Subject: Buying pick-ups
Posted by Lyrica on Fri, 28 May 2010 04:04:59 GMT
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My husband's birthday is coming up and he wants a new pick-up for his Fender Stratocaster. He wants the versatility of clean, bright sounds and fat distortion. Where do I begin?

Subject: Re: Buying pick-ups
Posted by Thermionic on Sat, 29 May 2010 07:13:33 GMT
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Hi Lyrica,

Both Seymour Duncan and DiMarzio make excellent pickups, and are the two chief brands used by professional guitarists. Sweetwater (my favorite) and Musician's Friend are excellent online dealers, and both have knowledgeable salespeople who can help you.

By mentioning "a new pick-up" (in the singular sense, not plural), I presume you're referring to the Strat's bridge pickup. If so, the starting point would be whether the guitar has the classic Strat configuration of 3 single coils, or a humbucker (two coils side-by-side) in the bridge position as found in certain modern Stratocaster models. By your description it sounds as if he has the 3 single coils, and is looking for a bit more meat on the bones but doesn't want to lose the bright clean sound.

Single coils have a bright, clear, chimey tone, while humbucking pickups have a fatter, warmer, more powerful tone. It's nearly impossible to have both in the same pickup; they tend to be one or the other. Single coils don't do fat distorted leads, and humbuckers don't do crisp, bright clean tones. Any attempt at coaxing more "meatiness" and power from a single coil will kill its clarity and brightness, likewise, trying to extract more chime and clarity from a humbucker will kill its fat tone. EVERYTHING is a trade-off. Those pesky laws of physics just won't bend for anyone....

A good compromise (if the particular guitar has a single coil pickup in the bridge position) is a stacked-coil or side-by-side coil humbucker that will fit in the existing single coil pickguard opening. A great side-by-side I can recommend is the Seymour Duncan SVR-1 Vintage Rails, which retains much of the basic transparency and brightness of a single coil, yet with a thicker distorted tone. Also good is the Seymour Duncan Lil' Screamin' Demon, which has a more modern tone than the Vintage Rails, with slightly less highs, more midrange, and higher output for a punchier distorted tone.

Do note, neither of these is quite as bright and clean as a true single coil pickup, although both sound fatter. However, they do have the ability to give you some versatility by switching one of the coils off, called "coil-tapping." The drawback is that because the two individual coils of a side-by-side are tiny compared to a true single coil pickup, you'll have a rather thin sound with low output power when playing in single coil mode.

The coil tap trick can be done with a miniature toggle switch, which is easily be installed on a Strat pickguard by drilling a single hole. Or, you can replace the volume pot with a pull-switch pot, in

which case you simply pull up on the knob for single coil mode and push it down for humbucking (or vice versa). The mini-toggle is more positive and easier to switch quickly while playing, but it always seems to be somewhat in the way (at least to me, anyway). The pull-pot method looks just like a stock guitar, but it's not as quick and easy to cleanly pull the knob up while playing, especially when you must do it really fast. More compromises!

A stacked humbucker sounds more like a true single coil pickup in that it's cleaner and brighter than a side-by-side humbucker, but also has a less fat distorted tone. A great stacked humbucker is the DiMarzio HS-2, which is slightly fatter and warmer than a true single coil, and has higher output. However, you can also coil-tap it, and when you do it just about nails the tone of a good true single coil.

Which of the two single coil sized humbucker configurations is optimal will depend on what type of music he plays, and whether a crisp, bright, clean sound or a chunky, fat distorted sound is the most important to him. Whatever you choose, make sure it's for a Strat specifically, and be sure to indicate whether you need black or white because they come in both colors. Also, you may need to specify that it's for the bridge position (if that's indeed what you need).

If you have any further questions, please don't decline to post them! We're glad to help.

Thermionic

Subject: Re: Buying pick-ups
Posted by Lyrica on Sun, 30 May 2010 05:45:06 GMT
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Thermionic, your knowledge is confounding me...in a good way! I shall re-read your post and check out the online dealers you suggested and hopefully I'll find one he likes. Thanks so much for all your help.

Subject: Re: Buying pick-ups
Posted by Lyrica on Wed, 02 Jun 2010 01:24:45 GMT
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I finally made a decision. I checked out Sweetwater and I think I'm going with the DiMarzio Area '61. Again, thanks for your help and I've added Sweetwater to my favs.

Subject: Re: Buying pick-ups
Posted by Thermionic on Fri, 04 Jun 2010 02:47:57 GMT
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Howdy Lyrica,

I'm sure the Area '61 will be absolutely fantastic. If I understand correctly, it's supposedly even a

bit better than the HS-2, which is one of my most beloved pickups. He'll love it.

Thermionic