



# Favourite Sons

With no signature artists involved, the first wave of new PRS SE guitars for 2024 includes a couple of old favourites and a posh makeover for the classic Custom 24

Words Dave Burrluck Photography Phil Barker









## PRS SE CE 24, SE SWAMP ASH SPECIAL & SE CUSTOM 24 QUILT £695, £979 & £1,079

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**F**or the past couple of years we've been treated to milestone additions to the PRS SE line in the form of John Mayer's Silver Sky and David Grissom's DGT. For 2024, there's not a signature artist in sight, but three new additions will certainly be of interest, especially to players who have followed PRS's near 40-year history.

Two of our Indonesian-made trio are bolt-ons – the CE 24 and Swamp Ash Special – which join the Silver Sky, the first SE bolt-on. If you know your PRSes, you'll remember that the CE (originally the Classic Electric) was the first bolt-on PRS guitar and also the most affordable on its launch in 1988. With its alder body and maple neck and fingerboard, it was originally a more Fender-like PRS. But the market said no and

The Custom 24 has a really strong, strident voice at the bridge; it's clear and powerful

by the mid-90s it used the standard maple-topped mahogany body with just a maple neck. It's dropped in and out of production over the years and returned to the USA line in 2016, albeit with a shallower top carve, where it remains today along with its rather fetching semi-hollow variant.

The Swamp Ash Special debuted in 1996 with a swamp ash body, maple neck and fingerboard, vibrato and a HSH pickup configuration. At that point, it attempted to occupy the 'Fender' slot in the line-up. It lasted until 2009 and was replaced for 2010 with the 25th Anniversary version, featuring a trio of then-new Narrowfield humbuckers, followed by its last hurrah between 2011 and 2012 as the Swamp Ash Special Narrowfield. More recently, swamp ash has made a comeback into PRS's USA line with the Fiore and, of course, the 2023 T-style NF-53 and the Myles Kennedy signature. Like the CE 24, it's the first time the Swamp Ash Special has been offered in the SE line.

Our third model, the Custom 24 Quilt, goes back to the original 24-fret 1985 Custom and has been in the SE line since 2009, while its current style dates back

to its last makeover in 2021. To be honest, it's a cosmetic upgrade of the standard model with a quilted instead of flamed maple veneer body top and headstock facing. Unlike the standard SE Custom, however, the headstock, fingerboard and top body edge are all bound (more like the SE Standard 24-08 or the SE 594 models), plus we get an ebony fingerboard. Whatever, it's a bit of posh to balance the blue-collar bolt-ons.

### Similar Strokes

Aside from the neck fixing, our new trio shares more similarities than differences. All use the classic PRS 635mm (25-inch) scale length, the same 254mm (10-inch) fingerboard radius, medium gauge frets and Wide Thin neck profiles. All three have maple necks, too: the Custom's is a three-piece longitudinal laminate, effectively quarter-sawn and gloss finished; the CE 24 and Swamp Ash Special have a one-piece slab-sawn shaft with scarf-jointed headstock – the Swamp Ash Special's headstock is left plain, the CE has a thin black plastic matt-finished facing. Both bolt-ons have very little toning to the finish





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1. All three new SE models use the same 85/15 'S' open-coil humbuckers and the all-steel 'moulded' (we'd call it cast) vibrato that's also used on the USA S2 models and the USA-made CE 24

2. Part of the Custom 24's Quilt makeover is the quilted maple veneer headstock facing, which is colour-matched to the body. The headstock, fingerboard and top body edge are also bound





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3. Once called the 'McCarty' electronics, this control style dates back to the mid-90s where the three-way toggle selects the humbuckers, which can be partially split via the pull-switch tone control

With only the SE Standard 24-08 below it on the price list at £675, the new SE CE 24 is very good value for money in anyone's book

and look 'whiter' than our reference SE Silver Sky. Hardware and the 85/15 'S' humbucking pickups are also identical – the Swamp Ash Special, of course, adds that middle single coil and has two fewer frets.

One fundamental aspect of the new-design CE 24 and Swamp Ash Special is the actual neck join. On the original models, although the material changed from mahogany to maple, the necks were identical to the glued-in models, just screwed in; the heel was on the neck and an extension ran under the neck pickup, deep into the body. Here, like the recent Silver Sky and Fiore, the neck is more Fender-like, stopping at the end of the fingerboard and sitting in a cavity on top of a heel that's pulled out from the body.

