

D.Allen Pickups – Review

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I build pickups, too ... You'll notice I said "too". Once in a great while a craftsman discovers someone else who shares similar interests, but is also "head and shoulders" above the rest in talent. David Allen is such an artist. I really mean "artist", because he takes the basic components of pickup construction and takes them to another level of performance and tone. I am jealous, but not bitter. It's refreshing to see someone really excel at their chosen livelihood. [D.Allen Pickups](#) are based upon two premises: the first is, "be true to vintage specifications" and the second is, "but with a twist". You can order most sets of D.Allen pickups with either vintage windings and output or tweaked versions that are slightly 'hotter' and more 'modern' in tone. But rest assured that either way you'll be getting a handmade, custom wound pickup that has clarity, detail and tone for days!

I recently had the opportunity to evaluate some of David Allen's finest creations and came away with some strong, favorable impressions. My good buddy the Nashville Super Picker, [Johnny Hiland](#), let me know he was working with David on some new pickup models. Johnny is legally blind; consequently he has some of the BEST ears in the business! He can simply hear things that most of us can't. I trust his opinions implicitly when it comes to tone, so when Johnny introduced me to David Allen and arranged for some sample sets to be sent to my shop for evaluation, I was stoked. I'm writing a new book for [Voyageur Press](#) on how to build an Electric Guitar, and David's pickups will be a great addition to the section on customizing electronics.



The first set I tried was for Strat style guitars. This set's nickname was "JohnnyCats", being Johnny Hiland's prototype pickups. They really captured the vintage Strat chime, quack and piano like tones, but still have enough power in the bridge position to drive an amp when picked hard. The neck pickup was based around a genuine '54 Strat neck pickup, but made with some custom materials that add dimension. The middle pickup had similar influences from a '59 Strat pickup, but was RWRP (Reverse Wound, Reverse Polarity) for quiet operation in the 2 and 4 positions. The bridge was designed to balance volume-wise with the rest of the set, especially when changing from the neck position to the bridge pickup. This is an extremely



flexible set that handles many types and styles of music but still always manages to sound like a Strat. David uses high quality, hand-beveled alnico magnets, USA-made ‘push back’ cloth hookup wire and real fiber flat work. A special scatter wind technique, a unique wax potting process, and lacquer dipped hand-built bobbins all add up to superior build quality. I especially liked the fact that each pickup coil is fabric taped to protect the delicate-build wire assemblies. You just can’t buy a more authentic, better made and superior sounding pickups for your Stratocaster than these.



The next set of pickups I was anxious to get my hands on were for Telecaster style guitars. Johnny Hiland is known throughout the industry as a ‘chicken picker’ and the Tele is his home turf, so I was especially hoping these were going to be good. And they were! This set was designed to bring clarity, and great note definition. There’s a responsiveness that allows you to produce different tones simply by changing your pick attack angle. David



uses an extremely thin nickel silver cover to help the magnets interact better with the strings. These are wound hotter than vintage specs to really balance well with the bigger sounding bridge. The bridge pickup is also wound a bit hotter so that it drives the amp better, but not so hot that it loses tonal range and definition. These are great examples of some of the best vintage Tele pickups around with a Nashville ‘super picker’s’ best recommendation behind ‘em!



Take it from me, humbuckers are some of the most difficult pickup sets to build. All of David Allen's pickups are handmade in his shop by the man himself, so I really wanted to see a true craftsman's work with this set, nicknamed the "Johnny Buckers".



They're wound like an extremely articulate late 50's vintage 'PAF' with lower output but producing a tone that plays and sounds much hotter (think Van Halen I and II). They'll play snappy or soft depending on your pick attack. The bridge seemed to be designed to balance better with the neck; it's hotter but still keeps the widest tonal range possible. I really liked the fact that this set plays so smoothly with gorgeous glassy highs, and without getting brittle or harsh in the process.



I'm a huge P-90 fan. The problem is that for most of us they're a bit 'harsh' in the midrange, and sometimes unmercifully noisy thanks to 60 cycle hum. Not only do I think D.Allen resolved these issues, he's improved the format to boot. David's "CoolCats" were inspired by some really great, early 1960's P-90's. But David uses a hand built bobbin carved from real maple wood and deploys Alnico 5 magnets to add the crunch we all expect from a great P-90 of the era. I really found that this pickup can bark and play dirty just like you'd want, but still cleans up really well. These were wound to 8.68 ohms, so they're a little bit hotter to bring back that period tone with a little extra balls.



D. Allen pickups are handmade interpretations of the best in classic electric guitar tones, but with a modern ‘twist’ to them. David takes the best of vintage and adds modern enhancements that don’t detract from what we all love about vintage guitars, but adds to that with taste and tone. Price-wise, these are mid-range replacements, well worth the money. You can go to DallenPickups.com to check out his wide array of pickups, and feel free to write David directly if you have any specific questions about his products. He’s a small operation, and he’s invested his heart and soul in to providing the best upgrades in the pickup market to average players like you and me!