

# Tech reviews: ToneRider guitar pickups

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By definition, the modern electric guitar owes a lot of its sound to magnetic pickups, first developed in the early 1930s. George Beauchamp, a performing musician, wanted his lap steel guitar to be heard clearly over other instruments. Working with Adolph Rickenbacker, he helped create the first practical electromagnetic pickup, which was fitted on the solid body 'frying pan' lap steel guitar. This breakthrough allowed steel strings to be amplified properly, making the instrument usable on stage and over the radio. In 1955, Seth Lover at Gibson introduced the humbucking pickup. It used two coils wired in opposite directions to cancel electrical interference, which became the blueprint for nearly all modern humbuckers.

# How pickups work

Single-coil pickups are known for their bright, responsive sound and are famously used in Stratocasters; but they often produce a lot of hum. Humbuckers, most commonly found in Les Pauls, fix this with their dual-coil design. P90 pickups sit in between, offering a unique tonal character that combines aspects of both. Each type offers different tonal characteristics, and choosing the right one depends on the sound a player wants to achieve.

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Pickups might look simple – just magnets and copper wire – but they are actually transducers. The magnet generates a field around the strings, and when the strings move, it disturbs this field and creates an electrical signal in the coil. That signal is then sent to an amplifier, turning the string vibration into audible sound. This process is fundamental to the electric guitar's voice and is why the type, placement and quality of a pickup really matter.

There's also the so-called 'tonewood' debate around how much the wood and construction of a guitar affects its tone. Some pickups are microphonic, capturing vibrations from the guitar body, which matters especially for hollow-body instruments. Certain woods and construction methods can produce unique harmonics on specific notes, subtly influencing the overall tone. While pickups play a central role in shaping a guitar's voice, the instrument's build and materials also contribute in meaningful ways.



***Guitars with humbucker pickups, using two single-coil pickups wired together to reduce unwanted hum while producing a more powerful tone***

## **ToneRider pickups**

ToneRider makes its pickups in Shenzhen, China, with a small team. There are many boutique hand-wound pickups that sound incredible, but they can be expensive. ToneRider finds a balance, offering well-made pickups at prices that don't break the bank, and installing them is straightforward if you can solder; ToneRider's website has clear wiring diagrams, which makes it easy for teachers maintaining school guitars or anyone wanting a hands-on DIY experience.

I swapped the humbuckers in my mid-90s Les Paul Studio for the Alnico IV Classics – a 'breakthrough in ultra-quiet, bell-like, vintage Strat tone', according to Tonerider. The ceramic humbuckers had too much output and were bass heavy, making it hard to get a nice, clean edge. The Alnico IV pickups are just right; not too soft, not too hot. They bring brighter highs, tighter lows, and a clear midrange. With wax potting to reduce feedback and four-conductor wiring for

optional coil-splitting, they have earned a permanent place in this guitar.

Turning to Tonerider's P90 range, I found the 'Hot P90 Soapbar' transformative when fitted to my Yamaha Revstar RS502T, which always sounded thin and lifeless with overdrive. The Hot P90S have Alnico V magnets, giving more midrange and stronger lows while keeping the classic raw P90 character. They handle clean tones and high volumes without feedback, thanks to the potting, and have completely changed the Revstar's sound.

Finally, I installed the Apex Classics in my Stratocaster guitar, which used to hum a lot when pushed. These single-coil-sized pickups eliminated the noise with stacked coils without dulling the tone. Unlike many noiseless designs that sound sterile, the Apex Classics retain the Strat's sparkle while adding warmth and punch, keeping the instrument lively and dynamic.

ToneRider bridges the gap between boutique and mass production. They offer much of the quality and character of expensive pickups at affordable prices. They arrive in sturdy boxes with proper documentation.

For teachers upgrading school guitars or players seeking better tone without overspending, these pickups deliver solid construction, thoughtful design, and genuine versatility.

## **ToneRider Pickups**

Price: £85–£140

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