

The Pickup Artist

The long and winding road of Jason Lollar

BY JASON VERLINDE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARK SULLO

THERE ISN'T A WHOLE LOT OF FAME IN pickup winding. Build a good dreadnought, and folks will borrow it for recording sessions. Take the hum out of a Fender Champ, and everyone will ask you to work on theirs. But wind a pickup on your own and you'll get a shocked look or two, perhaps a curious inquiry from friends and, if you're lucky, maybe an oddball's order. Unless you're Jason Lollar, that is.

Lollar is probably the only pickup builder worth talking about today that can custom-make you a four-pole Charlie Christian-style pickup for your tenor guitar. Or a virtually stock replacement pickup for your Clavinet. Or (most importantly) a brand new P-90 that sounds better than anything that ever came out of Kalamazoo. His workshop, an hour or so outside of Seattle, is unassuming enough—in a converted garage, the usual Grizzly planers and sanders sit idly by, waiting to be fed spruce. But in an adjacent room with long tables, where spools of wire and plastic trays sit near a handful of Rube Goldberg-looking machines, the magic really happens. This is where Lollar has established himself as the go-to guy for fixing and building electric-guitar pickups that are weird or obsolete—or that just sound fantastic.

He's been busy the

last few years. His pickups are showing up more and more on high-end guitars from small, respected builders: Nash, DeTemple, Zero, even some Nationals. He earned valuable street cred with a glowing review in the *ToneQuest Report*, and he continues to refine his talents on whatever oddball pickup he comes across. As builder Bill Nash puts it, "Lollar pickups are by far my top pick. I have yet to hear one that I did not like."

Legos and Lutherie

Lollar has always been a tinkerer; a homebrew guitar built in high school led to enrollment in the acclaimed Roberto-Venn lutherie school in the mid '70s. "First, I went to college and took about six months' worth of music theory," Lollar explains. "I thought, 'This isn't what I really want to do. I want to build more.' So I went



OPPOSITE: Jason Lollar's biggest creation yet: a reproduction Clavinet pickup.

LEFT: One of Lollar's signature pickups, coiled and ready to strike.





ABOVE LEFT AND ABOVE RIGHT: The Lollar pickup factory – lots of cluttered shelves, wire spools and finished goods ready to be sent off.



ABOVE MIDDLE: One of Lollar's earliest guitar experiments.



to Roberto-Venn. Back then, you had to make their designs. And [the late co-founder] Bob Venn worked for Mosrite, so everything looks sorta, kinda Mosrite-ish. They showed you how to wind pretty rudimentary kind of pickups, kind of Mosrite designs, sort of like a P-90. And you'd actually cut all the pickup parts out of plastic and make these wood pickup covers, put them in there, and put Bondo all over them to glue them in."

Lollar still has some of the early-period guitars that he made during this three-month crash course at Roberto-Venn; they're hanging on his self-proclaimed "wall of shame." You can see progressions and refinements even in his dust-covered rejects – nicer inlays in the fingerboards, lighter bracings and better-looking guitars. But the pickup evolution wouldn't happen until one hazy day a bit later.

"I came back up to Issaquah, [Wash.], and I started a company where we were making jewelry boxes and gun cases with a friend of mine in my Mom's basement," Lollar says. "I always wanted to have my own business and I tried and I failed and I tried and I failed. We were stoned on acid one day and said, 'Let's make

a pickup winder!' And we made one out of Legos! We made it so it would feed the wire back and forth. It had this little track, like a tooth track, with a worm drive thing."

For the next several years, Lollar toiled away at various day jobs, all the while playing in a Little Walter-styled blues band called Shakey Jake and dabbling in instruments. "We played two to five nights a week, 50 weeks a year, some years," he says. "And so I'd stay up 'til 4 in the morning and have to go to work in a cabinet shop at 7."

"Probably about 1994 or 1995, I started taking my own business seriously," he says. "I was working in a window and door factory on Vashon [Island, just southwest of Seattle], did that for about 10 years. I was about 35 and I figured if I don't make this happen now, it's probably not going to happen. It was like a midlife-crisis kind of thing. And I just busted my ass trying anything I could do to get this going. I started cutting back on hours at the place where I worked and finally I quit the band I was in. It was obvious it was successful in the way that we were always playing clubs, which



is what we set out to do, but after doing it for 10 or 12 years in the same band, I got tired of doing it.”

As a guitar maker, Lollar wasn’t exactly in sync with industry trends. “I took a shotgun approach to building,” he says. “I developed a series of archtops. At the time, the archtop boom hadn’t really happened yet. And I thought, ‘This is cool, Gibson isn’t making these anymore.’” His line of pickups today still reveals a knack for the esoteric and forgotten: along with the acclaimed

stuff and lap-steel stuff and lap-steel stuff,” he laughs. “That’s how I got into all these old lap-steel pickups. I take them apart. And you see all these late-’30s designs and how they relate to later models as they go on down. And you learn a lot about pickups because that’s really the oldest application for the pickup, the lap steel.”

As he continued building, he looked for new avenues in the world of lutherie. Then he saw a niche that had yet to be filled. “I thought about how I was going

ABOVE LEFT: The crockpot/potting machine every pickup must go through.

ABOVE MIDDLE: A bunch of fine-sounding dog ear P-90s.

