

Guitar Connoisseur Magazine

A Medium for Custom & Vintage Guitars

Jason Lollar: Pickup Artist



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By Dave Stephens

Back in the middle 90's, I was a career graphic designer of 30 years, with clients like EMG Pickups and Shrapnel Records. One day I told my wife that I had dreamed I was making pickups for a living, I thought it was a funny dream. Scroll forward through time and we had moved to Portland, OR to try to survive the bad recession and to take care of her dying Father in his last days, living in a horrible small apartment complex.

I met a great luthier who I traded work to do his NAMM catalog in a huge rush; he built a custom Nashville Tele for me. But the pickups were so dead sounding, even after the maker rewound them, I got this crazy idea that

I could do them a lot better. I had seen this ad in guitar magazines for a book on how to make your own pickup winder and build your own pickups. So, I bought it.

The author was Jason Lollar. I found him on the Ampage Pickup Maker's group and immediately asked him if he would answer some questions about his book that I was completely stumped on, and he graciously answered many questions that helped me finally get a working winder up and running. And for that I thank you, Jason, for without your help I might have quit all those years ago.

Guitar Connoisseur: Where did you grow up, and how did you become interested in playing electric guitar?

Jason Lollar: Wichita, Dodge City, Paris, Munich, Mercer Island and Issaquah. When I was 11 the first album I bought was Are You Experienced and Jimi just turned me upside down, so that was when I decided I wanted to play electric guitar.

GC: What players inspired you to play?

JL: Initially it was Hendrix and the Stones, Alvin Lee, Jeff Beck, King Crimson, Stanley Clark and even Black Oak Arkansas, so I was all over the map.

GC: Was there anyone you tried to emulate?

JL: Hendrix was my first inspiration but later towards the end of the 70s I met someone that told me how the Stones had copied a guy named Robert Johnson and Zeppelin had copied the Wolf and Willie Dixon, so I started to seek out the original music. It was easy to find hanging out in used record stores like Rubato's in Bellevue WA. He turned me on to a lot of blues artists and I would also buy records that had interesting covers like Albert Collins and Gatemouth. I got to see Albert several times- copied a lot

of his licks. I also watched a Seattle guy- Isaac Scott for hours and learned a lot from him- he had a killer band in the mid 80's- anyway around 1979 I had switched over to blues.



GC: Did you join or start a band, and what kind of music and venues did you play?

JL: I joined a band when I was about 18 and we played small bars where I was using an old Masco amp-

a MAP 15. That went on for a couple years, then I started a blues band called Shakey Jake- our first gig was for hundreds of enthusiastic bikers. We eventually wound up playing 2 to 6 nights a week – 4 hour gigs up to 50 weeks a year for about ten years. We mostly played clubs but also did a lot of festivals including these big full concert stage ABATE parties out in the woods. We also played the Oregon State Penitentiary, yacht clubs, ski resorts. One week we would play for 2000 people and the next 2 people. It was a real strange up and down thing.

GC: I know you went to some luthiery school, when you got out of high school, did you go to college, or what type of jobs did you first get into to make money?

JL: I went to luthiery school in 1979 – Roberto Venn, the guitar scene wasn't like it later became in the late 90's-2000, so I worked in a lot of places- antique restoration, finishing shops, cabinet shops, custom furniture, I made all sorts of widgets from small limited production to one of a kind items. It was all useful to put that experience toward guitar making and to what we do today. I did go to community college for a while to learn drafting but I just never had the right attitude to take college very far.

GC: Tell us about the curriculum at the luthiery school. What builders did you admire?

JL: Remember this was early on, so it was somewhat primitive compared to what they teach today but we built one acoustic and one electric, the electrics were sort of Moseriteish- the electric guy worked in Bakersfield at Hallmark. The cool thing was they did show us lacquering and pickup winding.

