

INSIDE

Have you mastered the emotion of tone?

All the guitars and all the tone – The Rick Vito Interview, live from Nash Vegas...

9

ACME Guitar Works Finally – meticulously crafted pre-wired pickguards with the top custom pickups, blender pots & more!

16

The Coil Chronicles... Our recommendations for Strat, Tele & Humbucking Pickups, plus wiring diagrams!

19

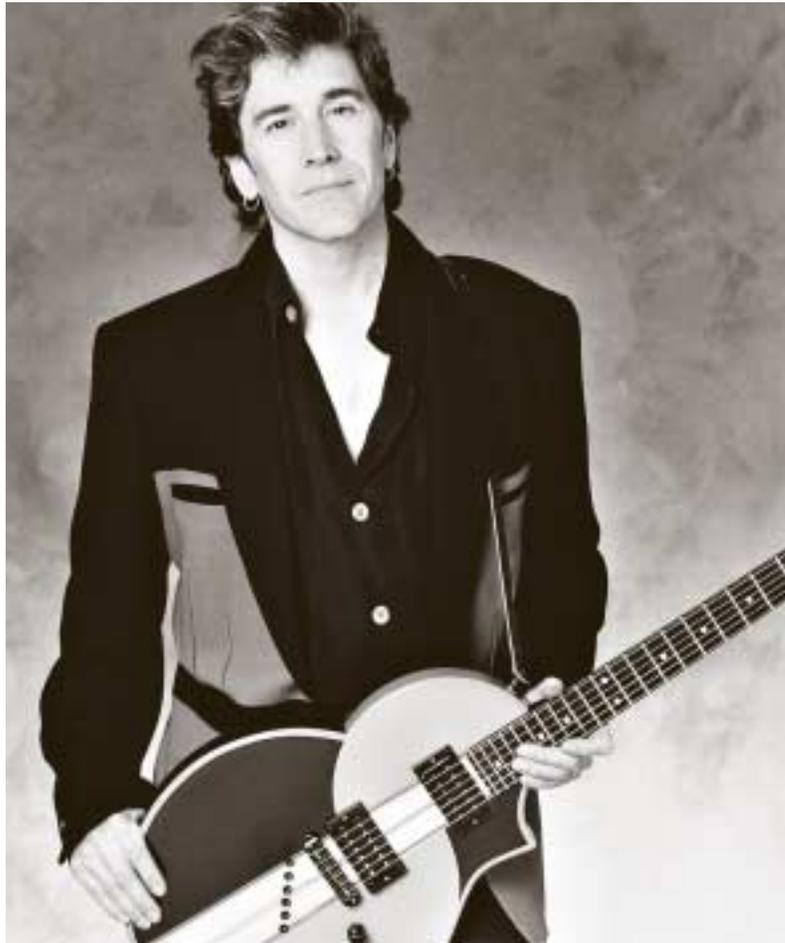
Review The Headstrong Lil' King... The '64 Princeton Reverb returns better than ever.

the ToneQuest

The Player's Guide to Ultimate Tone Report™
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Rick Vito

At the very least, the mark of a good guitarist is one who resists getting in the way of the song. Truly extraordinary guitarists play for the song, too, but when the red light is on they seem to pull something profoundly unique from within that lingers in our memories with the passage of time. Rick Vito is a great guitarist. He is also a hopeless gear head, which makes his presence on the cover of this issue perfectly appropriate, if a bit overdue.



Danny Flowers first gave us a nudge in Vito's direction with an e-mail message that said, "He's got all the guitars..." Should you take the time to sample Rick Vito's varied recordings with Bob Seger, Fleetwood Mac, Delbert McCClinton, Jackson Browne and his four solo records, you'll also be struck by the fact that he is unencumbered by any stylistic shortcomings on the guitar. Vito clearly knows all the historical

nuances of guitar tone cold and how to create them. He may indeed have "all the guitars," but more important – he has "all the tones," and regardless of how much gear one may hoard over the years, you must be capable of understanding the emotion of tone before you can truly create it. Rick Vito gets this. He could sit in and flawlessly mesh with Django and Grapelli, Willie Dixon, T Bone Walker, Bob Wills, Milton Brown, Ry Cooder, David Lindley or Eldon Shamblin,

breeze through a catalog of Motown tracks, tear through southern rock and the California side of slide spawned by Lowell George and Bonnie Raitt, and we would still only have scratched the surface of his working knowledge of the guitar.



All of us have heard one of Rick Vito's most legendary session tracks – the slide riffs on Bob Seger's "Like a Rock." As Rick observed, the song has become an anthem for Chevy trucks and largely forgotten as anything else, but when you consider the timing of the original release

and the guitar tone and unforgettable hook he created, "Like a Rock" must be counted among the most identifiable and memorable guitar riffs ever recorded. (And in fairness to Seger, we can vividly recall the years when he tirelessly pounded up and down the two lane roads of the Midwest playing dumps like the Indiana National Guard Armory, opening for Dr. John the Night Tripper, way before he ever cashed a check from General Motors...)

Perhaps you've noticed that the music business in America has hit the wall. Flatlined. The big sell out shamelessly rages on, promoting trashy little girls who can't sing, gangsta rhymes and subwoofer mixes while the real players wait it out as best they can making independent recordings and finding the occasional gig worth playing. Or working in Europe, where one of our greatest exports (music) is still valued with the reverence and enthusiasm it deserves. As Phil Brown said, "The people working in the record business today couldn't hear a car crash." But we needn't despair. There are enough Rick Vitos in this world making great music to feed our hunger for cool tunes played with conviction and style if we will only recognize and support them. So please settle back and savor our personal introduction to Rick Vito – a man who has indeed held on to all the guitars, and all the tones. We sincerely wish the same for you in 2005. Enjoy...

TQR: Where did you grow up and how were you first exposed to music and the guitar?

I grew up alternating between the Philadelphia area and Wildwood, N.J. in the summer months. Both locations had

musical significance for me. Philadelphia in the fifties was the home of "American Bandstand," which started out as a local show broadcast every day after school let out. When rock & roll broke out, so did Bandstand, and virtually all talent in the U.S. came to Philly for national TV exposure. I watched practically every day and took it all in, the music, the dances, the styles. It really affected me. My mom loved music and always had records playing, so along with rock & roll, I was exposed to Frank Sinatra, the Mills Brothers, Peggy Lee, and all the pop from the late forties and early fifties. I remember the 78 RPM record we had of Rosemary Clooney singing "Come On-A My House," that scared and fascinated me. Why did she want me to "come on-a her house?" I still love that one!

My mother had played the lap Hawaiian guitar back in the mid thirties as a kid on the radio, and we still had her old Oahu acoustic. I remember taking it out and smelling the inside of the body. The scent was like nothing else, all woody, dark, and compelling. I plunked out a few notes of "La Cucaracha" on it, as I guess it was still tuned to a chord, but the strings were too high to press down so I was stuck with that one melody. I have our old home movies from 1957 that shows me doing "Elvis" in our tiny living room with that guitar, jumping all around and going wild. That was my first performance, I guess, as an Elvis impersonator.

During the summer we went down the shore to Wildwood. My grandmother had a corner taproom with a Seeburg juke box that lit up and played real loud. At the end of the season we got to keep the records and I still have many of them, including all the original Little Richard ones on Specialty. I



really liked Chuck Berry, Duane Eddy, and Ricky Nelson. I should point out that I was also a faithful watcher of "Ozzie & Harriet" so that I could see and hear Ricky with James Burton on lead at the finale of every episode. Since everyone called me "Ricky" then, I felt a real

affinity with that rockabilly thing they did. I'd have to say that both Philly and the shore were very hip places musically in those days and all the local deejays played the coolest mix of R&B, doo-wop, and rock & roll. Without really realizing it at the time, DJs like Jerry Blavat exposed me to a lot of New Orleans R&B, New York street corner singing, and some great local music that you wouldn't hear anywhere else.

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TQR: When and how did you first become introduced to the guitar, and what was your very first instrument?