You'll notice that to achieve this, the inner line of the bass-side horn curves into the neck. PRS reminds us this actually goes back to the 513 from 2004 (and subsequent models such as the 305 and 509), whose body was pulled out to form a longer heel, though it did use a glued-in neck. "It's a stronger neck joint," Paul Reed Smith told us at the time. "[The body] holds onto the neck further out under the heel. We

were trying to get more of the sound of the Singlecut Trem but on a double-cut guitar."

"When we were designing these guitars, I took an early prototype home and carved the heel by hand," says Jack Higginbotham, PRS's COO, today. "The engineering team here made some improvements and programmed that shape for our partners at PT Cort. We think players will appreciate the ease of access this design brings."

Although that original Classic Electric/CE featured a two-piece alder body, which was then offered with a maple cap, our new SE CE 24 follows the switch from alder to mahogany back from the mid-90s. We can't see that through the opaque black back colour, however. Nevertheless, it's pretty clear through the natural back of the SE Custom Quilt that the bodies here are three pieces with a plain maple cap that's faced with the figured or quilt veneer. The CE 24 is the only one of our trio that has another original PRS hallmark – the natural edge 'binding'. The Swamp Ash Special's body is very slightly thinner in depth at 44mm (the other two are 46mm) and is three-piece by the look of it, plus there's no natural edge or binding.



## UNDER THE HOOD

Three guitars and three different circuits

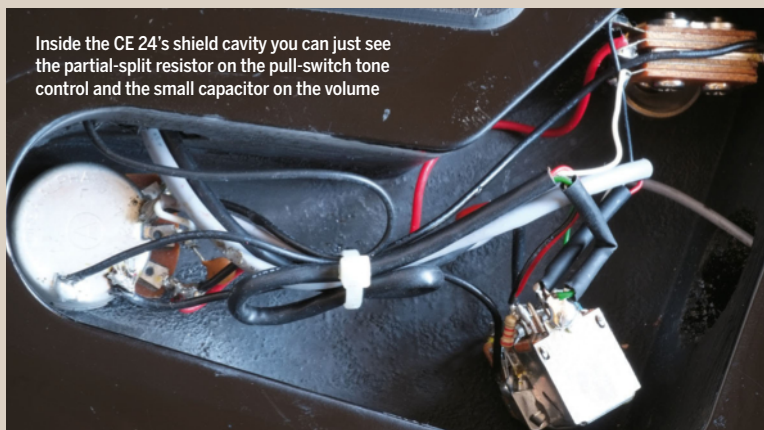
The SE CE 24 uses the standard PRS dual-humbucker wiring that the company has been implementing for years. A pull-switch on the tone control voices the inner slugs coils of both humbuckers simultaneously. These are partial-splits, which means that a little of the usually fully-dumped screw coil is left in circuit for a marginally fuller split sound; this happens via two resistors (a 2.2kohms for the bridge and 1.1k for the neck) between the junction of the dual coils and ground. Pots are 'Made in Korea' Alphas, both nominally 500k, and there's a .033µF capacitor on the tone control and 180pF treble-bleed capacitor on the volume: both PRS standards.

Along with a slightly different control layout and three-way lever (instead of three-way toggle pickup selector switch), the SE Custom 24 Quilt's circuit all looks the same until you realise those extra resistors are missing. This means the whole of the screw coils are dumped to ground in single-coil mode. Also, while we still have the same treble-bleed capacitor, there's a .022µF mylar capacitor on the tone control.

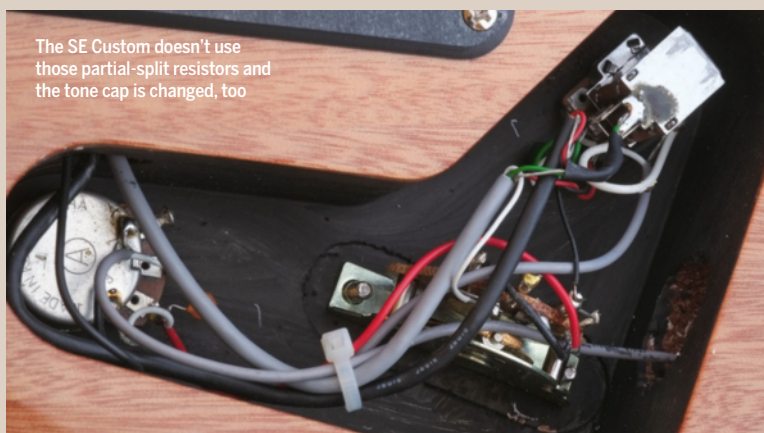
With our HSH Swamp Ash Special, the circuit appears to follow the original wiring back from 1996. So, again, we get the same master volume, tone and three-way toggle layout as the CE 24, and with the tone control pushed down we get the same bridge, both and neck humbuckers. But when you pull up the pull-switch on the tone control this changes to bridge humbucker plus centre single coil, all three pickups (with only the slug coil of the neck humbucker voiced) and, finally, middle single coil and that slug coil of the neck pickup. There's no way to voice the centre single coil on its own or any way to partially split the bridge humbucker – as a result there's only the 1.1k resistor for the neck pickup used for its partial-split.

