

# Guitar strings: Rotosound versus Ernie Ball

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**MAKING HISTORY SINCE 1958**

John Entwistle, Pete Townshend and Keith Moon with Rotosound's new Mustangs in 1966. © Rotosound Archive

Legendary tone starts with authentic strings. That's why we still use the same family-made machinery that wound strings for Pete Townshend and John Entwistle of The Who back in 1966. <sup>1</sup>

@rotosound\_uk

Rotosound began life in 1958, when James How, a musician and engineer from Kent, started making strings in a small workshop. At first it was a modest operation, but word spread quickly. The turning point came when John Entwistle of The Who approached the company looking for something new. Together they developed the Swing Bass 66, a bright and punchy roundwound string that gave bassists more power and presence than the flatwounds of the day. The set became a rock staple almost overnight and is still one of Rotosound's best sellers.

Unlike many of its competitors, Rotosound has kept its production entirely in the UK. It is still run as a family business, and its strings

have been used by some of the biggest names in music, from Jimi Hendrix and Brian May through to Duff McKagan and Guthrie Govan. The brand is as much a part of British rock history as the amplifiers and guitars that defined the era.

Ernie Ball, born Roland Sherwood Ball in 1930, came from a different background. He was a working guitarist in California who spotted a problem. The standard string sets of the early 1960s were heavy, awkward, and often included a wound third string. Younger rock players wanted something easier to bend and more comfortable to play.

Ball started selling custom lighter-gauge sets in his shop, and in 1962 launched them under the name Slinky.

The Slinky quickly became a must-have for rock guitarists. Clapton, Hendrix, Page, Richards, and countless others used them, and the bright packaging became as familiar as the sound itself. In the 1980s the company expanded further when it bought Music Man, which went on to build the StingRay bass and signature guitars such as Eddie Van Halen's models.



Today, Ernie Ball is one of the biggest string names in the world, with a roster of artists that runs like a who's who of guitar history.

## **Comparing electric guitar strings**

On the electric side, Ernie Ball's Regular Slinky set and Rotosound's Yellow Super Light set are good examples of each brand's approach. Slinkys are built on a hexagonal steel core with nickel-plated wrap wire. This gives them a slightly stiffer feel, with a strong midrange and reliable sustain. Many players find them solid and dependable, especially for rhythm parts or styles that need clear articulation.

Rotosound Yellows, by contrast, use a round steel core. That minor change makes them more flexible under the fingers, with a touch less tension. They are easier to bend, which appeals to lead players who rely on wide vibrato and expressive phrasing. Tonally, they lean towards a little brighter in the top end, although the difference is subtle and depends a lot on the guitar and amp.

In both cases, the quality control is excellent, and either set will deliver consistency gig after gig.

## **Comparing acoustic guitar strings**

For acoustic players, Ernie Ball's Earthwood 80/20 bronze strings are the headline act. Made from 80% copper and 20% zinc wrapped around a steel core, they produce a lively, shimmering tone that cuts through in a band setting. Strummers often favour them for their sparkle and projection.

Rotosound's bronze acoustic sets lean in a slightly different direction. The alloys and winding methods vary just enough to give them a warmer, more rounded voice. Fingerpickers often prefer this character, and in recording sessions the smoother top end can sit

more naturally in a mix. Both companies offer the usual range of gauges, from light and easy to play through to heavier sets that provide extra volume at the cost of more finger effort.

## **Storage and maintenance**

In schools and teaching spaces, it is common to see drawers filled with loose strings, sometimes mixed from different sets. Left unwrapped or stored in damp conditions, these quickly pick up corrosion. Once rust sets in, tuning stability and tone suffer, and the guitar simply becomes harder to play. Trying to patch together old strings rarely works well.

Both Ernie Ball and Rotosound help prevent confusion by using colour-coded ball ends and sealed packaging. The best approach is always to store strings unopened until needed and, if a guitar is showing blackened or dull strings, to replace the full set rather than mixing in spares. A fresh set transforms the feel of an instrument and saves frustration in lessons or performances.

## **Final thoughts**

I would strongly recommend buying decent, branded strings rather than the cheapest you can find. They last longer, sound better, and are less likely to snap than cheaper options. I would also advise that you are careful buying the 'big name' brand strings from unofficial suppliers, as there are many fakes in online marketplaces. For UK musicians there is something reassuring about having Rotosound on home soil, still manufacturing in Kent and still proudly independent. Ernie Ball, meanwhile, is still a giant of the industry with a truly global reach.