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I Use Gibson Pick-Ups, Why?

By Michael Tafoya

For years or decades I've played electric guitar in bands at bars, schools, concerts and recording

sessions yet I couldn't tell you what pick-ups (p/u's) were about. I mean, I didn't have a clue as to what a pick-up did what to my sound. I grew up in a Gibson family. I mean that my relatives, when they didn't ridicule me for my participation as a rock and roll guitar player, said if I played a guitar, it had to be a Gibson. So, I only had a clue about humbucker type pick-up's Gibson used. Oh yeah, it's little brother the P-90.

My first electric was a Tiesco Del Ray I got for Christmas in 1967. I did get a Mattel Tiger guitar that was made of plastic and used a contact type pick-up. My brother and I each got one that XMAS so often times we'd use one of the pick-up's as a vocal mic.

Those days' electric strings were extremely limited in types and gauges available to young poor city folk like yours truly. I think I only remember Gibson, Fender and Black Diamond strings. This is before the Maestro Fuzz and the Vox Wha-Wha were available to the buying public like me. Back to pick-up's!

With the limited info as to how the stars were getting "THAT SOUND" we just kept trying to learn guitar without "how to" magazines and poor sounding phonograph players playing 45's on a tiny speaker. You could say there was no reason to discern between p/u's.

In the mid 70's I was already playing full time and knew about vintage Les Pauls and the legendary PAF pick-up's that were installed in them. Around that time a N.Y. Co. was making a name for them selves as a replacement for your non- Gibson brand type (humbucking) pick-up, DeMarzio. I ended up buying one for my 76 Explorer. Mind you I owned since the mid 60's, a late 50's Epiphone symmetric cherry finish Coronet with a, I think someone called it a cobalt pick-up. It is referred to as the "P-90", or "soap bar" single coil type pick-up. I loved that guitar and its sound. I just thought I should have a "real vintage" sounding guitar with a humbucking p/u installed. I also owned a Les Paul Deluxe with the mini humbuckers. It sounded great, I just thought it should have full sized p/u's to sound and look right. To quote Ian Hunter in the mid 70,s, "Rock guitarist's seem to have this Gibson fetish", and I did! I wanted the "look".

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Gil Pini, the other Guitarist playing with me was using the DeMarzio super Distortion humbucking , and I for some reason didn't feel good about it's sound and feel, although it was touted as "heaven sent " sort of thing, especially for Marshall amplifiers back then (no master volume on the pre-amp stage). I eventually purchased a Super 2 p/u, because it had more bite. And to me, meant, it would cut through cleaner and not be as transparent in the mix. I even bought the Alembic `Hot Rod Kit" for my 56 Les Paul Jr. (stupid) in 1976 or 77. That was supposed to be a good idea because it was hotter (better sounding) with a ceramic magnet to install, and since it was from Alembic (from California) and not some "upstart p/u manufacturer" it was the right thing to do. I didn't think about the DeMarzio pick-up's and I didn't know that those pick-up's used the ceramic magnets at the time.

As I started to record in major recording studios I'd learn to discern my sound. I didn't have those how to magazines to hip me to that elusive vintage "sound". Yet, I could hear my Gibson Explorer and my Les Paul Jr. distorting at all volume levels as well as attack approach. It just wouldn't smooth out. I was

puzzled. Still trying to connect the look with the sound, I stumbled through the maze for years.

Not having the patience, or the money to buy and compare p/u's, I just tried to make a sound with what I had. I had all the right Pro equipment. Yet I was looking back, "wagging the dog".

A good sound starts from the fingers, to the guitar to the P/u's. If you don't start there, you're spinning in circles and you'll end up with a transparent (fuzzy) sound without body and response. "Your fingers are your tone generators". Not the amps or pedals. Those are tools to augment your expression. And if you learn anything about trouble shooting on the fly, you go down the line to find the problem with your sound or rig. The same goes for finding your sound. When establishing your sound you start with you, through the pick-up on down to the amp. With trouble shooting on stage, you should start with the amp and go down the line back to you. Which makes sense since you've established your rig set up, and you're trying to fix what was working, you back track. If not, you're spinning in circles, again!

