

PICKUP MASTERCLASS

PAUL ALCANTARA TALKS TO PICKUP GURU CURTIS NOVAK TO GET THE LOWDOWN ON VINTAGE TONE

Back in the 1950s and early 1960s, guitarists rarely altered the electronics that were factory-fitted to their instruments. A Fender sounded like a Fender and a Gibson sounded like a Gibson. You bought the brand that best suited your playing style and that was that.

Mavericks like Eddie Cochran and surf legend Dick Dale were bold enough to tinker with their guitars, but the average player's understanding of pickups and wiring was basic at best, and few – having saved for months to buy a shiny new Fender Stratocaster or Gibson ES-335 – would have dared molest their prized possession with a screwdriver or soldering iron!

The 1970s saw Gibson and Fender hit an all-time low in terms of quality control, and as a result, professional musicians began turning to instruments manufactured in the preceding decades. The nascent vintage market fostered the idea that old equalled better (which at that time was more often than not the case), and by the close of the decade, manufacturers like DiMarzio and Seymour Duncan were offering replacement pickups that promised to improve the sound and performance of your guitar. Not everyone could afford a 1959 Les Paul Standard, the thinking went, but a set of PAF-style ('Patent Applied For') humbuckers might just sprinkle a little vintage magic on to your brand-new Les Paul.

Today an entire industry has grown up around the manufacture of replacement pickups. Increasing sophistication on the part of musicians has fuelled the proliferation of boutique manufacturers, all striving to unravel the secret of Gibson's legendary PAF humbucker and Fender's fabled pre-CBS single-coils.

Here we chat with pickup guru Curtis Novak in attempt to separate some of the facts from the fiction that

has grown up around the replacement pickup industry, and, on page 102, we'll take a look at two sets of his vintage Tele-style pickups.

HOW DID YOU GET INTO WINDING PICKUPS IN THE FIRST PLACE?

"I've been restoring vintage guitar finishes for over 25 years, with a special interest in doing them as close as possible to the original materials and process. As a result, I have had the privilege of working on, and playing, many vintage pieces. Sadly, the current value of vintage guitars means that few players will ever get a chance to play a '50s Fender Stratocaster or Telecaster.

"There is a marked difference between an all-original vintage guitar and a reissue. Despite all the advertising and publicity claims, most stuff produced today lacks that vintage tone. The simple fact is that old manufacturing methods don't lend themselves to mass production. My typical customer likes the feel of the new guitars but complains that the pickups lack colour and response. Gigging musicians who own vintage guitars are often reluctant to take them on the road."

WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS THAT DEFINE A PICKUP'S CHARACTER?

"The magnets and the coil shape. There are two main types of magnet – bar and rod. Each creates a completely different magnetic field. The bar magnet, which Gibson generally used, delivers more of a dirty, overdriving sound, whereas the rod magnets traditionally favoured by Fender produce a cleaner, bell-like tone.

"The coil shape will also affect the tone, but not to the extent that the magnets do. For example, a Strat coil, which is tall and narrow, senses a smaller area of the string than the pickups fitted to Jazzmasters, which have flat, wide coils that sense a much

larger string area and focus less on one localised spot.

"This difference between coil shapes is more subtle than the difference between magnets. For example, a Jazzmaster pickup and a Gibson P-90 have very similar coil patterns but sound completely different. This is because the Jazzmaster uses rod magnets and the P-90 uses bar magnets."

WHY DO VINTAGE PICKUPS SOUND DIFFERENT FROM THEIR MODERN EQUIVALENTS?

"I feel that this has more to do with the winding process than anything else. I have personally wound pickups using a machine and by hand, and although the machine process is much more efficient, I just didn't like the tone of the finished pickups. It has been suggested that aged magnets make vintage pickups sound better, but if that were the case, Strats built in the '70s and '80s would be sounding as good as '50s and '60s guitars by now. They don't. Hank Marvin's Strat sounded great when it was brand-new!

"To my ear, scatter-wound pickups sound better. With a machine-wound pickup a cam repeatedly lays each wrap right next to the previous wrap. I think this causes signal bleed and interference – much like the effect you get when you run an antenna wire parallel to another wire. With a pickup that's been wound by hand you have a random 'scattered' pattern that reduces the contact point between each wrap, and in turn, reduces interference."

WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THE TREND TOWARDS 'HOTTER' REPLACEMENT PICKUPS?

"A pickup is *not* an output device! People often evaluate a pickup in terms of its output while overlooking its input properties. You never see microphones rated on their

CURTIS NOVAK TELE-STYLE PICKUPS

THE PROOF OF THE PUDDING...

■ We couldn't resist trying out some of Novak's pickups, and plumped for two different sets of Tele single-coils, as Curtis himself explains.

