

Buyer's Guide

1963 'Reverse' Firebird

Dan Orkin of Reverb.com clues us up on model differences, prices and limitations of the 60s Firebirds

Vintage guitar commentators often view the original 1963 Firebird as Gibson's answer to Fender offset models, such as the Jaguar and Jazzmaster, introduced in 1958 and 1962 respectively. If this was indeed the case, Gibson's strategy was an aggressive one, as 1963 saw the introduction of not one but four distinct Firebird variants. Each brought a different complement of hardware to a shared angular body shape with common features, including an ambitious neck-through design and mini-humbucker pickups.

The original Firebird I, III, V, and VII designs would remain the same up through mid-'65 when the body was quite literally flipped on its head. For collectors, this body shape reversal marks the major cutoff for pricing and desirability. While first-year models do earn a small premium, guitars from 1963, 1964 and the beginning of 1965 tend to achieve similar prices, with specific conditional factors dictating value more than the actual year of production.

At launch, the numbers following the Firebird indicated where each design fell on the fanciness scale. The Firebird I was the most basic and the Firebird VII the most deluxe, with the III and V falling somewhere in the middle. In today's collector market, this hierarchy remains mostly intact, with the possible exception of the Firebird I, where rare and excellent condition examples can obtain prices that rival the rest of the flock.

For the most part, though, it's the luxurious Firebird VII that commands the highest sale prices. First generation Firebird VII's will usually sell for £11,000 to £16,000, with original non-Sunburst examples selling for even more. Firebird IIIs in original condition have sold in the £4,600 to £6,400 range, with one very pristine example recently clearing the £8,000 mark on Reverb.com. The arguably more iconic Firebird V sells in a similar range, though the best pieces will fetch higher prices than any Firebird III.

Like pre-CBS Fenders, custom finishes have a serious impact on vintage Firebird pricing. Unlike many other Gibsons of this



era, the Firebird was marketed in a variety of vibrant finishes including Cardinal Red, Inverness Green, Frost Blue and Pelham Blue, with a few even rarer options beyond this core set. Any original non-Sunburst finish will increase the value substantially.

THE COMMON NECK BREAK

The most common issue with vintage Firebirds is the dreaded break where the headstock meets the neck. These types of fractures are common to vintage Gibsons and especially with the Firebird. The reason for this is fairly obvious. The Firebird's long, angled headstock with back-facing, banjo-style tuners means that if it falls on its back, it's more likely to snap at the neck than a guitar with a flatter headstock. Couple that with the angled bottom and you get a guitar that's more likely to fall over when propped up against an amp, and a headstock that's more likely to break when it hits the floor.

As for any modern equivalents and alternatives to the genuine vintage artefact, today's boutique builders offer a menagerie of wonderful Firebird-style guitars. Reverb staff favour Shelton Electric Instruments who make two Firebird-esque models – the SolarFlite and FireArrow – both of which

Pricing Factors

If a 60s Firebird is on your wishlist, here's what to consider before parting with your cash...

● FINISH


As with any 60s guitar, finish is central to pricing. This is true of Sunburst Firebirds, but especially important for custom finishes. An original non-Sunburst finish on a Firebird can raise the value anywhere from 60 to 90 per cent.

● NECK BREAKS

As mentioned, headstock breaks are endemic to this model. Although repair jobs can ready any Firebird for takeoff, prospective buyers should check images and descriptions for breaks. As with other vintage Gibsons, a headstock repair – even a very good one – will reduce the value by around half.

● TREMOLO CONDITION

For most, the stock tremolo system is the key differentiating factor between the models. The 'Lyre Vibrola' tailpiece on the V and VII is considered the best, though with any vintage tremolo system, there is the chance of rust on parts that should be considered when buying or selling a Firebird.

are available in a variety of slick finishes. Kauer Guitars offers a similar design with its Banshee. Beyond these higher-end options, Gibson and Epiphone produce a number of modern reverse 'bird guitars, including the relatively affordable Gibson Firebird Studio T. 



Dan Orkin is content director at Reverb.com, where he reviews the thousands of listings and manages the Reverb Price Guide