Well, my mother, bless her heart, took that old Oahu Hawaiian guitar to a local music store and traded it for my first guitar which was a student model blonde Stella, and gave it to me at Christmas in 1957. I started lessons in January 1958 with a man called Mr. Lewis who gave me a simple melody that I had to learn and figure out what song it was. It hurt like hell to press those strings down, but after a week I got it. It was "Catch A Falling Star" by Perry Como. Kind of a mind-expanding way to introduce a kid to music, I think. But I was a terrible student and gave it up when summer rolled around, but not before my mom traded the Stella for a sunburst Harmony f-hole model. That was definitely an improvement and easier to play. It was probably the beginning, though, of this very advanced sickness I have which forces me to buy and sell guitars with every passing whim. Blame it on my mom! I got back into it when I was ten. Someone showed me how you play chords under the melody of the song "Summertime," and it all clicked for me. "Ah, that's how you do it!" Then I found I had an ear and could decipher the chords of most rock & roll songs, and I've never put the guitar down since.

TQR: What types of music did you pursue?



Along with what I've already mentioned, I can tell you that I really liked my mom's Les Paul and Mary Ford records, which I also still have. They were also on a local radio commercial for "Robert Hall" clothiers singing "...when the value goes up, up, up, and the prices go down, down, down..." with Les doing the crescendoes up and down to follow the lyrics. I thought he was the fastest guitarist on the planet, not knowing that the tape was speeded up to get that effect. Eventually, I worked out tunes from the radio like "Rebel Rouser," "Walk Don't Run," and bits of Chuck Berry. I remember one of the bartenders in my grand-mom's bar making a strong impression as a Chuck Berry record was playing on the juke box. He said, "If you can play guitar like that, then you can really play the guitar!" From that point I'd have to say that I took every opportunity to learn as much of Chuck's style as I could, but it didn't come that easy. He's a deceptively simple player, with a lot more going on than many have given him credit for.

The first real live rock & roll show I saw was around 1959 at the Steel Pier in Atlantic City. For one price you got to see the diving horse, a movie, ("Ma & Pa Kettle On The Farm") and then the stage show, which that day was the Everly Brothers. It was loud and cool, kids were yelling, and the lead guitar player jumped all around playing (I later found out) a white Supro Dual-tone! I was totally captivated and excited and knew I had to have an electric guitar after that. I finally did get one maybe six months later.



After I got that first electric – a fifties Gibson 125, I would get together with a couple of kids who played a little and we would try and learn a few things. It was very difficult to figure out how to play as a unit and I guess we didn't get very far, but it was also fun just playing loud through my little Alamo wood amplifier along with real drums

and another guitarist. The drummer's brother was older and had a real band that actually worked and we would listen to them rehearse, picking up a few things here and there. I remember him telling me that when you play in night clubs you had to play, "like this," and they started off what I realized later was a slow blues. First time I ever heard that. It sounded pretty sexy, and I thought, "Wow, there's more to this musician thing than I thought!" I didn't know what that was exactly, but gradually I started being privy to the older guys' conversations about the girls they were dating. That pulled me in even more! I remember bringing my guitar to school and playing in the front of the class with another kid. I was encouraged because the nun told me I was good, and so



did a couple of the girls. I mean, that's how it starts right? Play guitar, girls notice you...

I played my first real gig a couple of years later with some guys my age who sang Doo-wop. I had met a guy in a soda shop as I was sitting next to a juke box playing guitar with a friend. Later, I ran into him again and he told me that he could tell from listening to me that I

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knew enough guitar to back up his singing group. So I went to their rehearsal and we played and sang for about five straight hours. We wore long leather coats, really tight pants and cuban-heel shoes. Our hair was combed back, slick and high, and we did our best to look the part. That was "Johnny and the Inspirations," and we hung out at a place called "Donutland" where we had our name painted huge on the wall. Except one of the singers spelled it as "Johnny and the Inspations!" At our first gig I realized that we didn't sound as great as we thought we did in the Donutland bathroom where the echo was big, and people were boogie us. It's a wonder I stayed with it after that, but I did.

TQR: How did your early interest in performing develop into a career?

I started playing semi-professionally in high school and got my union card. I was playing in a band backing a singer who had sung on a local record, "The Wizard of Love," by the Lydells. So we became The Lydells and did gigs presided over by a Philly DJ called Hy Lit. We played proms and store openings and his local TV show. I started meeting people in show business like Neil Diamond (who gave me a \$5 bill for an "E" string when he broke his), Joey Heatherton, and various national acts. By then my parents had their own nightclub in Wildwood called "The Glass Bar," which was successful in the sixties. I got to hear great bands play there like The Jaguars, who had a great Tele-man, and finally got a gig with the Lydells there. This was the "go-go" era, and we played sandwiched in between two cages holding shimmying go-go dancers. Pretty eye-opening for a young guy, I'll tell you.

Around this time I met a guy in Wildwood who was totally into guitars, like tearing them apart and seeing what made them tick. He was a guitar nut like me. He gave me a proof sheet of the Rolling Stones he had photographed which I still have. This made a strong impression because I was learning a lot from those Stones records, especially because Keith played those Chuck Berry riffs so well. Anyway, this guy was Seymour Duncan! I lost touch with him until 1975 when he

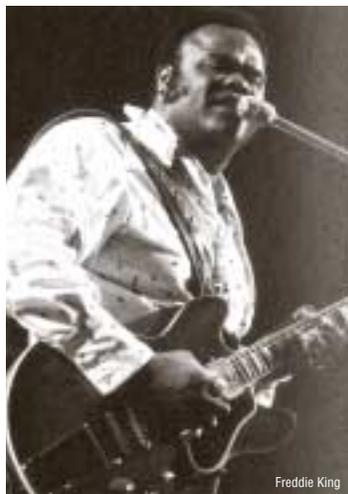


BB King

tapped on my shoulder in Topanga Canyon in L.A. and asked if I still played a Tele!

In college I started getting really serious about playing, and I was studying what made a great blues player. I bought every B.B.

King, Butterfield Band, Taj Mahal record I could find. If it was blues I bought it and learned how to differentiate between the styles as best I could. I really loved B.B., Freddy, and Albert King (who doesn't – but it was new to me then), Jesse Ed Davis, Peter Green, Earl Hooker, Elmore James, Buddy Guy, all those cats. I had seen Freddy King on a TV show called "The Beat" and this was the first real blues performer I had ever seen. He was so animated and funky, and I tried to keep up with all his licks. I have copies of that show from 1966 now, and realized that the house guitarist was "Gatemouth" Brown, and the bassist was Billy Cox. This



Freddie King

was like a chitlin' circuit version of prime-time shows like Shindig and Hullabaloo, only about ten times cooler. I used to go to Philly to see all the happening acts in the late sixties at a place called "The Electric Factory." I saw John Hammond Jr. And the Screaming Nighthawks, Eric Clapton with Cream, Jeff Beck Group, Ten Years After, Chambers Brothers –

everybody really. The ones that made the strongest impression on me were Jimi Hendrix and Peter Green with Fleetwood Mac. Those two guys had it all. Hendrix was the most talented guy overall I've ever seen – he had charisma you couldn't believe, taste, tone, dynamics, originality, songs, a great voice, and he was a master showman. No one else has had all that in one package. Peter had much of that but was tastier, more reserved, and gave me a sense of what I could do with my talent. I related to him more than the others.

With all these influences, I started to think seriously that I could make it in the big time myself, although I had no idea of how I would do this. I had a good band in college, The Wright Brothers, and we had the pleasure of being on the same bill both with Muddy Waters and John Hammond, and we did OK. Guys in Muddy's band, like Luther "Georgia Boy" Johnson and Pee Wee Madison, were complimentary to me, which was encouraging. Soon after that I got wind of a record by a group called Delaney & Bonnie & Friends (featuring Eric Clapton) from a friend at school, Robin Flores, who had seen them. They were doing something very close musically to what I liked, mixing a lot of roots American influences. That summer I heard they were coming to play nearby, so I made up my mind to go early to their sound check and introduce myself, lugging a big Webcore tape player to play them songs I had recorded. They were very

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nice to me. Later that fall they came through again and I went to see them play at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA. This time they invited me to sit in, which I did, and it was one of those times that just everything came together at once. The crowd went nuts, the band was impressed, and after the show, Delaney told me to think about moving to L.A. and that he would help me. Bam! Instant overnight awareness of what I



Bonnie Bramlett & Rick

was now sure I could do for the rest of my life! I struggled to get through the school year, then made a beeline for L.A., where sure enough, I got hired by Delaney & Bonnie to go on the

road. That's how I broke into the music industry, and I will be forever grateful to them and for that night at Lehigh for divining out my future.

TQR: As your career progressed, how did your choice of instruments and your sound specifically develop and evolve?