Before I went there I had a photo of a handmade guitar that was on the inside cover of a Warehouse Sound Catalog that inspired me to build guitars. Many years later I was talking to Rick Turner at a Namm show and he had an old guitar there he had made. I told him about this photo I use to have from the inside cover of a Warehouse sound catalog- turns out it was a guitar he made for Johnny Winter. What inspires me now are guitars like D'Angelico made, Gibson's from the 30's and 40's, 50's and 60s guitars. I like lacquer work, custom colors, fancy plastic bits and overall design, not so much the exotic woods and wood pick guards and wood knobs- did that in the 70s.

GCL Did you make a living building guitars, or was it a side job in the beginning, and what types of guitars were you building?

JL: No- remember this was before there really was a market for custom handmade guitars like there is today, so it was a side job. I built a lot of solid bodies like Les Pauls, SG's, flying V's, Telecasters, Stratocasters, some of my own designs and on and on. In the early 90s, I started making electric archtops, kind of like L-5's, I made a number of those which are actually a lot more work than a typical electric guitar.



GC: How did making pickups evolve for you, were those skills taught in luthiery school?

JL: Originally I was mostly making pickups for guitars I made. Back then you had to make all the parts yourself because there were no suppliers for parts, so I would use plastic from Cassette tape boxes for the bobbin, wood cores- magnets from liquidating stores, I would make pickup covers out of wood. In school, they taught us was how to make a bobbin, how to get the wire on the bobbin, alnico magnets make less output than ceramic, how to make a pickup cover- how to pot it with bondo.! That was about it! They had a bunch of parts they bought from Semi Mosely, so if you wanted alnico magnet you got those segmented magnets Moserites have.

GC: Did you do much in the way of studying actual vintage examples of the works of Leo Fender, Gibson, or other guitar company's products?

JL: Well yes but that came later in the mid-90s when I started getting a lot of repairs in and occasionally I still get vintage examples in I have never seen before but yes, it takes a huge amount of time learning everything you can about original examples. I have a large collection of drawings I have made where I measured every detail of every part and when I can, I will send parts in to have them vaporized in a spectrum analyzer. There are a lot of things we can make that we don't advertise. One of the important things to learn is what they did wrong- the reasons these old pickups fail so you can avoid that. I build

pickups so they will outlive the originals when possible.

GC: How did your book evolve, what made you want to write a book on basic pickup skills?

JL: Again this was back before the internet became what it is today so I was working out of my garage on an island with limited population and I was looking for a way to expand my clientele without having to run ads, which would cost hundreds of dollars for one or even thousands, so I thought writing a book might do that. I spent time looking at what was available having to do with guitar making and it turned out the only real missing book was on pickup winding. There was one by Erno Zwaan called Animal Magnetism for Musicians but it didn't cover anything about manipulating the wire or how to make anything standard like Fender or Gibson stuff, so I went with that subject as I knew something about it.

GC: That book was a huge amount of work, all the mechanical drawings and photography, did you do all those yourself?

JL: Oh wow- it really was a huge amount of work! I had no idea. I did a lot of the drawings- I had help on the cover, the exploded view of the machine from a guy at the place I worked at during the day – Tim Sommers. The photos were done by Mike Urban who use to work for the Seattle Times or the PI (newspapers) The proof reading was done by my partner Stephanie- we got formatting advice from a teacher at a local community college. I got some help from the local King County Library and a local print shop also helped format. I had to get a computer and learn to use it- it was quite a deal.

GC: Did it occur to you at any point that the book would result in educating people like me who could become potential competitors?

JL: Well I have had hundreds of people tell me they got started with that book and I meet people at shows that make pickups and they tell me they got started from it but really, I was never afraid of them getting ahead of me. Well let's say, I just go full steam ahead so that they don't catch up with me. There is room for a number of people, I have enough of a niche that I am not worried about it. There are several people I share info with and I have personally helped a few hundred people get started. It hasn't been an issue.

GC: I know there have been several iterations of the book, what generation is it now?

JL: It went through 2 additions since it was first released. It eventually became an albatross as people would call me all the time to ask questions, so at one point I stopped publishing it. Within a year or two, people were making photo copies of it and they were selling on eBay for 200 to 600 dollars apiece. People would send me what they bought asking for me to verify if they were real. Photo copies are easy to spot. Eventually I re-published it and that ended the bootlegging. I wrote a forward to the book saying don't call me asking questions and it worked!

