

The Washington Post

Robert Cray: What It Feels Like ... To Have Your Own Signature Guitar



Bluesman **Robert Cray** has had plenty of highlights in his 30-plus-year career -- Grammys, collaborations with the likes of Albert Collins, Eric Clapton and BB King -- but one of the most unique aspects of his career is that he has his own signature guitar, the [Fender Robert Cray Standard Stratocaster](#). How cool is that? I get lots of mail that doesn't even have my name spelled right. Cray is [at the Birchmere tonight](#) and has a [new album coming out next month](#). I got him on the phone for a brief chat about the science of his guitar. Gearheads take note.

"I was approached back in about '89 by a guy named John Grunder who worked at Fender at the time. He came up to me and said, We'd like to make a signature guitar, let's go to work on it. So I said, Sure, why not? I have a '64 Stratocaster that I played a lot and I had just purchased a '58 Strat. The '58 Strat is a hard-tail piece. The '64 Strat had a rosewood neck. So I asked them to kind of split it down the middle. Let's find a neck that's between the two that feels nice. And we put big, wide frets on it, with a custom pickup. And my choice of colors."

"So we had some made in the custom shop and worked on those for a while. Worked on the neck and the radius and all that. And then we decided to use a really nice maple neck with a Brazilian rosewood fingerboard. And then the choice of color which is silver ,and there's also a purple that I took from a swatch of shorts I was wearing. *(Laughs.)* And a sunburst. And I wanted gold hardware on it."

"There was a prototype. Then we went back and I changed the frets once again so there was a little bit wider fret. And I think we pretty much had it after that. It just feels good. That's the most important thing. For me, it's just a good workhorse. A Stratocaster's a good workhorse. I played Gibsons for a while before I got my first Strat in '79 and it was just too much work. When I'm at the microphone, I like that inline switch you just move it and you know where it is."

(More after the jump.)

"Everybody has their own likings; really, it's just the feel. I like my strings a little off the fingerboards. I use a little bit heavier string than most people. I don't use a whammy bar. I just like a pretty good workhorse. Then, you know, when it really comes down to it, as anyone will tell you, it all depends on the player that gets the tone out of it."

"I still use a variety of different guitars in the studio. They could be anything from Silvertones to Gibsons. I have a couple of James Trussart guitars, some older Strats. Or some really cheap, cheap, cheap \$50 guitars for what they offer."

"[For my model], I like it the way it is. The custom shop model, over the last few years, they've made a less expensive one from Mexico. That's been the only change. The thing about the Mexican-made one is that it still has the custom shop pickups in it. The pickups are handwound. And they have a nice sound. They're not your run-of-the-mill pickups."

"I'm a pretty simple guy. I mentioned those older Strats, I enjoy those. But the ones I play on stage, the signature models, they've replaced those older Strats that I used. For me, now, it doesn't make any sense to take an old guitar out. I have what I need and what I like. You don't have to be fussy about all kinds of stuff you don't need. When you're playing and you're singing at the microphone there's no time for messing around with other stuff."

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