As I mentioned, I started out on a Gibson 125, which was a cool sound, but after awhile I started to want more variation in tone and to hear more highs. I sold the 125 and got a guitar that makes me smile to think of today. I saw it in the window of Skip's Music in Media, PA with a \$99 sign on it sitting in a faux alligator case. It was a Gretsch "Twist" guitar with a red and white candystripe pickguard, put out I guess to capitalize on the dance craze. It sounded really good and I wish I had it today. But after the Twist craze ended I still had the guitar, and I really started to feel passé, as you can imagine. I had taken a few rock & roll lessons from a guy called Kirk Hamilton who has since sadly passed away, but he was a big Telecaster nut, and on top of that, he had actually gone to L.A. in 1962 and met James Burton! He was the first guy to also tell me about the local guitar hero that everyone spoke of in hushed tones, Roy Buchanan. Kirk played me a record called, "The Jam" which featured Roy bending strings with a tremolo and distorted guitar, and told me that this guy was going to be big one day. This was how I got indoctrinated into the world of Teles, banjo strings that you could use to bend the strings, and Fender amps. I knew I had to play a Tele too, and after selling the Gretsch I hiked downtown to South Street, where all the pawnshops were. I always went to

South Street Sales because they had the best stuff and were nice to bargain with, which was expected. I learned to haggle there. There were three old Teles to choose from that day and I bought a cream early sixties one for \$125 with a case. Man, that was it – I was in heaven! I loved getting that screaming high end tone that Kirk, James, and Roy had. I used that guitar for a couple more years and sold it eventually to a friend after someone told me that the Mustang had more tones in it. I bought one and was soon wanting the Tele back, which I did get. Around about that time I was really studying Mike



Bloomfield's style on the first Paul Butterfield record. When he switched from the Tele to a Les Paul, almost overnight, everyone I knew was scrambling to get a Les Paul, and being severely 'guitarded' by now myself, I wanted one, too. I did a series of flips with several guitars and wound

up with a 1960 blonde ES-330, which sounded to me like a Les Paul. I kept that awhile then kept flipping guitars until I finally made the BIG catch, a 1958 gold top LP Standard. That was my first serious love affair with a guitar, and I used it and played it constantly for four years, usually with a Fender Super Reverb or an old Twin Amp (wish I had that one now too).

When I went to L.A. in 1971 I had the gold top with me and a '59 Tele. For some hasty reason I traded that Paul for a '52 black guard Tele, then traded that for a '55, which became my main guitar for ten years.



During that time, I went largely back to Telecasters. I began collecting after joining a band with Norman Harris (of Norman's Rare Guitars). Those were the salad days of vintage collecting. You could get anything under \$1,000 then! I did an inventory recently of all the guitars I had bought and sold back in the seventies and eighties. If I had kept them all, they would be worth something like three million today or more. As the money and jobs got better, I experimented with all kinds of guitars. I remember having at one point in time or another old Strats,

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Firebirds, 345's, 335's, Gretsches... I guess I've been through them all, and as far as I am aware, I wrote the very first article to appear in *Guitar Player* magazine on the subject of collecting vintage guitars, which also profiled Norman back in 1976. That article broke his business wide open globally, and for the first time you started to see guys flying over from around the world to bring back old guitars. Now look at what it's become. Maybe I should have kept my mouth shut. As far as today goes, I'd say that overall, I like to play guitars that



are really toneful, whatever they are. I don't care to hear many modern Tele players though, I think because I've spent so much time there myself. I prefer a fatter sound these days that comes from a variety of guitars, and I definitely prefer old to new guitars, with a few exceptions like... my own designs.

TQR: Did you continue to be influenced by specific artists whom you admired, and if so, who were these artists and how did they affect you, in hind sight?

Yeah, definitely. I still look to B.B. for inspiration, especially his work back in the fifties and early sixties. I can hear some Django in his playing and that is very intriguing to me because Django is maybe my favorite guy to listen to of all, and by the looks of the numbers of players who now ape his style, I'm not alone. I like the idea of blending those two influences in my own playing. I guess that because I'm older



and know a little more about the guitar now, I like going backwards more often to re-listen to many of the guys I admire but could not understand well enough when I was younger. Again, Les Paul comes to mind,

and I realize that Les was very influenced by both Django and Charlie Christian, another of my favorite players. So, his work in the late forties before the pop stuff is now more interesting to me than ever. I like Tiny Grimes and Teddy Bunn very much, who also came from the early Charlie Christian school. Another guy who really inspires me is Nato Lima, the Brazilian from Los Indios Tabajaras. He's really a sweet melodic player. On the bluesier side I love Robert Nighthawk's slide work, J.B. Lenoir, and so many of the guys who went north to Chicago from the South. I will always love the blues music because it never fails to affect me deeply. Despite it's rawness and simplicity, the feeling within that music is really, really moving. So, I guess my playing has gotten more sophisticated on one hand because of the influence of the swing guys, but more simplistic on the other hand because of my awareness of the beauty and passion in more primitive or melodic styles. I love the evolutionary aspects of growing older with a guitar in hand.

TQR: Guitarists listening to your music will be interested to learn more about the guitars you play and their features, the tunings you use, your finger picking style, and the signature techniques you've developed to achieve your sound, live and in the studio. Let's address each of these facets separately, beginning with the evolution of your guitars, pickups and amplification.

Sure. I mentioned that I have a background as a Telecaster player, but I have moved away from that sound in recent years, although I do still have a newer one that was customized in hand-tooled leather by the great L.A. Western artist, Al Shelton. I have owned a 1956 Les Paul TV Jr. for about 25 years now that still turns me on. I used it on Bob Seger's "Like A Rock," that's been the Chevy truck commercial for around ten years now. It's one of those guitars that



will sort of 'bend' with you depending on your amp, the room, and your attack. When I was touring with Seger in '86 I came up with a design that I eventually was able to bring to life through my friend, luthier Toru Nittono out in Northridge California. I am an art deco nut and have incorporated those elements into that guitar, which I call "Deco model #1." It has been my main

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guitar since being born, and can be seen in the Fleetwood Mac, "Tango In The Night" DVD, and my own DVD, "Rick Vito In Concert." It uses a Japanese humbucker in the neck (I don't know what it is), and a Seymour Duncan Alnico Pro in the bridge position. It's a very versatile guitar in that it gets an incredible number of both Gibson and Fender-like sounds with just those two pickups, a blender control, and two push-pull pots that allow me to split the coils and play out of phase. Fender offered me a deal to produce it once that I did not follow through with, although now I would like to talk with some company about it (so if you're reading this please contact me right away!) Since that first guitar, I also designed and had built two more "Deco Models." Toru did both of them. One is more like a Les Paul Special and the other has a "National" vibe with single coil pickups. I use Duncan pickups in many of my guitars. A young guy, Hiroshi, in Japan is building me a copy of my "Deco" guitar and is putting Charlie Christian style pickups in it made by Jason Lollar, which I'm very anxious to hear. I love P-90s and Lollar makes some really nice ones, as does Seymour.

Reverend guitars have been good additions in recent years also, because I like the weight and sound I can get with them, especially for slide guitar. Joe Naylor at Reverend and I are



talking right now about a "Rick Vito Signature Model" for next year that will be based on a combination of both of our designs. That will be very exciting if we can pull it off. My latest passion has been for collecting old wood body Supro, Airline, and National electrics from the fifties and early sixties. I have six or

seven now and I like their sound a lot, which falls somewhere between Fender and Gibson in their own unique way. I've also gotten more into acoustic guitars in the past few years and especially love the sound of Delvecchio resonator guitars. I had a McGill resonator too, which is an upscale version of the Delvecchio. I also play a "Bayou Resonator" made by Richie Owens, a Dell Arte gypsy oval-hole guitar, and a few archtops by Framus, Epiphone and Eastman. I love swing guitar and my new CD, "Band Box Boogie," gave me an opportunity to stretch out a little on these acoustics. I have been fortunate enough also to own a few "holy grails" in my collection, which are outstanding. These would be my trio of Gibson Explorer, Flying V, and Les Paul Standard with the sunburst finish, all from '58 or '59. What can you say



about guitars like those other than that they truly deserve the praise heaped upon them.