GC: Did making pickups completely take over from building guitars, and do you miss the luthiery work?

JL: Yes it did- making guitars without CNC is a young man's work! It's hard on your shoulders even with CNC! I build on occasion but not much. I don't really miss it. Unlike playing music where I didn't want to bend to popular opinion, I felt if people want me to make pickups, I am happy to do so. I took it seriously and did every experiment I needed to do to figure out the variables, so I could make the best and most consistent product possible. What I don't miss is working for employers that don't appreciate that the employee is an important part of the whole.



GC: Have you ever considered, as many others have done, designing guitars to be built with your name on them, by one of the big semi-anonymous builders who supply the big guitar companies?

JL: No, although it has been amazing to see that happen! I have been asked by overseas pickup makers to make another line over there but it's just not my thing. I am happy to have a company that makes product right here in the USA.

GC: What was the kind of timeline for the growth of the company over the years,

JL: The first year or two was manageable but a couple years in, we experienced sometimes as much as 20 to 25% growth per year- that was uncomfortable to be able to maintain quality and customer service while increasing quantity. We were fortunate to have some talented people come work for us that learned quickly and we developed procedures that avoided errors. Some of those people still work for us.

GC: Do you build OEM pickups for guitar companies?

JL: We no longer ghost build for anyone but we have and do made pickups for most of the big companies. Collings, Heritage, Fender, Gibson, Godin, Maton, Nash, National and we build for many of the smaller makers, Senn, Bilt, Vinetto- too many to list. It's been a big part of what we do. Thinking back as a teenager working in my parent's basement, I never imagined selling to Fender or Gibson!

GC: How well has the business survived the economic changes we've all been through, and the ever-growing competition from Chinese companies?

JL: Sure, we were all impacted by the recession and then a strong dollar impacting overseas sales. We're frugal, good at tightening our belt and keeping a rainy-day fund.

Competition from China hasn't been an issue for us, we've built strong relationships with our customers.

GC: Are there other pickup makers you have a lot of respect for, people who excel at what they do, or even pickup designers of the past? For me personally, you and Curtis Novak are people whose ethics and craftsmanship I know are first rate.

JL: For sure- Curtis Novak, Tom Holmes, Lindy Fralin, Seymour Duncan, Bill Lawrence, Kent Armstrong, Les Paul, Rick Turner- all pioneers and super human beings. I'm sure there are many more, some I don't know personally or have had an opportunity to know their work.

GC: Maybe this is a touchy question, but how would you compare your company to say the big pickup companies, like DiMarzio, or Duncan etc. I know they each have their own markets they serve, say Duncan is kind of a generic company, DM seems to serve the heavy metal, hard rock genre, my old client EMG had a pretty narrow market of bass players and heavy rock guys.

JL: We don't spend time comparing ourselves to other companies- we try to stay in our own lane and run our own business- that's enough.

GC: What do you see the future of guitar pickups becoming? I know one guy who swears that low impedance pickups are the coming "big thing," we've seen the Lace "single turn" Alumatonics, the

Variac, etc. Optical pickups, laser pickups. I was at EMG when they invented their line of piezo pickups. Are there any new twists that impress you?

JL: There is so much recorded catalog out there that expectations of what is a serviceable tone is very ingrained. It's hard to imagine something that sounds very different would completely take over. I haven't noticed any of these new technologies getting much of a foothold- Time will tell but for instance, Hammond organ is still a viable sound heard on countless recordings even though it was invented in 1935- it's still being used and or emulated today.

GC: Have you run into problems with changing materials such as magnet wire, for instance, plain enamel not really being made the way it used to be, with only one supplier that even makes it now. Does your company ever suddenly get hit with materials changes that completely throw a monkey wrench into pickup production, and having to make rapid design changes?

JL: One of the big problems was some years ago they stopped making vulcanized fiberboard in the USA. This is the material Fender makes strat and tele pickups out of. We had to change our handling procedure because the imported fiberboard expands and contracts more.