The Swamp Ash Special also introduces a new pickup, the PRS-Designed AS-01 Single Coil 'S' in the middle position. "The AS-01 single coil features both Alnico and steel (hence the name), which add mass to the pickup helping to create a more powerful sound," says PRS. It's a theme we first saw on the SE Silver Sky's pickups where five small-diameter steel rods are placed in between the staggered height Alnico rod magnets to slightly increase the inductance of the pickup.

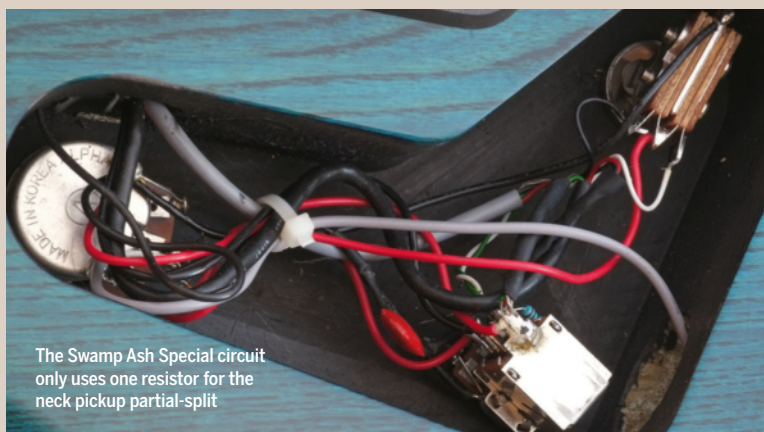
The Indonesian-made 85/15 'S' humbuckers are based on the USA pickups introduced back in 2015. PRS is scant with the details, describing them as "uncovered pickups designed to PRS's specifications with clarity and extended high and low-end – perfect for modern applications". As well as our review models, they're currently used on the Custom and Custom 'Floyd', and unlike the 58/15 'S' units they use four-conductor hook-up and no covers. They do sound a little 'hotter' than those 58/15 'S' pickups, which is backed up with a simple DCR reading at output: our bridge humbuckers measured between 7.65k and 7.86k and the neck pickups between 7.15k and 7.23k.



Inside the CE 24's shield cavity you can just see the partial-split resistor on the pull-switch tone control and the small capacitor on the volume



The SE Custom doesn't use those partial-split resistors and the tone cap is changed, too



The Swamp Ash Special circuit only uses one resistor for the neck pickup partial-split



With the Swamp Ash Special's neck pickup removed, you can see those additional steel rods within the bobbin





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4. While our CE 24 and Custom have 'old-school' (solid) pearloid bird inlays, the Swamp Ash Special uses fancier laminated abalone on its shorter 22-fret fingerboard

The Swamp Ash Special adds some rootsy character... it has that 'hot rod bolt-on' vibe and is the closest to our original 1988 Classic Electric

The CE 24 has four colour options, the Swamp Ash Special and Custom only three, and fairly obviously there are no opaque top colours, although both the CE 24 and Swamp Ash Special are offered in Vintage Sunburst, with cream switch tips and pickup rings, and amber speed knobs that recall PRS's earlier style.

### Feel & Sounds

Our three guitars arrive perfectly set up from PRS Europe and up to a point really do feel very similar indeed. The fretwork, all from the standard SE size, is nicely done, while the vibrato stability is impressive with minimal string stretching. There's a slight weight variance with the CE 24 being the lightest at 3.34kg (7.35lb), the Swamp Ash Special the heaviest at 3.86kg (8.49lb), and the Custom 24 in the middle at 3.43kg (7.55lb). The surprise here is the Swamp Ash Special because swamp ash is known as a lightweight wood as evidenced by the sub-3kg NF-53 and Miles Kennedy we looked at earlier in the year. However, an early Fiore we reviewed weighed 3.96kg (8.71lb), so 'variable' might be a better way to refer to its reputation.