As far as effects go, I don't use much and try to stay with the guitar and amp as much as

possible. I like your basic reverb, tremolo, delay, and amp overdrive setup. I've used the Leslie thing or a little or slow chorus, but I think that's about it. Amps are a very important part of anyone's sound and I try and stick with ones that are tried and proven – some that I've owned longer than the guitars I play. Here are some of my favorites: a late seventies Dumble Overdrive with Reverb, a Fender tweed Bassman from 1959, a blackface Fender Deluxe Reverb, a small Supro, an Ampeg Jet, and a little National Westwood. Newer amps I like are the Dr Z Maz-38, which I have endorsed, a Gibson Goldtone 30 watt combo, and believe it or not, a Peavey Vintage 100 watt, from which I removed half the power tubes to produce a 50 watt output. Then there's my old Risson solid-state amp from the 70's that really delivers despite the fact that it's tubeless. There are a few amps I'd like to have, like a nice old Marshall 50 watt head, a Vox AC 50, or a good Matchless DC30, but I just haven't gotten to them. There are



a lot more guys building good amps these days than ever before and it's hard keeping up with them all. I like the old Jensen blue speakers, the Celestion Vintage 30's, Mojotones, and I use EV's in my Dumble 2x12 cabinet in the big halls. I don't care for 4x12 cabs and much prefer one or two twelve's,

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or a 4x10 cabinet, any of which I think are more punchy and direct than that 'spread-out' sound of the bigger cabs.

TQR: Do you ever use alternate tunings, and how did you learn about them?

I play a lot of slide guitar in standard tuning and have written about this tuning in magazines. It was developed back when I only had one guitar to play all night, so I had to switch gears in my mind when I used the slide, instead of switching guitars. I don't use many exotic tunings, but I feel comfortable switching between standard and E/D or G/A. My friend Rick Valenti showed me the "G" tuning back in college and it opened up a whole world of understanding for me. I moved on then to Elmore James' "D" tuning and so on. I'm experimenting some now with a 6th tuning, but you have to be careful not to start sounding too western swing with that one, not that that's bad. For years I used nothing but a Sears 11/16 socket for a slide stuffed with a little support inside, but for the last couple of years I play the Acousta-glide slides made by Latchlake. They are tapered at one end and come in a brass or nickel alloy that sounds very smooth to my ear next to the Sears. I don't care for glass so much, but if I used one it would be the heaviest I could find. I like heavy 2.0 mm. Picks, too – the "Gator-grip" ones from Dunlop. I can't go back to thinner picks now and would rather use fingers, which I do, for alternate tones. Dugain horn and clear plastic picks are nice too, especially for playing harder on the acoustics.

Some players that I really admire on the steel guitar are those that developed a style other than country on it, like Alvino Rey for swing and Hawaiian, and Reverend Aubrey Ghent in the Sacred Steel style. I can apply some of these types of influences to my slide guitar, which then takes that to a different place than what is normally heard. I think that a good player can mix his influences from different musical styles to form something unique, but only if he has a very discerning ear. It does not always work, and I sometimes cringe when I hear some country players who try to mix country with blues. You have to be very careful with what you *don't* play, and I am constantly training my ear to try and stay tasteful, although I'm not always successful at it. I'm guilty of playing jive, too.

TQR: What are some of your favorite tracks and collaborations from past recordings (including sessions with other players)?

"Like A Rock" with Seger is perhaps my best-known solo, even though probably most people who hear it just think of it as a commercial, and don't know or care that it's me playing. I did a record back in 1975 with John Mayall called "New Year, New Band, New Company," that gave me for the first



time an opportunity to stretch out as a soloist on a bluesy record. I used my Telecaster back then. A

lot of people in Europe remember my playing with Roger McGuinn's Thunderbyrd on a TV show called "Rockpalast," which was the very first satellite broadcast of rock music in Europe, reaching something like 100 million people. There's a bootleg of that out that has some good stuff on it in my older style. Jackson Browne's "Lawyers In Love" had some good playing, especially the tracks, "Tender Is The Night," and "For A Rocker," among others. This was when I switched to the Dumble amp that Jackson subsequently very kindly gave to me. The sound got much bigger and I was able to expand my world a little after that amp. An interesting note is that this was done at the same recording loft that Jackson lent to Stevie Ray Vaughan for his first record, and I heard that he made use of the Dumble amps that were there. I've always wondered if he used mine, but we'll never know for sure. I like Jackson's recording of "In The Shape Of A Heart" that I played lead on also.



The first recording that I made with Fleetwood Mac was a song called "As Long As You Follow," and I like that one very much

because I went for a little Peter Green flavor on it. The live DVD that features me on Peter's song "Another Woman" came off pretty well. More recently I produced a CD "Speed of Sound," on the rockabilly gal, Rosie Flores. I really like her version of my song, "Devil Love," a lot which we did as a rumba with a Rheinhardt/Grappeli treatment, and several other swing numbers on that record. There's also a couple of rootsy tracks that I played on Delbert McClinton's "Nothing Personal" CD that sound good to me, but I can't recall the titles. That record won a Grammy.

I have had five solo CDs released so far and one live DVD. They all come closer to what I really like to play, with much more emphasis on bluesier material. "Band Box Boogie" combines jump blues, swing, vintage sounding rock & roll. It

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gave me an opportunity to expand my playing outside of what I had done before.

Basically, I'm more of a blues player who has played rock than a rock player who plays blues. Probably the

rock artists who have enlisted my playing hear that blues consciously or sub-consciously. It adds a color that's not too "white," which is a shade I've always tried to avoid in my playing.

TQR: What's ahead for you, Rick? What would you like to achieve in the future?

Well, I pray that I can continue doing music all my life. I like to think that our greatest achievements are in front of us, so I look for ways to keep expressing my ideas, keeping my eyes open for those little opportunities that come along. My wife told me that you should anticipate that miracles will happen, so I do. You can't look around at the music business scene and let yourself become intimidated by it, even when a clear-cut path is not in front of you. The best things that have happened to me in life took very little effort on my behalf, even though I may have been prepared to take advantage of the opportunity when it came. So I try and keep prepared at all times for that phone call or chance meeting that will change your life. I believe in things like this and expect them. If I am offered a chance, I would like to record a "masterpiece," so to speak, something that would be really successful in every sense. I would like to be known for my own accomplishments as an artist from now on and not necessarily in association with another artist or group. It would be satisfying to continue growing as a guitarist and keep expanding that world to the highest level possible to me. My new CD, "Band Box Boogie," is out now in the U.S. and Europe and is getting great reviews. It would be wonderful if through it I could do more touring and become more established here at home. I also have another CD finished for next year that I hope will take me even closer to reaching my goals. This one is very much a slide guitar record and has a very cool stripped down "guitar, bass, and drums," approach to it. And there are a couple of other media projects that we have begun recently that could blossom into something really exciting. So in the meantime, I'm playing my guitar, enjoying my life, and waiting for the next miracle to happen! **To**

SOLO CDs

- "King of Hearts" 1992 Modern/Atlantic
- "Pink & Black" 1998 Streamliner Records,
- "Lucky Devils" 2000 Hypertension Music (Import)
- "Crazy Cool" 2002 Hypertension Music (Import)
- "Band Box Boogie" 2004 Streamliner Records

SOLO DVDs

- "Rick Vito in Concert" 2004 In-Akustik

www.rickvito.com



Finally, someone has created a one-stop shop for pre-wired pickguards featuring a wide variety of pickups, cap values and wiring schemes, and that 'someone' would be George Ellison at Acme Guitar Works. We first mentioned Acme as the official supplier of pre-wired pickguards for ToneQuest guitars in May of this year, and if you haven't become acquainted with Acme yet, it's time you did.



Look, the single most significant barrier preventing guitarists from exploring the secret pleasures of pickup experimentation is the tedium of the pickup swap. We know this from experience, having pulled and replaced countless

pickups in all kinds of guitars during the past five years, and we're still at it, having swapped out pickups in two Strats, a Les Paul and a 335 (for the third time) in the past week. There aren't many shortcuts to be taken in replacing pots, caps and pickups in a typical set-neck guitar. Hollowbodies seem especially daunting (they aren't, usually), and Fenders (Stratocasters and Teles anyway) are the easiest of them all. In addition to pre-wiring rigs for Strats and Teles, Acme does custom bench work. They also sell wiring kits, CTS pots with tighter tolerances than those used by most guitar companies, tone caps, blend pots, switches, mini switches and lots of other accessories. Here's the scoop on the electronics end of the Acme story, straight from George.

TQR: Do you have a background in electronics, guitar repair, or other related areas? What kind of training and practical experience led you to create Acme?