We have had most of our parts made for us with molds or dies we designed in order to get consistency from batch to batch and stopped relying on resalers. We have our coil wire and all our lead wires made to spec for us, so yes, we dealt with that over the years and our parts and end product have continually been scrutinized.

GC: How did you first get sales and how much work do you still do in promotion of your products, are you constantly attending trade shows such as NAMM, do you travel overseas for promotion as well? Do you constantly run print ads in magazines, and how would rate the effectiveness of that in keeping your products in front of guitar player's attention? Do you do web advertising as well?

JL: Originally, I built pickups for my own guitars and a few friends, eventually I was asked by a guitar manufacturer to design a pickup for one of their new designs. My book had been published a couple years earlier and the internet had just begun to take off- I think it was more word of mouth and some guitar forums. I was often on the steel guitar forum and built a lot of steel guitar pickups in the beginning.

We do run print ads and have a website, Facebook and Instagram. We've never had a booth at NAMM. Word of mouth is still the most direct and compelling way to get noticed.



GC: How much staff do you retain, and do you find that running a business is a constant drain on your time, or are you able to get away from it all, enough to stay sane, and what do you do with your free time if any?

JL: We've been extremely lucky- we have several employees that have been with us 10 to 15 years. I have a shop at home and still play music on occasion. Ride motorcycles, garden etc.

GC: Does managing workers come easy, or is it always a challenging thing to keep control and ensure that work is being done with maximum efficiency and quality? This kind of shit scares the hell out of me, personally. I know I would end up micromanaging an employee to death and burn myself out in the process, one reason why I remain alone in my work and to maintain ultimate control of every piece that goes out the door, which is not a good strategy for making money, but that's me, ha ha.

JL: We have a great crew- awesome really! Their name goes on every pickup they build, so they take just as much pride in a Lollar pickup as we do and that goes for our customer service staff, our shipping department, purchasing, quality control. When people love what they do, are treated as a team member and respected- you really don't have to manage much- they manage themselves. It's all the other stuff- the paper shuffle; trademarks, suppliers, keeping up a web presence, magazine interviews- lol.

GC: We are all getting older now, I figure I maybe have about 12 years of life left before I'm gone. Have you thought about what happens to your company if you left the planet sooner than later? Would the company continue to exist? I know Bill Lawrence's company is still producing work.

JL: Right- yes, the company could continue. There is a lot of talent here, they can do R+D and prototyping, everything is documented, there is tooling, a large product line and lots of contacts and customer base- I don't see a problem with that. At the least they could just continue making what we already have designed but we have people with enough experience that have helped in R+D and product development that they could take that over. Really, I use to have to do everything but to get where we are today, it took many people involved. We do so much now with writing articles, R+D, web development, inventory control, shipping – it's been 20 years since I worked alone, so that's 20 years experience gained by the team.

GC: I know you have made some vintage replicas of a few old pickup types, is that something that will continue, any plans for other products in the line? This is something I really love, but don't have funds to do much further than I have, since I have to make the parts myself.

JL: I used to make all the parts by hand too. Now we either make the parts in shop or we have them made

for us. I designed a lot of replica parts that everyone has access to now. Fender Wide range, Thunderbird bass, Teisco gold foils, Gibson size Filtertron covers and many that only we have access to and even ones we don't advertise that we make as one offs, so it's always been part of the business and we have several items on a list for future development. That's really the fun part of it for me, doing the R+D and making the drawings to get dies or injection moulds made, figuring out procedures and even making prototype parts by hand on the metal lathe and mill.

GC: Music seems to be less and less about guitar players, these days, with bands using software instruments, recorded loops, and getting further away from guitar hero worship. Do you wonder how this trend will impact guitar pickup manufacturers in the near future? I saw a band on SNL last night that played “air guitar,” licks that were obviously recorded by studio musicians, do you think that the raw musicality of bands of the 60's and 70's, even 80's into 90's, who's live gigs sounded the same as their records, is disappearing? It's strange to me that classic rock still has a following among younger players, stuff that was new when I was a teen. Who would of thought that our kids and their kids would be listening to Led Zeppelin. But there are no contenders now to create music with that kind of power and raw live performances, that I'm seeing.

