

GO AHEAD AND ASK DiMarzio

BY JOE COFFEY



Some of us make gear, some of us play it, and, in our case, some of us work at a media network that aims to keep everyone informed. That's why we facilitate this discussion every month. There are certain conversations that need to take place just between us gearheads. This month, we wanted to give you a chance to ask Larry DiMarzio a few questions.

Not only is DiMarzio a significant manufacturer in the pickup world, he was the first gearhead to figure out how to mass-market replacement pickups. Starting with the introduction of the Super Distortion and Dual Sound pickups in 1971, players could finally swap their guitars' stock pickups for something different. You could say that changed everything. Think about it: A new world of drive and power was just a quick modification away—you no longer had to buy a new amp, pedal, guitar (or all three) to try to change the fundamental tone that served as the basis of your sound.

DiMarzio produces nearly 200 pickup models now and offers a full line of cables, straps, and hardware. The company boasts a who's who list of endorsers that includes notable guitarists and outright guitar gods, many of whom have been instrumental in the development of their signature pickups. It isn't too hard to connect the dots and realize the impact that Larry DiMarzio has had on guitar-driven music in general. As if that wasn't enough, the man behind the company is also a well-respected photographer who has created a number of iconic images that any guitarist would recognize in a heartbeat.

Below are 10 of the questions you submitted to us, along with answers from Larry DiMarzio.

1 I have had Dual Sounds in my Les Paul for 25+ years. I remember when imports like Hondos and Curlees had DiMarzio SD-2s in them (which were basically budget Super Distortions) from the factory. Are you considering reissuing the SD-2 or similar pickups any time soon?

—John Seetoo, New York, NY

You have a good memory. The pickup you're talking about was our K-10, which was a lower-cost, OEM version of our Super 2 that had nonadjustable pole pieces. But there's no need for a re-issue, since the Super 2 has sounded basically the same as the K-10 since 1977.

2 How different do rail-humbucker versions of DiMarzio pickups sound than their standard-humbucker equivalents (like a Tone Zone 5 vs. a Tone Zone)?

—Ethan Munter, Richmond, VA

They're very similar in terms of tonality. The main difference is in terms of output. We had to sacrifice a little power in the case of the Tone Zone 5 and several other [rail-humbucker] models in order to maintain the characteristic sound of the full-size humbuckers.

3 Hey Larry, love your pickups! I was wondering, is DC resistance the main factor in whether a pickup is high, medium, or low output? I have a Super Distortion and an Air Zone, and I've noticed the Air Zone is classified as medium output but has a DC of 17, whereas the Super (which is high output) is only 13. Or is it because of ceramic versus alnico magnets?

—Craig Jahns, Englewood, CO

DC resistance by itself has nothing to do with output level, for several reasons. First, it doesn't take wire gauge into account. The thinner the wire gauge, the higher the resistance. So fewer turns of thinner wire can produce the same resistance as more turns of heavier wire. Fewer turns would produce less output. Second, the type and size of magnet will have a major effect on output level. It's true that a Super D is louder than an Air Zone, but it's not really about ceramic versus alnico—we have some ceramic-powered humbuckers that are not as loud as some alnico-equipped models. The only accurate way to directly compare output level (loudness) is to check the output spec, which is measured in millivolts and published for each pickup model on the DiMarzio website.

4 Hi Larry. I was told that if you wrap the coils of a pickup with copper shielding tape and solder the ground to it, it will shield the pickup from outside interference. Is this just a myth, or is there some validity to the idea? Thanks,

—Ed Baumgarten, Covington, LA

It's not a myth, but shielding the coils isn't always as effective as you'd like it to be. Ideally, the entire pickup would have to be enclosed in shielding, and that isn't practical for a lot of pickups.

5 How do you come up with your unique names for pickups (specifically, Norton, Breed, Fred, Steve's Special)?

—Cameron Johnson, Greensboro, NC

Q&A.

Norton and Fred were the creations of Steve Blucher, whose mind sometimes has the ability to go off in strange directions. One of those directions also produced the Steve's Special, which wasn't supposed to be manufactured until John Petrucci tried it and called it "Steve's Favorite Pickup"—which was obviously too long to put on a label. The Breed was named by Steve Vai.

