Matic is an extremely versatile, toneful and easy playing guitar that can cover anything from funk to metal.

VERDICT

We need to look at this guitar from two angles. First, there's the Super-Matic itself: though not everybody likes a 'Swiss Army knife' guitar, it covers all bases. Secondly, does the ATD 440 provide sufficient added value to justify the price tag? None of the other guitars in Fret-King's Blue Label range offer this combination of body style and H/S/H pickups, but the current top models peak at around £700, so the ATD 400 system does add a lot to the price (it'll be interesting to see if it ever becomes available separately as a retrofit). You

may decide that the ATD HT440 is unnecessary if you play in standard tuning and you have an electronic tuner or a musical ear. However, if you enjoy swapping between tunings for dropped metal, Stonesy riffing or bottleneck excursions, the ATD HT440's speed and accuracy would be very convenient. Trevor Wilkinson and his team have proved that it's possible to make a self-tuning guitar where the technology doesn't dominate or detract from the playing experience. The ATD HT440 is a remarkable feat of engineering, and its success will depend on whether enough guitarists feel that it is something they actually need.

FINAL SCORE

Build Quality18/20

Playability18/20

Sound17/20

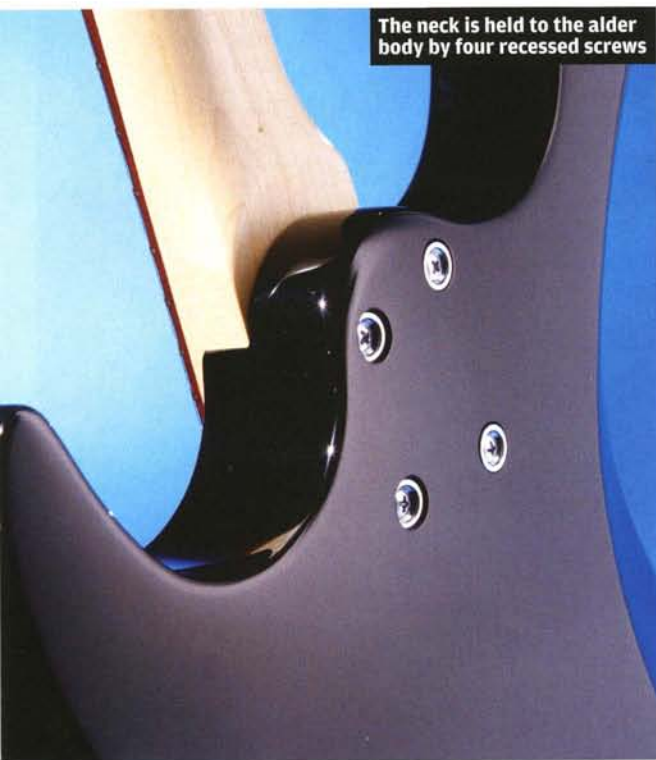
Value for money14/20

Vibe15/20

TOTAL82%

Good for... wide range of tones and tuning up

Look elsewhere... for vintage vibes and any kind of whammy bar action



The neck is held to the alder body by four recessed screws