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DECEMBER 2008

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# The Pickup ARTIST



## A conversation with JASON LOLLAR

BY ADAM MOORE

For many tone chasers, Jason Lollar is something of a god. And why not? The man who resembles an ancient Greek deity himself, with a thick beard and long, flowing hair effortlessly draped over his shoulders, exists on ferry-bound Vashon Island, miles off the coast of Seattle and is literally bringing tone to life. While he has a bustling, professional operation—he can claim nine full-time employees, including his wife, Stephanie, and his daughter, Terra—there's this image of him that persists in the guitar world, of a solitary man hunkered over a winding machine, dedicating his life to the alchemy that first birthed rock n' roll. His out-of-print book, *Basic Pickup Winding*, has become the bible for burgeoning builders and a literal collectors' item, with rare copies fetching upwards of \$250 on

eBay. He keeps a low profile, and skips the NAMM booth. Even on the opening page of his website, there is an image of Jason, surrounded only by walls of guitars and a floor full of amps; he's looking off into the distance at something, nothing. Indeed, it can be said that Lollar makes a bold statement without having to say much at all.

Of course, this near-deification isn't unfounded; Lollar has designed and created some of the best sounding pickups on the market today, including—according to many guitarists—the P-90 to end them all. You'll find his work in the top of the top-end guitars on the market, from Collings to DeTemple to Fano. And unlike many pickup builders today, Lollar is not a specialist; he

doesn't spend all of his time studying the minutiae of a specific vintage model, hoping to unlock some great secret. He instead is a generalist, thinking in bigger swaths and applying well-honed concepts and years of experience to all of his pickups; it has resulted in an extensive range of choices for players, and has ensured that no one is left out in their search for tone.

We spoke to Lollar from his Vashon Island home about the perfect P-90, the fallacies of pickup design and the importance of technique.

**How did you get into the world of pickups, and when did you first fall in love with the P-90? ►►►**

# JASON LOLLAR

## The Pickup Artist

Well that was Semi Moseley, Bob Venn and John Robert's fault. They use to teach students how to wind pickups at Roberto Venn. We're talking very crude, rudimentary pickup designs similar to old Bigsby and Japanese-made pawnshop guitar pickups. One of the designs was a single-coil pickup which was a variation on a P-90, so I have made those since the beginning. Everyone probably remembers back in the seventies you would see LP Juniors and ES-125s in people's basements, sitting in the corner; P-90s are an old design we all remember taking for granted.

I've been repairing and building guitars since the mid-seventies, but didn't really get into any kind of quantity until the early nineties. However, I made every pickup for every guitar I've built since I attended Roberto Venn. That said, I hadn't perfected my method until the mid-nineties; everything I made before that was quite crude and I used whatever materials



I could find. I've made and sold more P-90s than anything else; they started getting popular again around 2000-2002, so I was already there to supply a lot of that demand.

### What's the secret to an amazing P-90?

P-90s are about the midrange, but you can go too far and lose the detail and punch. You also need to build in a certain amount of microphonics and it needs to have some power for most people to like them, but a P-90 also has to have some sensitive qualities or it becomes more of a caricature—meaning all midrange and no dynamics.

The boutique pickup market has absolutely exploded. What matters more in recreating classic pickup sounds: having the correct materials or the technique that goes into it?

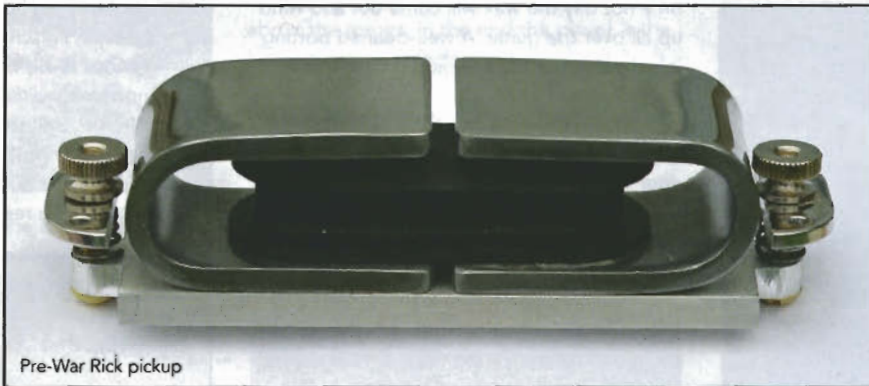
It's both of those factors and, more impor-