JL: They predicted the guitar would become obsolete when the synthesizer became affordable. Punk was supposed to be the end of rock and roll; new wave was the new thing. I don't see the electric guitar fading to obscurity. Compare guitar to keys or horns and there is a simplicity to it where you don't have to learn completely different patterns for each key you are in- what's going to replace that? I'm not saying guitar doesn't have complexities because the way its laid out does have idiosyncrasies but I can't see anything as accessible that's going to replace it- could be wrong though!

GC: Do you think your company will expand into other products other than pickups? We had Gibson announcing a year or two ago that they are no longer a “guitar company,” and they are putting their focus on other consumer products. Have you thought about offering pedal effects, guitar accessories, even amplifiers, built by trusted mass producers, etc.?

JL: Early on I thought about amps and a few other products but making pickups became full-time. We found a big demand for what we do, we don't have the time to go into something completely different.

As far as having someone mass produce an item, I just don't care about that. I set out to make the best product I could and focused on maintaining that with a consistent high quality, it's what the manufacturing industry has become in the USA. Manufacturers here are generally not competing with high quantity, low cost imported goods from other countries, that doesn't really exist.

We want to create good paying jobs for skilled people. Its what's been happening for the last 20 years in the musical instrument industry in the US. The rise of the small guitar, amp and pedal companies from

the 90's has been amazing. This is the golden era of musical instrument making as far as the USA goes and I have been lucky to be a part of that.

GC: Within the company, what is the work you most love? I assume that your staff takes a lot of the labor-intensive things off your plate, to free you up to do more enjoyable work for you personally.

JL: Absolutely. I am happy to tinker with ideas and tooling. I bought a small metal lathe and mill a few years back and figured out how to use them. I milled out a pickup and tail piece for Freddie Roulette when he lost his National a while back, which was an enjoyable experience.

Taking pickups apart and making dimensional drawings of them, documenting the materials used, figuring out every aspect of how to nail the tone a vintage pickup gets, trying to suss out what designs might become popular. I like doing the planning and research more than I like winding pickups anymore. The level of quality and consistency we strive for makes winding and assembly a difficult job to do, which I have done but my team requires me to develop new pickup projects, so that's what I do and I like it.

GC: Does your company do endorsement deals to promote the products? When I had EMG, they were really negative about doing endorsements, an idea that they somewhat changed much later. In my work, I found that if I gave away free pickups, they would think of me as the "free pickups guy," so I don't do any of that.

JL: We do support musicians and the music industry. We have several discount schedules and

occasionally we will give someone pickups but it's usually someone we want to support and that supports us back. Sometimes we will exchange pickups for sound files or video. We've worked with so many artists, it's amazing to me still.

You do have a point, you don't want to just give yourself away because in my opinion you have a responsibility to your employees and customers; this means you charge enough to be able to remain in business, you have enough money to invest in new products and maintain a high level of quality.

GC: Do you ever sit down and try to invent a new type of pickup design, a twist on all that has gone before, using everything you've seen and learned from? Or do you think it's all pretty much been done before, even the "new" ideas we see, are nothing more than slight changes on very old ideas?

JL: Oh sure- I have made many one of a kind pickups for special applications and helped design pickups for other companies but anything with a coil and a magnet has probably had some variation of it made

before. I have seen a lot of homemade items from the 30's and 40's that are unique compared to what came later.

GC: Do you use computer automated winders these days, or are you still using winders you built, and the old REA winding machines?

JL: I own a computerized winder but never use it- I think it's a waste of money. I like vintage mechanical adjustable winders- I like the "consistent randomness" of them and on certain applications I use winders I made. I did use winders I made exclusively for several years. The thing about machine wound and "machine wound doesn't sound good" is just plain false. Anyone that's used a computer controlled winder will know even these can oscillate the traverse in a random pattern- it depends on how its set up. Hand guiding the coil doesn't magically make every pickup sound good.

To Learn More about Jason Lollar please visit: lollarguitars.com

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