I have some formal training in both electronics and guitar

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repair. My electronics training was limited to basic electronics and avionics in the US Air Force. I was an avionics technician, working on F15 flight control systems. Other than that, I never was a real electronics buff. I learned a little here and a little there, but I wasn't one of those kids who grew up building radios in my bedroom. I was always more interested in mechanical stuff.

My training in guitar repair started in 1979, and that was initially school-of-hard-knocks training. I grew up around shops, and had friends whose dads were machinists and so forth, and I always took wood shop in junior high and high school, so I was at home around machinery, and I understood mechanical principals; that understanding seems like it's always pretty much been there for me innately. I grew up with bicycles and motorcycles, and I could do most of my own maintenance and jobs such as clutch replacements, etc, by the 8th or 9th grade.

After I got out of the Air Force in 1984, I became roommates with a guy named Mike Schomisch who had a pretty profound influence on me mechanically. He was a freelance fabricator, and he did absolutely brilliant work. A fabricator is simply a person who can start with pieces of metal and make things out of them, and Mike was especially good at it. What I really learned from him though, more than anything else, was an eye for detail. He could pick apart poor craftsmanship because he was a total perfectionist. He had some friends who were also really good at specific things, mostly automotive stuff like machine work and painting, and it was just cool to see all the things that they accomplished and the overall excellence of their craftsmanship. Their projects were always top-shelf.

Mike and I had decided it would be cool to customize guitars, so one day in May of 1984 I was at a wood supplier looking for some mahogany. They didn't have what I needed, so they suggested that I might want to try 'that guitar school down the street,' which turned out to be The Roberto-Venn School of Lutherie. I had never heard of it, so I ventured over there and they gave me the tour and the sales pitch, and it turns out the summer session had begun a week earlier. That night I made a decision that I had to go to this school, and the next morning I started.

The Roberto-Venn School at that time was just a collection of Quonset huts out in the desert outside Tempe, Arizona. They did three 4-month sessions per year, and there were 12 students in my class, including me. The hours were 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, so it was like a full-time job, and the task was to complete two guitars from scratch from rough-sawn lumber. We had to build an acoustic and an electric, and we had some limited amount of flexibility, such as choosing between a classical, 6-string folk, or 12-string folk for our acoustic project. On the electric guitar, we had to make everything from scratch, including the pickups. There were no parts for the pickups, like baseplates or pre-made flatwork or bobbins. We had to make the covers, which actually



were just wooden boxes finished in lacquer (we even made the pickup mounting rings out of wood), and then we wound the coils and fitted them around some metal strips that we cut and shaped with a file. All of that went into the pickup boxes we made, along with some magnets, and we poured epoxy into them to lock everything in place. It was pretty crude looking back on it, but it was also a good learning experience because we were given nothing to work with. We had to make it all!

What I took away from that school was the knowledge that there is nothing magical about building a guitar, even a relatively ornate acoustic guitar with wood purfling, etc. When the process is reduced down to its individual steps and you're shown those steps, you understand that there's nothing to it really, just simple steps and basic mechanical principles. What sets people like Bill Collings and Tom Anderson apart, I believe, is their unfailing eye for detail – that desire to make it absolutely as clean and perfect as it can be.

Acme Guitar Works actually began as a hobby shop where my friends and I worked on our own guitars. This was in 1993 or so, down in Richmond, VA. In fact, the first Acme shop was seven or eight blocks from Lindy Fralin's first shop. Acme ended up settling outside of Washington, D.C. At that time (mid to late '90s), I was doing all the repair work for both of the Veneman Music stores in the D.C. suburbs. Some of your readers may have done business with The Music Emporium mail order business, which predated Musician's Friend and AMS, and was probably the largest mail order music business out there at one time. This was a Veneman business, and was run out of the Rockville, MD store.

It was during this time that I realized that I enjoyed wiring

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guitars. I did a lot of it, installing pickups and pre-amps in high-end basses and pickup

installs and complete re-wires of electric guitars of all kinds, and I got pretty good at it. I had a real admiration for the guys who were the best at it, like Anderson, and some of the high-end bass guys like Spector and Fodera. Veneman had a whole bunch of high-end lines, plus everything they didn't have come through the door sooner or later for repair, so I really got into some of the best examples of guitar wiring out there.

Acme has since moved away from repair work for the most part, and we've relocated to Delaware to be closer to family. At this point we're still a Fender Service Center, but we don't advertise repair work and we aren't focused on it anymore. Wiring pickguards is more rewarding in some ways because we have been able to really hone our skills at it and make the



product look great. It takes a while with a given circuit to figure out how to wire it cleanly; it sort of evolves over

time as you try different things, different wire placements and so forth. The quantity of assemblies that we've done has allowed us to realize some benefits in terms of product quality that sets us apart from some of the other folks doing it.

TQR: The concept of mounting and pre-wiring pickups for consumers is long overdue. Let's review each of the different wiring schemes you offer...

Well, we offer Strats and Teles, passive Fender basses and Les Pauls. We offer Strat wiring in vintage, modern, and blender wiring. Vintage is just like Leo did it, with a neck tone and a middle tone. Modern is the same, except that the bridge pickup is added to the middle pickup tone control, so you have some tonal control over the bridge pickup.

Blender wiring gives the user a master volume and master tone control, and the third control is a blender control, which is a modified pot that allows you to combine the neck and bridge



pickups together. The modification to the pot prevents bleed-through when the control is turned down, so it can be completely eliminated from the circuit when not in use, sort of

like a true-bypass switch. Of course, we do all sorts of other Strat wiring, too. We'll basically do whatever people want to pay us for. Our shop rate is \$50/hour, so when we get an odd-ball request, we just start the clock and charge by the hour.

Our Tele wiring is more limited in that we don't get asked to do much in the way of one-off stuff, although it does happen occasionally. We offer several standard wiring configurations: Esquire, '51 Nocaster, '52 Telecaster, Modern Telecaster, and 4-Way. The first three are just what the name implies, we're true to the originals. The modern wiring is neck, neck/bridge in parallel, and bridge, like an American Standard Tele. The 4-way option adds an additional position that combines the neck and bridge in series.



The bass stuff is basic P-Bass and J-Bass, all passive currently, although we are considering doing some assemblies that will

include John Suhr's preamps, but we're still on the fence with that idea. We've just added Les Paul assemblies as well, and there are several options that let people customize the assembly, such as push pull pots that allow them to tap their pickups.

TQR: In our experience, the actual value of various commercially available pots and their taper is very inconsistent. Some 250K pots may measure at closer to 300K or significantly below 250K, and the same can be said for 300K and 500K pots. Have you located a source for high-quality pots that are more consistent? Have you determined why these inconsistencies exist, and assuming you have dealt with this problem successfully, how did you address the problem?

We're familiar with these problems, too, and I think there are

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a couple of factors involved. The tolerance factor is explained by simply knowing that guitar manufacturers are specifying the parts with broad tolerances. For instance, CTS offers several tolerances on their 450 series pots (the ones Fender and Gibson use). Specifying a tighter tolerance drives the price up, so companies tend to specify the broadest tolerance they think is appropriate so they don't pay more than they need to.

I can tell you that I worked with a design engineer at CTS to spec a couple of different pots for us, and we've had our blender pots and some 250K pots made by them. He pulled the specs for a couple of Fender pots and discussed them with me, and he said that Fender specs a tolerance of 30% for the pot used in most Strats – the standard 250K split shaft. This surprised me at first, but the more I've thought about it, the more sense it makes to me.

Acme always specs the tightest tolerance available when we have pots made for us by CTS, but I personally think that the issue of pots reading significantly higher or lower than their stated value is less of a problem than many people believe. I've read comments where someone states that CTS pots are junk because they measured a CTS 250K pot and it measured 215K or whatever. Well, this is no indication of the pot's quality; it's simply a function of the tolerance that was paid for initially. And I'm guessing that Fender has determined



that 30% is good enough through testing and trial and error. I don't think it was just an arbitrary decision

to save a few nickels per pot with the underlying assumption that Fender's customers were too unsophisticated to notice.

We did a test before we ordered blender pots from CTS. I was considering having them made in 500K instead of 250K values at Lindy Fralin's request. I had planned to order 250K pots, but Lindy said he always made blenders out of 500K pots. So I made a 250K and a 500K blender and put them in my guitar connected to a switch so that I could A-B them, and I'll tell you that I couldn't decide whether there was a discernable difference. I listened over and over, carefully, listening for differences in the sweep of the pot and the tone, and first I'd think, "Maybe there is a little difference," and then I'd think, "No, it's my imagination." So maybe there was a difference and maybe not – the jury's still out. But if there

was a difference, it was so small as to be irrelevant, I believe. The truth is, I don't think the average player will hear any difference between a 220K pot and a 250K pot, although more significant deviations (such as substituting 500K pots for 250K pots in a Strat) are definitely audible.