The 22-fret fingerboard of the Swamp Ash Special means the neck sits slightly further into the body than the 24-fretters and allows the neck pickup to be placed further away from the bridge. Many will prefer the satin feel on the neck backs of the CE 24 and Swamp Ash Special, too, over the very shiny, glossed feel of the Custom 24, though we'd probably run a fine abrasive pad over those bolt-ons, just to smooth the slightly papery feel as if it had been played in a little.

The necks all use PRS's long-running Wide Thin profile and they're pretty similar, dimensionally. All have 36mm string spacing at the friction-reducing nut, and the string spacing at the bridge is 52.5mm. Actual nut widths are 43mm: the CE 24 is slightly under at 42.85mm, and the Swamp Ash Special and Custom are slightly over at 43.38mm and 43.3mm respectively. Likewise, the 1st-fret depths are a shade under 21mm, and at the 12th fret they're slightly over 22mm. In the hand, the C profile feels a little bigger than the dimensions suggest and, aside from the CE 24 needing a little more fingerboard edge rolling (it feels a little sharp),





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these Wide Thins come across as pretty mainstream do-it-all shapes.

And yet despite the specification similarities, this really is a disparate-sounding trio. At one extreme is the Custom 24, which has a really strong, strident voice at the bridge; it's clear and powerful. The neck has that same undercurrent but with some expected vocal warmth and there's good bounce from the middle both-on pairing. It's balanced and pretty big-sounding, which makes for a strong start. But with a switch to a subtly different neck pickup position, a maple fingerboard and different neck construction, the Swamp Ash Special adds some more rootsy character. It's somehow a little deeper sounding with a smidgeon of sparkle – very much that 'hot rod bolt-on' vibe and the closest to our original 1988 maple/alder Classic Electric. The actual SE CE 24 sort of sits in the middle, being a little 'looser' sounding than the Custom but with less of that scooped sparkle. It's a bit more direct sounding, though it's not quite as strong and strident as the Custom.

Listening to the additional sounds with the tone controls' pull-switches up and

5. This new AS-01 single coil uses additional steel rods in between the Alnico poles like the SE Silver Sky's single coils. Perhaps surprisingly, we can only hear it in combination with the neck or bridge pickup, not on its own

6. The new CE and Swamp Ash Special neck join is different from the original guitars. Here, the heel design originates from the 513 and the neck stops before the neck pickup





we have some further different shades. The simple full coil-splits of the Custom sound the brightest, and just pulling back the volume a tad helps to soften that bright edge. It's less bright on the CE 24 and the partial coil-splits do sound subtly fuller, too. But again, the Swamp Ash Special is the most notably different. With the pickup toggle in the 'neck' position we

get the slug coil of the neck pickup with the middle single coil. There's plenty of Fender-y bounce here, and even in the 'bridge' position – with the full bridge humbucker and middle single coil – there's that unmistakable Strat-iness, with a little bit of kick. In the middle 'both on' position that voices the slug coil of the neck pickup, the middle single coil *and* the full bridge humbucker, it's slightly sweeter perhaps than the 'neck' selection, but, for us, it's the least successful voice here.

### Verdict

There's little doubt that the SE range is leading the charge in terms of new PRS model additions. While we lose the Standard 24, Mira, Starla and Custom 22 Semi-Hollow from the line-up for the start of 2024, aside from our three reviewed additions, there are four new lefties to swell the ranks. It's an impressive range.

With only the SE Standard 24-08 below it on the price list at £675, the new SE CE 24 is very good value for money in anyone's book, not least that the standard SE Custom 24 has (four screws aside) a very similar spec and costs nearly 50 per cent more.

7. The original 1988 Classic Electric had a plain maple headstock like the SE Swamp Ash Special. The black-faced head soon followed and here it's a thin matt black plastic laminate

8. PRS is always very open about where its SE guitars are made, as the rear of the headstock demonstrates. None of our trio features locking tuners, although these are available as direct drop-ins from PRS

9. The standard PRS neck join – originally used on both glued-in neck and bolt-on neck models – means the neck extends into the body under the neck pickup







**PRS SE CE 24**

**PRICE:** £695 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on  
**BODY:** Mahogany back with maple top (w/figured veneer facing) and shallow violin carve  
**NECK:** Maple, Wide Thin profile, bolt-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 635mm (25")  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Friction reducing/42.9mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Rosewood, 'old school' bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius  
**FRETS:** 24, medium  
**HARDWARE:** PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed non-locking tuners – nickel-plated  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52.5mm  
**ELECTRICS:** PRS 85/15 'S' Treble and Bass humbuckers (open coil, double black bobbins); 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (w/ pull-switch to simultaneously coil-split both humbuckers)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.34/7.35  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** See SE Swamp Ash Special. Third bolt-on in the SE range is the SE Silver Sky (£979). USA CE 24 costs £2,569  
**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not this model  
**FINISHES:** Black Cherry (as reviewed), Turquoise, Blood Orange, Vintage Sunburst

