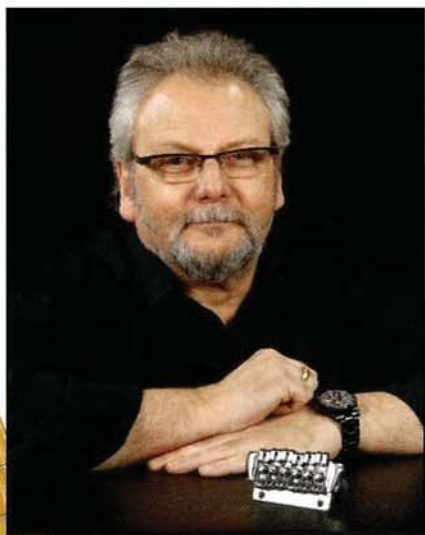


Q&A

Trev Wilkinson



U.K. Guitar Builder and Accessory Maker Pushes Into the U.S. Market

"I'd like guitarists to look at my instruments in their own right," says the always-affable Trev Wilkinson. "I want them to compare these guitars to others of the same specs and performance level, and *not* the same price point. If dealers look past the shape, they will find punch way above their weight and price."

The creator of "working vintage guitars" bases his instruments on classic designs, which "required pickups reflecting the character of the originals," he says. This worked out well because for decades Wilkinson has been known for quality guitar and bass parts. "I learned a long time ago that pickups are more than just wire and magnets – they need to be the *correct* magnets, the *correct* wire! Equally important are the mechanics of the whole assembly."

He takes a heady approach to his accessories, pointing out that just because the resistance measures the same as the original, and the magnets and wire are no different.

That doesn't translate into exact success. "What if the coil is taller, wider, or longer than the original guitar pickup? Knowing how to manipulate these criteria is one of the secrets of good guitar pickup design."

On his Wilkinson guitar bridges, it's all on how and where the steel is bent. "The classic 3-saddle design of the Wilkinson TC200 base plate has been around for over 50 years, and is still widely regarded as the tone machine," Trev says. On the Wilkinson

bridge unit, he noted that his newly designed staggered brass saddles achieve individual string intonation never before available on this type of guitar bridge. "I have been careful not to interfere with success – the base plate itself is a faithful reproduction of the original, made from steel, which is important in a guitar bridge of this style."

Wilkinson-designed Italia guitars are based on a personal, deep love of "those bizarre instruments of the 1960s." The problem with the originals, though, is, "they were awful to play. Their status as musical instruments was sacrificed at the altar of far-out styling and whacky features." So he set out taking what was good about the era and combining it with the best of modern guitar innovation.

"I have many working partners on all continents," Wilkinson says of his growing operation today. "I put as much thought into something made in Asia as I do my hand built Fret-King Guitars in the U.K." Both his Fret-King and Vintage instruments are handled by UK distributor JHS. They, led by managing director Dennis Drumm, "are working

very hard to produce the very best guitars at any given price point.

And there's more to come – he wasn't at liberty to talk about it now, but there'll be some hot news coming out of the Wilkinson camp in time for the Winter NAMM show. Meanwhile, let's retrace.

MMR: When did you first get interested in music?

Trev Wilkinson: About the age of five, my father taught me to play ukulele. At about age nine, after seeing Buddy Holly on TV, I tried to "electrify" the uke by prying off the back and gluing a telephone mouthpiece into the sound hole and plugging it in to the family radio's mic input.

MMR: Intriguing. How'd that work out for you?

TW: It didn't work, but I guess that's where it all started! My first serious guitar

was a Futurama II. Later I progressed to a Burns Tri-sonic. At the time, I had the choice of a brand new [Gibson] '61 SG Junior or the Burns for the same price. Of course three chrome pickups and a whammy bar was always going to win over one P90. They say ignorance is bliss, don't they? I bought with my eyes not my ears, but eh, we all have to learn.

MMR: When did you get serious about building guitars?

TW: In 1968, I built a fluorescent orange Plexiglas Tele-style guitar at Art School. Eventually I made my way to California and started my guitar hardware business in 1984, Wilkinson USA. I traveled to L.A. after inventing the Wilkinson Roller Nut. That business really took off when the Fender Corporation decided to use a version of it that I built exclusively for them.

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Upfront

From that grew a full range of guitar and bass bridges and other accessories for stringed instruments.

MMR: Were you able to meet Leo Fender?

TW: I was befriended by Leo, and was able to visit him when I wanted – or he wanted! He was a great inspiration to me, of course, as he was to so many others in the industry. I found him to be open and honest and he answered all my questions about what he did and why he did it in the early days of Fender. He was striving all his life to improve the electric guitar and bass, something he did till the last day of his life.

MMR: Let's talk pickups.

TW: I am no expert about pickups: What I have learned is purely by trial and error. My friend Seymour Duncan



has probably forgotten more about them than I will ever know!

However I do have a reasonable ear for tone and that certainly helps. Again, I received a lot of information from Leo. Also Seth Lover [inventor of the humbucker] gave me the basics and an insight into the history of those early classics.

MMR: So what is the magic formula?

TW: It is impossible for me to choose a pickup that is right for everyone. So I decided that I would produce vintage voiced and hotter versions of the same. That way people can make a judgment on the guitars I design or build. It's a bit like a Ferrari. You have to put wheels on

the car otherwise you can't drive it and make the buying decision. But once the sale is made, there's nothing stopping the customer from replacing those wheels. Whether it actually improves the car over the factory fitting is purely personal and subjective.

MMR: How does that idea influence your building of guitars?

TW: If people buy one of my guitars then I take it as a compliment if they want to invest further in an aftermarket pickup, because it must be a good "chassis" if they want to spend more money on it.

MMR: Where is the market for your pickups?

TW: Most of my pickups are offered as OEM in other company's guitars as well as my own. They are available as aftermarket, but as of yet I don't do the distribution myself. Maybe later I might.

Whether I talk about pickups, or guitars, I try to stay away from the words "sound better." "Better than" is purely subjective. It's impossible to prove one guitar or one pickup sounds better than another. We are not selling computers where it is obvious if one is faster than another or whatever you are looking for in that market. Sound is a big factor in the myth and mystique of what makes a great guitar, but it is purely up to the individual.

MMR: What's your approach to your art?

TW: I have only ever designed and built things for the guitarist or bassist. I don't believe in being different for the sake of it. My hardware has to work in a playing environment. Keeping a guitar

in tune is something I have worked towards from the beginning, keeping tone in a guitar is all about how the string couples to the guitar...

it would take too long to go into it here, but suffice to say that if the vibrations of the strings cannot transfer to the mass of the guitar, or is restricted in sustaining by something they contact – wobbly, loose saddles for example – then they do not vibrate as long, as their energy is being used to hold something still instead of ringing longer.

MMR: Let's talk about your Fret-King guitars – you like to say yours are "vintage guitars that are usable."

TW: I love old guitars of all styles, but just because something is old it doesn't mean it's good or it works. However, we have become used to the sounds created by these guitars and it is not just down to the pickups, et cetera. Construction plays a big part in this. String tension, neck angles, body mass, truss rods, and hardware all contribute. Many of these things have been changed for mass manufacturing...

But just because a guitar looks like a classic, it doesn't mean it feels and sounds like one. I try to build out in all the good things and leave out the bad.

MMR: Who is the typical customer for your Fret-King guitars?

TW: People who appreciate both the old and new aspects of guitars. Definitely not people who buy the "right" head stock or decal or give in to peer pressure in the buying decision. They are discerning pros and semi-pro working guitarist who are not hung up nostalgia.