We buy from Fender and AllParts, but I always try to get CTS if I can, because I like their quality. However, we always spec the tightest tolerance available when we have pots made by CTS because I want the best, and for the nominal difference in cost I get the bragging rights of being able to say, "Acme has the finest available, and you can't get these anywhere else."

The other issue you mentioned is the pot taper. Log taper pots are almost always used as volume and tone controls in guitars instead of linear taper pots, because the logarithmic taper mimics the way our ears perceive volume changes. Making linear-taper pots is easy, but there's no easy way to make true log-taper pots cheaply and efficiently, so manufacturers compromise. The problem they face is, how do you apply a trace of carbon that varies in resistance logarithmically along its length? Or, assuming you use a single carbon composition with a given resistance, how do you deposit a continuously-varying thickness of it over the length of the trace in order to provide a logarithmic taper?

Instead, the manufacturers lay down sections of different carbon compositions with different resistance specs along the trace, in order to approximate a smooth logarithmic taper, but it's not perfect. And some manufacturers undoubtedly do it better than others, so it could be that many people who have experienced problems with tapers just had some low-quality pots. Another possible problem is that they had linear-taper pots, or even reverse-taper (left-handed), when they thought they had log-taper.

Bottom line, we think CTS makes good pots. That's who we use and that's who almost every manufacturer of quality American guitars uses, so there you go. That's quite an endorsement. Specs, inconsistencies, and tone of electronic components are debated endlessly on the Internet, but many folks debating these issues are lacking some of the information necessary to draw logical conclusions from the data, and few of them have done extensive, unbiased testing. The funny thing is, if you looked at a bunch of \$20,000 - \$60,000 vintage guitars under a microscope, you would find all sorts of inconsistencies and poor-quality parts. But few people are critical of this because these guitars are almost always placed on a pedestal, no matter what. If the ancient-technology caps in a '59 Les Paul have drifted and leaked and they are producing a measurable DC voltage because of mechanical deficiencies and acting as tiny batteries in addition to acting as capacitors, many folks would quickly deduce that these quali-

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pickups



ties are contributing to the magic and are therefore desirable! You know – “This is why those guitars are so great, and why the modern ones don’t measure up.” Well, no engineer worth his salt would come to the same conclusion, because there’s no *repeatability*. You could pull those same old caps out of a different ‘59 Les Paul, and they will have drifted in

the opposite direction, and they are producing no DC voltage; so there goes that “here’s part of the magic” theory, at least in my opinion. And I would hazard a guess that if you started ripping pots out of old Strats and Les Pauls and measuring them, you’d be in for a shock! My point is that there’s a double standard being applied. With vintage guitars, the inconsistencies contribute to the magic. In modern guitars, inconsistencies are typically regarded as a defect, and many people are quick to slam the manufacturers.

TQR: We get a lot of questions about capacitor values, George. Can you review the value and specific type of caps that you use and share with us how cap values can alter and affect tone?

We use Orange Drop 716P polypropylene caps and Orange Drop 225P polyester caps, both of which are film/foil caps. These are manufactured by SB Electronics in Barre, VT. SB Electronics was formed by a management spin-off from



Sprague, the company that originally manufactured Orange Drops. In fact, many people still

mistakenly refer to Orange Drops as ‘Sprague Orange Drops’ but Sprague is no longer the name of a manufacturer – it’s simply a brand name. All Orange Drops are now manufactured by SBE in the original Sprague plant.

The capacitor in a guitar circuit is connected to the tone control and provides a path to ground. As you turn the tone control counter-clockwise, some of the treble frequencies are shunted to ground, and the guitar’s tone gets ‘darker.’

As an aside, some people mistakenly believe that the tone control in a passive guitar circuit (like that used in the vast



majority of Fenders and Gibsons) can boost certain frequencies, but this is untrue. In fact, the tone control in these types of circuits can only *cut* frequencies. A preamp is required to *boost* frequencies, and that means some sort of power source, like an onboard 9V battery. A lot of basses have these types of active circuits, but most guitars don’t, although there are exceptions, such as the Clapton Strat with mid-boost, and any guitar with EMG pickups.

Acme stocks Orange Drops in five values:

.022uf and .047uf (716P)

.015uf, .033uf, .1uf (225P)

(uf = microfarad; the “farad” is the unit of measure for capacitance)



The value basically designates how much of the treble frequencies are shunted to ground when you roll

off the tone control. The higher the value, the “darker” the tone gets as you turn the tone control counter-clockwise. It should be noted that there’s no right or wrong here, any of the values will work, and it just comes down to personal preference.

One interesting thing to note is that a higher value capacitor has more work to do than a lower value cap, so to speak; it must shunt more treble frequencies to ground across the same 300 degrees of pot rotation than a lower value cap does. Tonal changes therefore happen more quickly and more dramatically with a .1uf cap than with a lower value cap like a .022uf.

.015uf is gaining in popularity as a value in Les Pauls, especially on the neck pickup.

.022uf is historically the value associated with Gibson humbuckers, and is the most popular value for use in humbucker-equipped guitars. Fender has now adopted this value in many of its Strat and Tele models, so it may be that in the future it will become the de facto standard for guitar circuits.

.033uf is also gaining in popularity with the Les Paul guys, like the .015uf is. This would typically be used on a bridge pickup.

.047uf is the value many people associate with Fender, and the value we default to for our assemblies when people don’t have a preference. Many of the old Fender wiring diagrams list the capacitor value as .05uf, which is the same thing.

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pickups

folks. It also gives us a less expensive alternative to the other pickups we stock.

The other side of that coin is the group of people who think that Fender has forgotten how to make good pickups. I've read opinions from some people who think there was some magic happening at Fender before CBS, and that magic has been lost. I don't agree with this. I think that if you could go back in time and walk into Fender in 1955 or whatever, that you would simply find a cross section of the local Fullerton population who needed jobs and found them at Fender. I think the folks winding pickups were, by and large, non-players who knew nothing about tone. They weren't working any sort of magic; they simply wound wire onto bobbins before lunch, and then wound wire onto more bobbins after lunch. I think that some of those old pickups sound better today than others, and that it's simply happenstance that some were great and others weren't.

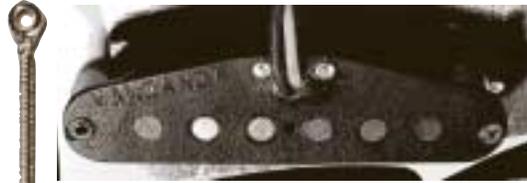


We bought Lollars based on some things I read, and some folks were asking for them. We built some pickguards and recorded them so we could put clips on our website, and I thought "Holy cow, these things sound great!" So I'm glad we bought them. I still haven't

heard some of his other models, but that will change. I'm in the process of building a '52 Tele so we can record the Tele stuff, and I'll get after the P-90s and humbuckers soon. I'm guessing they'll sound great too, Jason told me that he's especially well-known for his P-90s. Right now, we stock his Strats, Teles, and P-90s.

We started stocking John Suhr's pickups based on his reputation in the industry, and some people I know and trust recommended them. I had an old beat-up Plexi head at one point that John had modded, back when he was at Custom Audio (it had Suhr and Custom Audio labels on it), and it was an awesome head – one of those pieces of gear I wish I hadn't sold. He's a really meticulous guy, and he has a unique approach to getting that 'hand wound' sound. His pickups are proving to be pretty popular.

We also just added Van Zandt. As you know, these are made by a small family concern that has direct ties to one of my all-time favorites, SRV. We'd heard good things about them, and so we decided to give them a go. They fit into our niche,



which is the high-end, low-volume pickup producers.

The Lace stuff is in the line because we recognize that some folks need hum-canceling. Don Mare called me from Lace and said he really thought we should try a few, so we're stocking the Holy Grail and Hot Gold models, and they've proven to be fairly popular. I think 'noiseless single coils' are a tonal compromise, and I personally don't think any company has really nailed the noiseless single coil thing yet. But these Lace pickups are actually pretty good, and there are people for whom hum really is a big problem, so we wanted to have something for these people.

Our goal ultimately is to stock a wide selection of high-end pickups – all the good stuff we can get our hands on. I want Acme to be known as the place where the guitar electronics needs of discerning players get met.

