

In Search of the Holy Grail

by Vivian Clement

I still remember my first attempt at trying to improve my guitar tone. Years ago, I naively went into my local music store and began searching through all the new pickups that were on the market. It seemed that the more I enquired about buying a replacement pickup, the more I was confused. It was apparent to me that the sales people really didn't know what kind of tone their own pickups would produce. They seemed to utter some vague generalities, which for the most part were already what the promotional brochures advertised.

To make things worse, all the guitarists I would speak to had their own take on what constituted a good sounding pickup. Needless to say, this was in keeping with their style of music and their own personal tastes. Naturally, you can't just try a pickup in the store; you have to purchase it to then see if you like how it performs. And if my memory serves me well, I believe that many stores won't allow an exchange for a new pickup if you aren't satisfied. It would be considered a "used" item – since you would be altering it once you wired it into your guitar. After doing as much sifting through the pickup display rack as I could tolerate, I took out my cash and purchased a pickup by using the "eenie meenie mynie mo" method. I was then the proud new owner of a mini-double humbucker. To say I was disappointed in the results would be an understatement. The pickup, which I was promised would give me a juicy lead tone ended up generating a thin, AM radio-ish sounding tone. Some of the problem was due to the fact that for some bizarre reason, the repair guy wired the pickup in reverse! But even after having it rewired correctly it still didn't seem to deliver what was promised.

A few years after that I decided that I needed to find an amp that would give me a nice warm tone for jazz as well as a bright enough sound for funk and blues when

necessary. There was lots of great stuff on the market, but having had years of lugging around gear to gigs, I just wanted a simple amp that I could plug in and play. Is that



asking too much? Apparently so. I landed on a small combo tube amp that had just the right amount of warmth and bottom end with some nice highs. The problem was that when I practiced in my studio by myself, I just loved the sound, but when I went to play live, I had to crank up my amp so I could hear myself above the rest of the band. Typical scenario, only that once my volume was at 5, the distortion would kick in. Distortion was great for my funky, bluesy gigs but for jazz it wasn't so wonderful. I ended up sounding like George Benson meets AC/DC! I loved the tone of this amp, and didn't

want to have to mic it (as I mentioned I was trying to simplify not add more time to setting up). A friend of mine suggested a speaker that was new on the market with lots of headroom and comparatively light. This would be considerably cheaper than purchasing a brand new amp, so I thought I would give it a try. The amp sounded great for R&B and blues but was too bright for jazz. It took me about a month to break it in. (I was told the brightness would eventually dissipate after several gigs.) Once again I had a used item on my hands which could not be returned. Using an EQ has helped reduce some of the brightness of the speaker but overall I haven't been able to reproduce the original tone of the amp.

Presently, I own a lovely red semi-acoustic guitar, which has a phenomenal tone no matter what I plug it into. The downside is that the soundhole produces feedback at even fairly low volumes. Given that the soundhole is oval shaped, rather than round, I can't find a plug to fill up the hole. I've tried stuffing foam as well as towels (someone also suggested egg cartons) but the feedback persists. I decided to play this guitar mostly at home even though it's my favorite.

Is there a point to all this? Yes and no. It appears as if the search for the elusive tone continues. Finding that ideal amp and guitar that work great together in all situations is the never-ending saga for many guitarists. We are determined to find that perfect tone that allows us to singularly focus on our playing, rather than being distracted by a gnawing feeling that something is just not quite right. As most driven musicians, I will continue until I find my "happy place," but until then, I will always admire and respect those who have discovered their "Holy Grail."

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