So, I had a friend who made the point about how some pick-up's play you and PAF's don't. I soon tried two 57 Classic pick-up's installed on my 92 Les Paul Classic and what do you know? I had a sound that was tight on the bottom ringing on the top and honking clear / dirty mids when I played hard, and subtle soft tones when I backed off the and played lightly. I was in HEAVEN!! And the great thing that went with it was that, this same thing happened regardless of the volume setting on the guitar.

My experience was that the tone I got on full could be bright and tight with honk, and as soon as I backed off the guitar's volume, the tone would take on a dark or dull shade. This meant I would spend a lot of time tweaking the blend between my rhythms (clean and crunch) and lead tones. Looking for each was a drag, and a waste of time!

I'm no tech. so I can't and won't waste your time with my take of their specs. I do know that there's something about the combination of the enamel coated copper wire and the alnico magnets that give me a sound I can play with and use dynamics. It was soon after I started using the Gibson 57 Classic pick-up, that Gibson came out with their 57 Classic plus. This p/u was designed as a bridge p/u.

In the 50;s the gals at the pick-up dept. would wind these pick-up's using an egg timer or something

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like that. Sometimes they'd be distracted and some pick-up's would end up with more winds. Other times they would end up with less.

The p/u's with more sounded "hotter" and when people started going for the tone, they'd notice the sound of certain pick-up's compared to others. It wasn't rocket science to come up with the idea to put one of those "hot" pick-up's in the bridge position you would have a bright, tight, and honk'n lead tone where there wasn't. And a whole new sub market in `vinatge' pick-up's ` came about.

Which brings us full circle, "I use Gibson Pick-ups and I'm sure that the other brands quality alnico pick-ups are a good sounding product. I do know what sounds good to me and what I know from "my" experience. I'm a guitarist who's been around the block and my ears have a sense as to what a pick-up should sound like, that's what I go for all the time.

Make your self happy and keep the communication's open!

Michael Tafoya is a two time Epic recording artist. He uses Gibson Guitars, Gibson Strings, Epiphone,

Marshall, and Crate amplifiers, and Dunlop guitar Picks.

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A Brief Overview Of Gibson Guitars

By Chad Taylor

One could argue that over the past 100 years no guitar company has been copied more often than Gibson guitars. Of course they say that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. Ever since Gibson began making guitars in the early 1900s (with their roots going back to the late 1800s), their styles have been copied many times over. So why is it that so many companies copy the look and feel of Gibson guitars?

Well the most obvious reason is that they make guitars that look very cool and play extremely well. Many different artists over the years have endorsed various types of Gibson models, including Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Angus Young, and Slash, among others. In addition, many of their designs have been fairly innovative. The Les Paul is arguably the most well known guitar in the world and its style has been copied many times over by many guitar companies, sometimes even resulting in lawsuits. The Explorer and Flying V models also come to mind as two of the more innovative guitar designs of the last century.

Gibson is also recognized as the company that created the "humbucking" pickup in the 1950s, which is a pickup that is designed in such a way to cancel or eliminate the excess hum caused by early single coil pickups (i.e. "buck the hum").

But perhaps the main reason that they've been copied so often is that the prices of a lot of their guitars

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are extremely expensive. Many companies as a result would offer similar guitars but at a drastically reduced price, including well known guitar companies such as Ibanez and Paul Reed Smith. Gibson does however have a subsidiary company, Epiphone, that is allowed to build very similar models to the more expensive models. They are able to build these replicas cheaply using overseas labor in countries such as China and Japan.

In any case, Gibson continues to make high quality guitars that are known the world over and their popularity has made Gibson a household name. And there is no reason to believe that they won't continue to make their guitars long into the future!

Read more articles by Chad Taylor and read reviews of Gibson Guitars at

http://www.guitar-resource-center.com/gibson_guitars.html



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