TQR: Will you mount any pickups that are sent to you besides those that you sell?

Pretty much. We have people send us their pickups regularly, but I should qualify this. If someone called and said "I have a Lace Sensor for the neck and an Anderson stacked humbucker for the middle and a Dimarzio single coil for the bridge," then, no, we wouldn't be interested in installing that combination. Nothing against those pickups, but this type of job is fraught with headaches, and trying to get everything in phase and hum-canceling when it's supposed to can be an exercise in futility. So we're interested in scenarios where we can win, and where we can look at the finished product and know that it's not compromised.

TQR: Do you get involved with shielding in any way, such as selling pickguard shielding, etc.?

We do. We sell Fender's pickguard shields – both the '57 model which covers the area behind the pots and switch, and the '62 model which covers



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the entire back of the pickguard. We can modify the '62 shields to work with the 8-hole pickguards as well.

We also carry a high-quality nickel shielding paint. It comes in a spray can and one can will do five or six guitars. I prefer using shielding paint to using foil or copper tape. I think it's much easier to use (and quicker), and it's easier to get a really clean job, which can be difficult with tape or foil, especially for an amateur. The paint has excellent conductivity; it's definitely a commercial-quality product. One of these days I'll do a web page that talks about shielding; it will have photos of the process of shielding so people can get some visual help. This is one of the many things on my to-do list!

TQR: What's ahead for Acme?

We want to be the premier high-end retailer of guitar electronics. As we get time, we are adding additional prewired products, and there are other services we'd like to offer involving customized wired assemblies. Also, we've been approached by a couple of small manufacturers to see if we were interested in doing some limited-production work as a contractor, and I can see us getting into that business.



Finally, we really want to become a comprehensive source for parts and information about guitars. We're getting more and more involved in the parts business.

We're currently stocking a lot of Fender parts for Strats and Teles, and we'll be adding parts for other popular Fender guitars and basses over the next six months. The Fender connection also includes parts for Gretsch, so we may venture down that path. We've spoken with Gibson as well, and we may start carrying their parts.

There aren't that many websites that offer top-quality products, professionally presented, and comprehensively described. We aspire to the level of people like Tom Anderson and Bob Taylor in this regard; these guys are both so completely professional, and I think that guitar players would love to have a resource for parts and accessories, service, and information that is on a par with those guys. **To**

Acme Guitar Works, www.acmeguitarworks.com
1-302-836-5301

the Coil Chronicles

In the time it takes to install and evaluate a mere handful of pickups made for your favorite style of guitar, you could easily devote an entire week to swapping pickups, soldering leads and re-stringing guitars and have barely put a dent in the custom pickup market. The same can be said for speakers. So, is the time and expense involved in chasing tone really worth it? Absolutely, if what you're hearing isn't making you happy, or if you're happy with your sound but you simply enjoy experiencing and exploring uncharted territory.



We've been intensely experimenting with pickups in preparation for this issue, and the mechanics of setting up different gui-

tars, tearing them down and repeating the process often left us wishing we could be *playing* instead of laboring for days at our workbench. The concentration required to accurately evaluate the nuances of various pickups is also difficult to sustain over long periods of time; self-imposed breaks are required, putting everything down for a few days and walking back in with a fresh perspective. It is at this point that we often discover what we *thought* we liked at the end of the last listening session has lost its luster, to be replaced by something new. We have learned to avoid relying too heavily on first impressions – they can and often do change.



If you play Stratocasters, the ACME pre-wired pickguards enable you to swap pickups and pickguards merely by loosening the strings, removing the pickguard screws and unsoldering and re-sol-

dering two wires. Unfortunately, there are no real shortcuts for most other types of guitars. But having installed three different sets of humbuckers in our 335 this week, we recommend hollowbody pickup swaps to put things in perspective. Once you've done a few, changing pickups in a solidbody guitar will seem like a walk in the park, and unless you are willing and capable of performing your own pickup swaps, you can't make much meaningful progress in discovering the inspiring tones that exist among custom, aftermarket pickups.

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Stratocasters

Today there are easily a hundred different choices for Stratocasters, if not more. Authentic, *vintage* Strat pickups are very inconsistent, and fans of all variants exist. The weaker coils with fewer turns on the bobbin produce a classic hollow, throaty, extremely clean and trebly tone with strong, clear lows. These weaker coils compliment effects pedals and overdriven amps exceptionally well because they *are* so clean-sounding. In other words, cleaner sounding single coil pickups often seem to match up better with effects and high gain amps. The brightness of the bridge pickup, while very thin and brittle-sounding alone, enables the out-of-phase #2 and #4 positions to possess the quacky *thwack* we expect from a Strat. A darker bridge pickup will reduce this effect, as does a reverse-wound middle pickup. For some players, the downside of the low-output, vintage style coils is that the overall tone exhibits a dramatically scooped midrange and exaggerated, high-frequency harmonic overtones (tinsel).

The stock Fender 57/62 Strat pickups that were originally installed in our Cuneo-era Relic replicate the classic, low-output tones we've just described very well. Fender selected a specific set of pickups from 1963 to use as a benchmark for the 57/62 set, and the consistent *inconsistencies* found in the original Fullerton pickups are a thing of the past in all Fender



pickups today. The Custom Shop 69's wound by Abigail Ybarra also remain

one of our favorites for sparkling clean, harmonically rich Strat tone, although the tall, unbeveled, staggered Alnico 5 pole pieces generally require us to increase the string clearance, dropping the pickups nearly flush with the pickguard. We also like the Fender Custom '54 set, which produces slightly stronger mid-range presence in all three pickups and less brittleness and bite in the bridge, while retaining the early Stratocaster vibe. By the way, if you currently possess a favorite set of Stratocaster pickups but you'd like them even better with flat polepieces and a more even string response, you can press the taller magnets flat using a hard surface, but may also risk ruining your pickup in the process.

Many pickup makers continue their attempts to duplicate the mellowness of a 'naturally aged' vintage single coil pickup, and for good reason. The smoothness, warmth and musical character of the original pickups in our 1956 Stratocaster were truly remarkable in much the same way that a 40-year old Marshall or Fender amp sounds when compared to a new 'reissue.' Old pickups and amps can acquire an elusive 'sweetness' that has often been difficult to build into new products, but in 2004, this goal has become a reality. We've

previously mentioned the four variations of Strat pickups made by Jason Lollar, and his 'Specials' have been getting glowing reviews from the new owners of our custom-built ToneQuest guitars. Jason has undoubtedly figured out how to reproduce the character found in vintage examples of nearly all the classic pickup designs, and he has accomplished it *by design*. We also recently acquired two sets of Van Zandt pickups for review and selected the 'True Vintage' Van Zandts as an option for our TQ guitars. Like Lollar, J.D. Prince Jr. at



Van Zandt has cracked the code in creating the sweeter, rounder,

smoother tone of a great old pickup. The Van Zandt 'True Vintage' set possesses all the unique character you expect from a Stratocaster, but with the rough edges taken off the top, a lot less string warble on the G and D strings, and a more balanced sound overall without sounding uncharacteristically dark. The notes shimmer like ripples in a clear pool, but lack the strident treble overtones in many current production pickups. We have never heard a set of pickups with 'Texas' in the name that we liked, by the way. Whatever that name is supposed to imply (Stevie?) it seems to produce nothing but mud in our experience.

Humbucking Pickups

Like the old Fenders, classic 'PAF tone' is in the ear of the beholder. We've heard plenty of 'real' PAF's and the girls in Kalamazoo weren't watching the counters any closer than the girls in Fullerton, gang. Gordon Kennedy's original '59 Les Paul could be mistaken for an old Esquire in the right hands with the right amp...

We own one of the worst-sounding sets of humbuckers on the planet, made by Gibson circa 1982. We *know* what 'bad' is, but how to define 'great'? One of the curious facts about pickup manufacturing today is that some of the most well-



known and successful companies are perfectly capable of producing exceptional

pickups, but they do so on a very limited, custom basis on 'spec'

for only an elite group of insiders with access to the custom

bench. The rest of us have to settle for whatever they choose to mass produce. Why? Mass production maximizes profits, and the trade-off for an efficient, cost effective and pre-

-continued-

dictable result is almost always a compromise. To be fair, the market for a \$120 set of pickups is infinitely greater than the market for a \$300 set, and if pickup manufacturers want to play ball with the big guitar companies, they are forced to drive the unit cost of manufacturing as low as possible to remain competitive. This is actually good for them and for us, because it creates the demand for handmade products built by 'little' guys who have only themselves and their loyal customers to answer to.