**Guitarist CHOICE** 9/10

**PROS** Crisply executed; very much to the classic PRS recipe circa 1995; very good, versatile voices; easily upgradable

**CONS** We'd like a little more fingerboard edge rolling and some classic colours



**PRS SE SWAMP ASH SPECIAL**

**PRICE:** £979 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway solidbody electric, bolt-on  
**BODY:** Swamp ash w/ shallow violin top carve  
**NECK:** Maple, Wide Thin profile, bolt-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 635mm (25")  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Friction reducing/43.4mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Maple, laminated abalone bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius  
**FRETS:** 22, medium  
**HARDWARE:** PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed non-locking tuners – nickel-plated  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52.5mm  
**ELECTRICS:** PRS 85/15 'S' Treble and Bass humbuckers (open coil, double black bobbins); AS-01 single coil (middle), 3-way toggle pickup selector switch, master volume and tone (w/ pull-switch to add in middle pickup plus, in centre and neck positions, split the neck humbucker to single coil)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.86/8.49  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** The only other swamp ash guitars are in the USA range: Fiore (£2,829), NF-53 and Myles Kennedy signature (both £3,099)

**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not this model  
**FINISHES:** Iri Blue (as reviewed) Charcoal, Vintage Sunburst

**Guitarist CHOICE** 9/10

**PROS** Another smartly turned out returning model; superb satin neck feel; hot-rod meets single-coil sounds; essential PRS

**CONS** A little weighty; three-way toggle selector limits the switching potential



**PRS SE CUSTOM 24 QUILT**

**PRICE:** £1,079 (inc gigbag)  
**ORIGIN:** Indonesia  
**TYPE:** Double-cutaway solidbody electric  
**BODY:** Mahogany back with maple top (w/ quilt maple veneer facing) and shallow violin carve  
**NECK:** Maple, Wide Thin profile, glued-in  
**SCALE LENGTH:** 635mm (25")  
**NUT/WIDTH:** Friction reducing/43.3mm  
**FINGERBOARD:** Bound ebony, 'old school' bird inlays, 254mm (10") radius  
**FRETS:** 24, medium  
**HARDWARE:** PRS patented vibrato (cast), PRS designed non-locking tuners – nickel-plated  
**STRING SPACING, BRIDGE:** 52.5mm

**ELECTRICS:** PRS 85/15 'S' Treble and Bass humbuckers (open coil, double black bobbins); 3-way lever pickup selector switch, master volume, tone (w/ pull-switch to simultaneously coil-split both humbuckers)

**WEIGHT (kg/lb):** 3.43/7.55  
**RANGE OPTIONS:** Standard SE Custom 24 (£979); SE Custom 24-08 (£1,049), 'Floyd' version (£1,079)

**LEFT-HANDERS:** Not with quilt top; SE Standard 24-08 (£675), SE Custom 24 (£999), SE Custom 24-08 (£1,049) and SE Custom 24 Floyd (£1,079)  
**FINISHES:** Turquoise (as reviewed), Violet, Black Gold Sunburst

**Guitarist CHOICE** 9/10

**PROS** Hard to fault this version of PRS's classic; very clean build, good weight and versatile big rock voice with useful coil-split contrast

**CONS** Are the colours a little too Las Vegas?

The Custom 24 Quilt might basically only be a posh upgrade to the standard Custom 24, but it only adds £100 and if you want a taste of the USA Core level 'real thing', it's a very impressive guitar.

The Swamp Ash Special might be a game of two halves. While it captures the souped-up Fender-y vibe of the original model with strong humbucker sounds and very evocative mixes, some players might simply have preferred a standard five-way lever pickup selector switch with a pull-switch tone control. This is particularly true with regard to those who enjoy a bit of DIY modding, as that toggle switch is quite limiting for any future upgrades. It's also closer to the Custom in terms of price, and the weightiest of our trio.

We all hear things differently, but to sum up, the Custom 24 is your classic-to-modern rock friend with some clear single-coil options. If you need more 'single coil' but are still after the rock, it'd be the CE 24 we'd suggest. And if you want more of a Fender-y bolt on with some kick then the Swamp Ash Special might be your best option. There's no shortage of choice... in fact, perhaps there's too much! **G**