"The set of pickups with the white cotton wrap uses Alnico-V magnets with 42-gauge wire for the bridge pickup and 43-gauge wire at the neck. The pickups with the black cotton wrap are Broadcaster-style. They have Alnico-II magnets and thinner magnet wire that's wound to a higher number of turns. In theory, the weaker magnets give a little less individual string definition, while the higher resistance from the wire makes the pickup a little 'edgier'.

"The pickups with the white wrap are voiced to give a traditional vintage Tele tone, while the other set are a little closer to the tone favoured by Roy Buchanan – though, of course, Roy could make any Tele sound great! To be honest, the difference between the two sets is subtle and I'm not sure

that most players would hear it in a blind comparison. Both sets have a neck pickup that is wound to match the bridge unit. I'm not looking for a pickup with one particular tone, but one that can cover the full spectrum, just as the original Fender pickups did."

We installed the featured Novak pickups in an early 1980s Tokai Tele, and whatever Curtis is doing, he's certainly doing something right!

Both sets delivered an authentic Tele tone that's as close to vintage as we have heard from a modern pickup. There's plenty of detail, snap and twang, but with an overall fatness that's patently lacking in much of the competition. Though Telecasters are often pigeonholed as country guitars – and, indeed, they excel in that area – the Novak Tele-style single-coils are ballsy enough to land you a deal with Old Nick down at the crossroads!



■ Hand-wound, signed and dated – celebrate your pickup's birthday!



■ Novak's workshop is packed with pickups, wires... and vintage Fenders

output volumes, so why do we rate pickups that way? One serious drawback of an over-wound pickup is that the mid-range is increased, while the highs and lows fall off. This leaves you with a one-trick pony.

"You want a tone spectrum that's as pure, clean and wide as you can get. From there you can sculpt your tone using the amplifier or outboard effects. Chris Duarte, a great player with that massive Austin tone, told me that my pickups were the closest thing to his 1963 Stratocaster that he had ever heard. He was shocked to learn that I did not over-wind them. Later, I did some repair work on his 1963 Strat and noticed that the middle pickup read at a low [impedance of] 5.09k! The only consistent thing I've noticed that creates the vintage tone we all love is to wind a pickup the old-fashioned way. There's no shortcut."

WHAT DOES THE FUTURE HOLD?

"People are always surprised to learn that it's just me working out of my shop in the evenings and weekends,

because I still have a full-time day job [Curtis tells us that he has recently quit his day job to focus on pickup production full-time]. I do everything by hand, one pickup at a time, and all of my work is wound to the customer's specs. I believe that you can't find your tone shrink-wrapped on a shelf, so I don't have a 'line of pickups'.

"Over the past few years my volume of work has greatly increased, and as a consequence, my turnaround times have slipped from three days to around one to two weeks. I'm currently working out my day job so I can do pickups full-time, and hope to bring my turnaround times back down. I also enjoy repairing unusual vintage pickups – not just the standard Gibson and Fender pickups. Most people regard these pickups as a waste of time, but I've learned a lot from them." **GB**

CONTACT:

CURTIS NOVAK CLASSIC PICKUPS

■ PHONE: +1 828 396 3626

■ WEB: www.curtisnovak.com

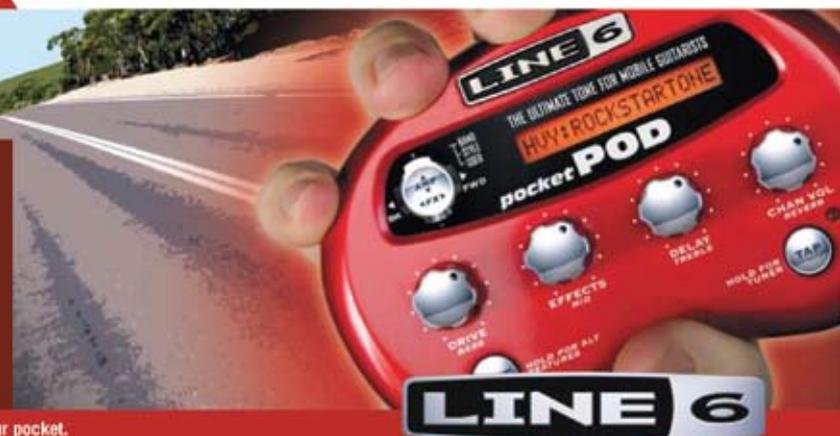
www.line6.com

POCKET POD®

ONE FOR THE ROAD

With Line 6, you've always been able to get BIG guitar tones without the BIG studio. Now we're putting our award-winning POD in the palm of your hand. Pocket POD delivers all your favourite amps and effects alongside hundreds of presets dialled in by rock stars and studio musicians. It's platinum tone for when you need to travel light.

Check it out at www.line6.com



32 amp models, 16 classic effects and exclusive rock star presets. Make some room in your pocket.