Jim Wagner's WCR Coils line of humbuckers has impressed us (and many of you) mightily, and deservedly so. Here's another lone ranger who has beat the details to death and



developed his own methods of delivering stunning humbucking tone. The same can be said for Tom

Holmes, whose humbucking pickups now sell for whatever the market will bear since the demand for them here and abroad (mainly Japan) has far outpaced his ability to produce them. The last set we saw on eBay sold for over \$1,100. We have also consistently referred our readers to the Lollar Imperial humbuckers – utterly magnificent.

Gibson has addressed the phenomenon of 'designer' pickups by creating their own design for the 'Burstbucker' pickups



installed in the Historic reissue guitars, and while Gibson deserves to be recognized for making a sincere effort to build a pickup worthy of the Historic line, we still prefer the '57 Custom humbuckers that preceded the Burstbuckers. The Custom '57s won't send

you into a drooling stupor of disbelief, but there is absolutely nothing *not* to like about their tone. (The '57 Classics were developed with Tom Holmes before he began making his own humbuckers).

We also recommend the Seymour Duncan 'Seth Lover' humbuckers as long as you aren't planning to use them in high-gain applications (they aren't potted). The absence of wax produces a beautifully open tone, but they'll squeal like a pig if you plug into a powerful, cranked up amp. The Duncan Antiquities are also very good across the board, and the 'JB' humbucker is a great hard rockin' pickup. We need to get our hands on a set of Duncan Pearly Gates and ask Billy if his Pearlies are the same

as what you can buy off the shelf (if he knows). We'd ask Seymour, but he has declined to be interviewed by us because of his long-standing regular column in VG.

The 'flavor of the month' also influences what's hot in pickups, amps and pedals. Another small builder develops a cult following, someone posts an orgasmic review on a discussion page, and before you know it the poor bastard is back-ordered for 6 months and doesn't even have enough time to answer phone calls or e-mail inquiries, which fuels the fever even more, as if only the chosen few with an inside track can ever hope to be

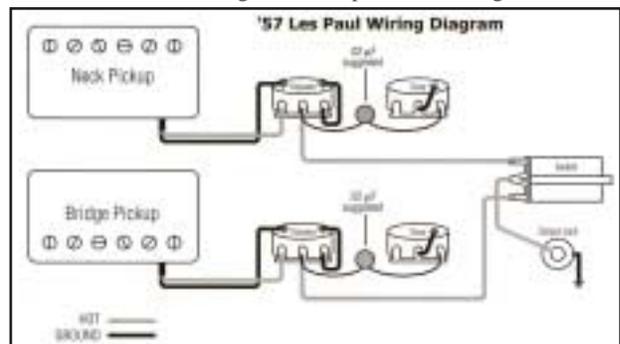


blessed with a set of Mr. Wizard's Amazing Funkadelic Pickups. Builders in this category include Tim White (humbuckers favored by Brad Whitford) and Alan

Hamel (James Pennebaker loves his Fender stuff – especially the Teles). We've e-mailed them both in the past but to date we have failed to set up a review and interview. Peter Stroud had this to say about Tim White's HB's:

"I compared Tim's, Jason's and the Duncan Antiquity PAF's on my three guitars... Jason and Tim's are a notch above the Antiquities in terms of openness and clarity. The Antiquities are still pretty great sounding, so it just means theirs are that much better!"

Don't forget about Peter's favorite wiring modification for modern reissue Gibson guitars that prevents the high-end



from dropping out when the volume on the guitar is cut back. Check the diagram against the wiring in your non-vintage Gibson guitars and make the change – it's simple and worth the effort.

Telecasters

Simply stated, we like Tele pickups with fat midrange tones rather than the shrieking brittleness that seems to plague many Teles. Well, that, and lets acknowledge the fact that some guitar players completely ignore the tone-shaping tools known as the Volume and Tone controls on their guitars. If

you habitually turn your volume and tone controls wide open and just leave them there all night, shame on you. Teles benefit from having the volume and tone knocked down a bit – *really*.

The Fender Custom Shop Nocaster set is damn good, period, as is the ‘Original Vintage’ set. We have no problem at all with Fender pickups – they sound good, they’re inexpensive and easy to find. If you want to play ‘budget’ pickups with a heavier attitude, switch to bigger strings – say, an .011 or a .010-.052 set. The change is especially dramatic on a Tele.

Again, James Pennebaker loves his Hamel pickups. Alan previously worked in the Fender Custom Shop, and if you want to take a stab at contacting him, try: AHCSTMGTRZN-CARS@AOL.com or contact Ron Ellis at 1-760-436-2913.

Of course, we’re big on the Lollar Tele pickups, too. George Goumas recently observed that Jason’s neck pickup was the best sounding Tele neck he had ever heard, and our Nash ‘ToneQuest’ Tele equipped with Lollars and a 4-way switch absolutely rules! Stay tuned for an announcement on our next ‘ToneQuest’ guitar... a Tele/Gibson EH150 lapsteel-inspired one-off featuring two Lollar Charlie Christian pickups. Call or write to reserve yours now. It’s gonna be good.

Whatever you do, we strongly recommend the addition of a 4-way switch for your Tele. Acme Guitarworks can help you there, or contact your favorite supplier. There are no limits to the options you can dream up for exciting new pickups and configurations, so solder up! **To**

www.seymourduncan.com

www.lollarguitars.com

www.gibson.com

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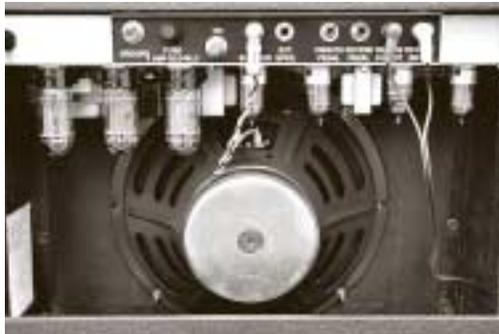
One of the most popular articles we’ve ever published in the TQR is “Under 40 Watts of Whoop Ass” (see Volume 1, Number 1, November 1999) and we’re still getting e-mails about it five years later. Dave Boze’s tale of having blueprinted a blackface Princeton Reverb and replacing the original 10" speaker and baffleboard with a 12" resonated with a lot of players who were looking for a portable club amp that could hang with the band, and many of us followed Dave’s advice (he was right, as usual). Thanks to Dave’s enthusiastic exhortations, there are lots of beefed up Princeton Reverb amps being used today for practice and club gigs. We should also add that running a Princeton Reverb with a 15" extension cabinet (Eminence Legend 15" or JBL D-130 recommended) will produce classic early Stevie Ray tones with a Strat at a fraction of the decibels Stevie’s rig produced, and it’s also a spectacular lit-

tle outfit for P90 and humbucker players. *Just so you know...* Headstrong Amplifiers in Asheville, NC is now making membership in the “Under 40” club a little easier with the introduction of The Lil’ King – a faithful reproduction of the venerable 1964 Princeton Reverb, and the King can be ordered with a 12" Weber VST speaker (or choose your own).



We received one of the first Lil’ Kings for review, and short of hunting down an original and performing

the full Boze treatment (and that can be pricey and time-consuming these days), you can’t do better than the Lil’ King. Like the original Princeton, Headstrong’s 12 watter is hand-wired with tube-driven spring reverb, an improved tube tremolo circuit and classic finger-joined pine cabinet construction. It is what it is, and what it *is* is a meticulously handbuilt rendition of a new 1964 Princeton Reverb! The tone is warm, deep and delicious, just like the original amps when they were new, with classic Fender clean tones up to about ‘5’ on the volume control and a steady climb into sweet, overdriven output tube distortion in the upper range of the power curve, compliments of two JJ 6V6’s.



The Lil’ King reverb is as lush as you remember, the tremolo far better than

the blackface-era photoresistor circuit ever was, and for our money, we wouldn’t consider buying this amp with anything but the optional 12" speaker. The Lil’ King is solidly built with traditional pine box construction and a design that simply reflects what’s inside, and it’s all good. If classic, 12 watt blackface tone is your brand of fun, here’s your amp. Visit the Headstrong website for information on the Lil’ King and lots of equally intriguing models handcrafted in the misty mountains of North Carolina. **To**

www.headstrongamps.com, 1-828-670-1207

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