ABOVE RIGHT: Templates for future Lollar guitars.

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P-90s, Tele and Strat pickups he’s known for, you’ll find Charlie Christian-style pickups and steel-guitar pickups for almost every string configuration.

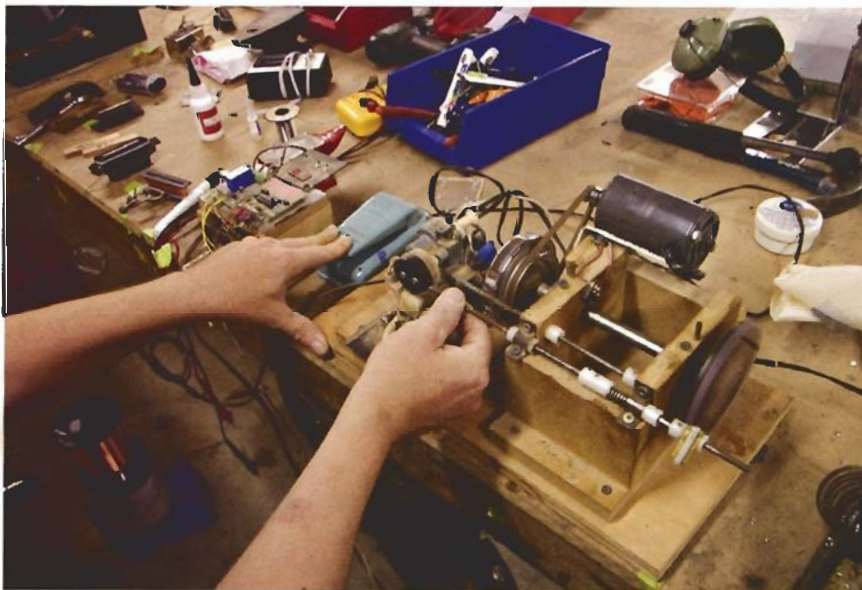
“At first, I did a lot of lap-steel work ‘cause I was hanging out at a place called the Steel Guitar Forum [steelguitarforum.com]. I was a player, so I already had steels here. And people just kept sending me lap-steel

to get my name out there,” he recalls. “I noticed there was no book on pickup winding, so I wrote that book. And really that’s what allowed me to quit my day job and make this happen.”

The book was a simple affair with a clunky title – *Basic Pickup Winding and Complete Guide to Making Your Own Pickup Winder* – that came out in 1998.



RIGHT: An original Jason Lollar creation: a Rick-inspired lap steel with horseshoe pickup.



ABOVE: Lollar working one of his home-built pickup winders.

Lollar ended up making second and third editions over the subsequent years and printing thousands of copies. The book made him an instant authority on pickup winding, and the sewing-machine-motor-fueled pickup winders he detailed gradually started showing

up all over the world. Eventually, the book's popularity became a negative: getting endless calls from wannabe pickup winders seeking advice became a drag on the increasingly busy author. So Lollar has since pulled the book out of print.

P-90s and Crockpots

Business at the family-run shop has grown. Lollar shows off a new laser cutter that makes easy work of routing and etching. It costs more than some new cars, but for the volume of work he has, you can tell it was a wise investment. And despite all the pickup oddities he's making, it's clear that the P-90 design is still close to his heart. "P-90s were easy to make and something they showed me how to do [at Roberto Venn]," Lollar explains. "P-90s floated this whole business for a while."

There aren't a whole lot of Lollar Guitars out there, mostly because he doesn't have time to build them anymore. He spends the vast majority of his time building new pickups, but he still spends a few days each month working on guitars and doing repair work for friends.



"I'm just happy to be keeping busy," Lollar says. "Pickups are challenging and demanding, and you can be creative with it."

Part of what keeps Lollar busy are the relentless R&D sessions he puts all of his pickup models through. He'll A/B test subtle tweaks on two otherwise identical Les Pauls, Strats and Teles through the same collection of vintage Fender amps. He also makes his pickups in batches, which allows him to notice any defects right away. "If you wind a pickup to 9000 turns," he explains, "and you wind 10 of them, anywhere from six to nine of them will measure, for example, 7000 ohms. Some of them are going to have shorts in them. If you don't do it in batches, you won't know if it has a short in it or not. When do you them in batches, you can just pick [the shorts] out, chop the wire off it and start over."

Oddly enough, virtually every high-end pickup that Lollar pours his heart and soul into goes through a '70s-era crockpot that came straight from a thrift

store. Slightly modified, yes, but a crockpot nonetheless. "This is a potting machine," he says. "Pretty much every pickup has to go through this and it kind of limits how many you can do. It puts wax into the pickup. And in some designs it helps hold the whole pickup together. Normally, we just use a real light amount, and that keeps any of the coil from shifting if it gets bumped or dropped or hit. If it's not potted at all, the wires can shift and become more microphonic."

Despite the crockpot's space constraints, Lollar's line continues to expand. He's begun making replacement pickups for Clavinets, sold through clavinet.com. He's making 10-string steel-guitar pickups, and he even has a pre-war Rickenbacker horseshoe model. Lollar keeps a few tricks of the trade secret, but his products are – for the most part – based on classic designs. "A lot of guys who are new [to this industry] are thinking that the way to make it is to underprice people and to create some new exciting design," he says. "And that's not what it's about at all." 