**We kept removing things until there was only pure guitar left.** I believe great guitar design isn't about asking the question, "What kind of inlays can we add?" It's about asking, "How can we distill a guitar to its essence?" I'm TJ Baden, and that's why I started this company. To make a pure guitar. With pure sound. We set out to offer a truly handmade guitar – made by skilled luthiers – at a price that's reasonable. I'm thrilled with the results. Now it's up to you to decide. Call us at 760-738-0370 or visit [badenguitars.com](http://badenguitars.com) and we'll help you find a dealer. I hope you'll feel the same way I do – that it's pure joy.

tantly, it takes experience working with different designs, techniques and materials. I have seen guys get obsessed with finding materials that have closer resemblance to vintage pieces and still miss the mark, and I have seen other builders think that they had rediscovered some previously unknown technique and work that angle to death. Making pickups to me is much like playing guitar: the more you play and learn, the better you sound. You don't see good players hiding their technique very often; on the other hand, if they told you how they do something, it may not make any sense to you

if you are not up to that level yet. It took me years of trial and error and thousands of pickups to understand most of the

and you get some made. Six months later you order again but this time the batch weighs 30 percent more. Most likely your plater



Pre-War Rick pickup

tried to get some imperfection out by laying on a thicker coat of copper than last time. If you listen to it on a pickup you'll hear a difference, but how do you learn to even check for that? Sometimes to find a variable, you have to stumble onto it before you recognize it, meaning a lot of trial and error.

variables involved. For instance, let's say you specify a particular type and thickness of materials to be used for a metal pickup cover

I understand that nearly every pickup you make goes through a wax session in a classic Crock-Pot. What are the pros and cons of wax potting, in your mind? ►►



# JASON LOLLAR

## The Pickup Artist



Jazzmaster pickup

I could go on about this for some time but let me start by saying I was once adamant about not potting anything I made, but that attitude has been tempered through experience. For instance, on Fender style pickups—Strats, Teles and any variation using that type of construction—the wax actually helps hold the pickup together, preserving it from becoming more microphonic over time. If your guitar gets bumped, the coil can shift and become loose if the pickup is not potted. This happens on vintage pickups quite often. I get calls all the time from people complaining about how their vintage pickup all of a sudden became too microphonic to use.

I use the Crock-Pot you mentioned, actually I have two and they are outfitted with a gasket so I can hook them up to a vacuum pump. Each pickup design I make is put under vacuum for a specific amount of time at a particular wax temperature. The time varies from ten seconds to two minutes, depending on the results I want. I like to have a particular level of microphonics for each pickup design—too much microphonics makes the pickup difficult to use for most players and too little makes



Strat pickup (white) and ES-300 (tortoise) for 1940s-style Gibson lap steels

the pickup less lively sounding—so at the least ten seconds if only to hold the outer layers of coil in place. Potting a pickup longer than two minutes can make it sound dull.

Often on imported pickups you'll see so much wax they can't clean it all off. If you don't allow the excess wax to drain out before it cools, then if your guitar gets left in the car on a hot day the wax will come out and wind up all over the guitar. A well-cleaned potting job should look like the pickup hasn't been potted at all.

**"Scatter wound" shows up frequently on your website, and is a frequently used buzzword in the boutique arena. Could you define that technique for our readers and how it affects the sound of a pickup?**

There are different definitions of what scatterwound means. I think most people use it as a term to differentiate between winding by hand, which means guiding the wire back and forth by hand in a more random pattern while the pickup is spun with a machine, versus a machine that automatically traverses the wire across the pickup for you. It's argued that the machine lays the coil with each layer of the wire parallel to the next which increases the way the coil acts like a capacitor and makes it bleed off treble as capacitance increases. In practice, auto traverse machines don't really work like that.