6 Hi Larry. What's your opinion on the main differences among alnico 2, 3 and 5 pickups, and what do you recommend? Thanks!

—Rogerio Bley, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

This is a subject that can trigger a lot of discussion, but we don't recommend pickups based on magnet choice alone because so many other factors influence a pickup's total performance. All other things being equal, alnico 2 and 3 generally create a warmer sound than alnico 5 but produce a little less power. However, there are a number of different grades of all of these magnets, and they have a pretty wide range of performance.

7 There is no better pickup for drop C tuning than the D Sonic, in my opinion. My band is starting to do more stuff that's much lower, even going to A flat for a few chug tunes. The D Sonic handles it all great, but I wonder if there's a set of pups you'd recommend for those lower songs. I've got an Axis Super Sport set aside just waiting to drop something in.

—Ken Moore, Clearwater, FL

A flat? Yikes! I'm old-school in my musical tastes and I like warm sounds, but I think low tunings can sound really muddy if you're not careful, so it makes sense to me to use pickups that don't have very powerful bass response. I also think lower-output pickups would be good to check out, because low tunings generally call for heavier strings which won't clean up well with hot pickups. A pickup like the EJ Custom works well because it's clean and bright and can "hear" the strings well.

8 I bought a '66 ES-335 in 1977 that came with two of your cream-colored PAFs, and it is one of my favorite-sounding electrics. What year did you introduce those, and are they made the same way today? Thank you!

—Will Mramor, Cleveland, OH

Our first PAF was introduced in 1976. They're not made the same way today. After a lot of research, we altered the EQ so the highs are fatter and the lows are more articulate, which is closer to the sound of the humbuckers in my '59 Les Paul.

9 Hi Larry. I am a long-time user and fan of DiMarzio humbuckers.

Recently, I've been on a quest to find the perfect single-coil. I haven't found any vintage-style models that I like from any manufacturer. So far I've had the best results with '80s Fender USA single-coils with non-staggered magnets. Could you explain how magnet staggering affects tone and what would warrant using staggered versus non-staggered magnets?

—Dan Szaba, Rochester, NY

Another subject that can provoke arguments in some circles. I don't really feel that different magnet staggers have a major effect on tone, but they can have a real impact on string balance. This is something Fender was aware of in the 1950s, when they created a magnet stagger designed to balance with the most popular string sets of the time. These sets had 4 wound strings and 2 plain strings, so the B magnet was the shortest and the G the tallest. This stagger doesn't function as well with today's standard 3 & 3 string sets, because the G-string would be very loud if it had the tallest magnet. I don't think nonstaggered magnets will produce as even a response across all six strings as a good stagger will if you're playing chords, but bending a string may be smoother-sounding as it crosses over the individual magnets because the field will be more even.

10 With all this fuss about players changing out their magnets for alnico 4s and 8s and whatnot, don't you think this is going overboard? I mean, do you think most guitarists can even hear the difference between alnico and ceramic? Thanks for all the years of great pickups and cables, Larry!

—Jean Spiegel, Redlands, CA

You're very welcome. I think these are two different questions. There are obviously people who enjoy modding their equipment, and changing magnets is one way to do it. I don't think it's necessarily the best way to create a specific sound, but most folks don't have the ability or equipment to design a pickup from the ground up, which is naturally the method I prefer.

Swapping an alnico for a ceramic magnet in the same pickup should be pretty easy to hear for most players (I hope). However, the idea that every type of magnet has a specific sound that's always easy to identify is wrong, as far as I'm concerned. I think even the most experienced players with the most acute ears may not be able to correctly identify a magnet type if they're playing an unfamiliar guitar in a blindfold test. There are so many things that go into pickup design that I'm not convinced, at this point, that the type of magnet is the most important factor in determining tone or feel. 🤔

Next month

For next month's "Go Ahead and Ask," click here to head to premierguitar.com/goaheadandask and let us know what questions you'd like to ask
Fred Gretsch III.