

# D. ALLEN JOHNNY HILAND JOHNNYBLADES

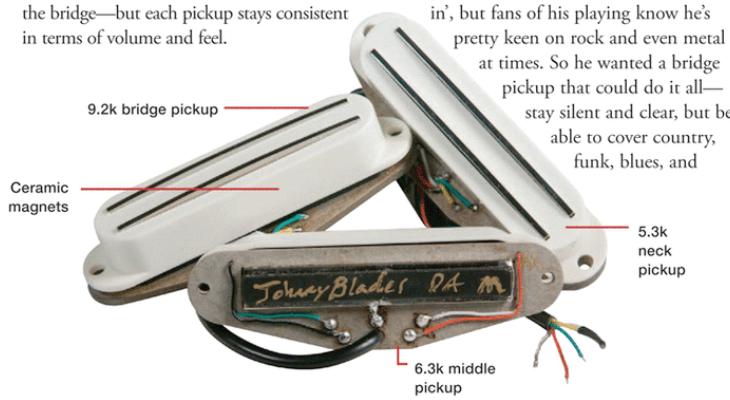
BY JORDAN WAGNER

**D**avid Allen's popular CS StratCat pickups are the toast of boutique forums and discussion boards everywhere, and recently his pickups caught the ears of country and rock virtuoso Johnny Hiland, who worked with Allen to design and produce his latest set, the Johnny Hiland JohnnyBlades.

### Three Amigos

Hiland is not only known for his fluid playing, but also for having a great ear—which proved to be a significant factor in the development of the JohnnyBlades. Allen produced a total of 20 prototype sets before he got what Hiland wanted. But the arduous three-month process resulted in an absolutely stellar-sounding set of pickups.

The main goals of the JohnnyBlades are to deliver great single-coil tone, stay noiseless, and be versatile enough to cover a wide range of genres. Each pickup uses two custom blades crafted from nickel-plated cold-rolled steel, which are then highly polished. Each pickup sports four-conductor wire, custom ceramic magnets, fiber flatwork bobbins, and plain enamel wire wound in a special scatter pattern for better balance between each pickup and to add some vintage spice to the recipe. The resistance level varies quite drastically from the neck to the bridge pickups—5.3k for the neck, 6.3k for the middle, and a whopping 9.2k for the bridge—but each pickup stays consistent in terms of volume and feel.



### Covering All the Bases

My test bed for the pickups was a 2011 Fender Classic Series '60s Stratocaster, a workhorse that sounds pretty great in stock form. After mounting and soldering in the pickups, I buttoned up the guitar and fired up a Fender '65 Twin Reverb reissue.

After starting with the neck pickup on its own, I was amazed that it was only 5.3k. The tone was vibrant and lively through the Twin as I laid into a rhythmic blues groove, but much more powerful than I'd expect from a pickup at that resistance level. The pickup's overall tone and feel wasn't cluttered or foggy-sounding anywhere. And there was a certain hi-fi element to the tone with extreme detail in the lows and low-mids that was breathtaking through the Twin's reverberated output—especially at louder levels.

The neck pickup certainly doesn't sacrifice punch. There's a perceptible midrange boost, and the snappy lows are perfect for funk work. When mixed with the middle JohnnyBlade pickup, though, the combination becomes an absolutely killer tool for blues and jazzier leads. Instead of fighting each other for space, the two pickups work together in a sort of harmonic handshake that produces a landscape of sweet, rolling highs, gorgeous mids, and earthy lows.

Hiland is known for his chicken-pickin', but fans of his playing know he's pretty keen on rock and even metal at times. So he wanted a bridge pickup that could do it all—stay silent and clear, but be able to cover country, funk, blues, and

a wide scope of rock. With the Twin, the bridge position yielded a gorgeous Tele tone, perfect for precise fingerpicking in the vein of Jerry Reed and Chet Atkins.

But if you're a Strat player with a jones for hard rock, these pickups are worth a look too. After I fired up a vintage '81 Marshall JCM800 connected to an Emperor 4x12 cabinet, the bridge JohnnyBlade came alive, bristling with harmonics and a solid low-end foundation. Single-note leads positively popped, and legato lines felt super fluid and defined. Dropping the Marshall's gain and cranking the master opened up the pickup's classic rock possibilities. The JohnnyBlades are very sensitive to pick attack, and with the even-ordered overdrive from the Marshall's EL34s and a heavy hand, I got one of the best tones I've heard for coping Pete Townshend's rhythm work.

### The Verdict

The hum-cancelling JohnnyBlades are an incredible replacement for standard single-coils. They're super versatile, have great output, and killer range. If you're looking to expand on the versatility of your Strat or other triple single-coil guitar without sacrificing the essence of what a great Stratocaster pickup should be, it would be hard to go wrong with D. Allen's Johnny Blades. 

### Rating:



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