Scatterwound can also mean that you are using more pitch to the traverse; this means rather than going across from side to side of the coil, traversing the distance once for each 100 times the coil rotates, you go across 20 or more times per 100 rotations. Another way to look at it is if you unwind a pickup with one traverse per 100 rotations, you would unwind 100 turns before the wire changes direction across the coil and in the latter you would unwind 20 turns before the wire changes direction. Less turns per layer makes a bulkier coil with more air space in it, which normally translates to a clearer tone that can also sound fatter at the same time.

**Does age have a discernable effect on a pickup's tone? Can your pickups sound as good, or better, than true vintage examples?**

I have a feeling the wire in the coil does change a little with age, but I have no way to prove that. The old magnets do have some different impurities than new ones—I have sent parts off to be vaporized and run through

a spectrum analysis machine. Also, magnets will discharge to various levels after they are put into most types of pickup assemblies. Most old pickups, if you recharge them, will read noticeably higher than before. On most of my pickups, I discharge the magnets partially—various levels of magnetic strength do sound noticeably different. I try to make each pickup design I sell sound as best as it can. I developed all of my line over time, making changes and comparisons to previous versions to really polish the results.



Lollar Concert Archtop Guitar

I listen to countless vintage instruments and compare them to my pickups as well. Often there is some difference, but even old pickups sound different from each other. I am not completely concerned if mine sound exactly like some vintage example. My concern is that if you were to compare mine, would it sound favorably similar? Even to the point where the difference it has is considered a strong point, worthy of getting a comment that it may even sound better than the best vintage example.

**There are so many esoteric claims and theo-**

## JASON LOLLAR The Pickup Artist



P-90 Soapbar with clear top for display

ries floating around in the boutique pickup world—how can players sort out what is true and what is just marketing speak? Are there any theories or ideas you've heard that strike you as patently untrue?

A lot of the claims and theories out there have just been repeated over and over—copied from one book or article to another for decades without having anyone examine them. If it sounds like BS, it probably is. There is no truth police for advertising. If someone is saying they have discovered some secret no one else has, it's probably BS. If they are way undercharging everyone else but saying it's of similar quality, it's probably BS. One thing I see repeated over and over is the claim that just because a pickup is hand-wound means it's better than anything else. Claims like, "My hand-wound pickups are better than any machine-wound pickup," with hand-wound meaning hand-guided traverse. I would bet most of the guys claiming that have never run an auto traverse machine, so they can't honestly know what the difference is. It's not just how it is wound or just what materials are used; it's all of that together plus having a vision of what outcome you want as a result. If you can't make it consistently, you don't have anything.

The other fallacy is making people believe you wind each pickup for each individual player, i.e. a different design and wind for everyone. In practice, if you think about it, you can imagine what a tall claim that is. First, how would you know what a pickup would sound like before it was made if every one was unique? And every guitar player sounds different; you can't predict what their attack is like, how they sustain the tone or what their approach is. I watch the same guitar and amp combo being used by hundreds of players and I'm amazed at the different results

each player gets. You can't guess how the individual is going to affect this by the type of wood used in the guitar or by what kind of music they play. Even if you hear a recording of the player, you can really only generalize about the results. In the end the player is the biggest unknown factor.

**What's in the future for your business? Are you growing? Have you reached a nice stasis point?**

My business has been growing from the start; I have tried to limit it to a level where I can keep on top of the jobs I do take



Strat pickups

and keep the quality and personal service at top level. But I am not the kind of person that will sit back and ride on my past accomplishments. Expect to see more stock designs available, new design families and unusual offerings. I will probably be going out to more vintage shows, so be looking to see me around more.

At this point I have a really good crew and have learned a lot of hard lessons about what types of people I want working with me and how to pull everyone together as a cohesive unit. I have always been cautious about claiming that I have made my mark, but a couple of years ago I finally had to admit that all that hard work has paid off. I'm doing something I like, on my own terms and that's a great place to be. 🐼

### ON THE Web

For more from Jason Lollar, head to [premierguitar.com](http://premierguitar.com) for the extended interview we couldn't fit in print.

[premierguitar.com](http://premierguitar.com)

# Hear the Light



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