



IRONGEAR BLUES ENGINE & TEXAS LOCO

A new range of replacement pickups promises real quality without the high price tag. David Greeves tests their metal

IronGear Pickups is a relatively new British firm offering a range of replacement guitar pickups, with the stated aim of proving that you don't need to spend a lot of money to get great tone. The company's wares are designed and developed here in the UK, but they're manufactured in the Far East, keeping costs right down – if you buy direct online from distributor Axetec, we're talking humbuckers from around £25 and single-coils from around £19. The UK design/Far Eastern manufacture equation is one we've seen work with some success when it comes to guitars, provided the designers really know what they're doing and manufacturing incorporates strict quality control. Can IronGear make it work for pickups?

Construction & Features

The two sets we're looking at here are from IronGear's new Classics Series, very much the top of the pile at far as company's range is concerned, though they're still very reasonably priced.

The Blues Engine has its sights set on one of the true icons (or sacred cows) of the pickup world, the 'PAF' humbucker. IronGear says it has spent a considerable amount of time researching every aspect of the Blues Engine's design, settling on an Alnico-IV bar magnet, a nickel/silver baseplate and 42-gauge coil wire. These units certainly look the part in their

nickel covers, though other options are available. They're wound to a relatively low DC resistance in vintage fashion, which should mean a sweet, open tone without the overemphasised midrange of some overwound humbuckers.

The Texas Loco single-coils take their lead from the no less classic Strat pickup, using fibre bobbins, Alnico-V rod magnets and 42-gauge wire. Although the name might suggest something hot and spicy, the Texas Loco set is wound to a relatively low DC resistance, just a little hotter than what you'd call 'vintage.' Hopefully this will mean a full sound with a little extra bite and good dynamics. The use of Alnico-V magnets rather than the less powerful Alnico-II and -III employed in many vintage-style single-coils should give plenty of bite and spank.

Sounds

When evaluating pickups, it's important to remember that these are not sound-producing devices – they're there to 'pick up' and convey the sound produced by whatever guitar is put in front of them. So we need to be careful when talking about how a particular pickup 'sounds.' What we can say for sure, however, is that we installed these IronGear pickups in a couple of old and much-modified guitars and must confess to being very impressed. We've had bad experiences with lower priced pickups in the past,

but these units turn in a transparent, musical performance that belies their affordable price.

The Texas Loco set hits all the appropriate Strat notes, from the supple, bluesy neck pickup tone to the twangy bridge. As expected, the sound is bright but it is in no way brittle. There's plenty going on in the midrange, and though there's not a huge amount of low end, the overall impression is of a nicely balanced tone and good dynamics.

The Blues Engines are similarly tight and controlled in the low end – we can see these pickups working particularly well in the context of a bass-heavy instrument that needs more clarity. However, that clarity is combined with, again, an open, balanced tone with a great sense of musicality about it. Both the neck and bridge units perform well in a clean context but they can really cut it with overdrive too.

Conclusion

In a blind test, we doubt if we'd guess that these pickups are available at such a low price. Put next to high-end, hand-wired pickups, these IronGears perhaps lack that extra 10 or 15 percent in terms of dynamic sensitivity and tonal complexity, but we're talking about pickups costing twice as much or more. These IronGear pickups really are very good and would represent a noticeable upgrade over the stock pickups in many guitars. **GB**

IRONGEAR PICKUPS

BLUES ENGINE HUMBUCKERS

Price: from £34.95 each

Type: Humbucker

Features: Alnico-IV bar magnet, 42 AWG wire, nickel/silver baseplate, 2-conductor braided cable

DC Resistance: Bridge 8.6k, Neck 7.4k

Options: Nickel (shown), aged chrome or gold cover – £36.95 each, black or zebra open coils – £34.95 each

TEXAS LOCO SINGLE-COILS

Price: £28.95 each, £74.95 set of three

Type: Strat-style single-coil

Features: Alnico-V rod magnets, 42 AWG wire, fibre baseplate, 2-conductor waxed cloth cable

DC Resistance: Bridge 7.6k, Middle 6.5k, Neck 6.2k

Options: White (shown), parchment, mint green or black covers optional

CONTACT DETAILS

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www.irongear.co.uk

GB VERDICT

GOLD STARS

- ★ Really impressive sounds
- ★ Fantastic value for money

BLACK MARKS

- None

BEST FOR...

Anyone looking for an affordable pickup upgrade

GB RATING

