

SP-90 SPECS

Manufactured by: Vintage Vibe Guitars (925) 337-0991; vintagevibeguitars.com

MODEL SP-90

PRICE \$184 (set of three). Single pickup \$71 plus S&H

MAGNET Tested with Alnico V (alnico II and III and ceramic optional)

DC RESISTANCE Neck 8.06k \square , middle 8.06k \square , bridge 9.54k \square

WIRE 43 gauge

POLEPIECES six threaded steel, adjustable

KUDOS Full, round tone that still retains some Strat-like character. Adjustable pole pieces, minimal string pull.

CONCERNS None.

H540-42 SPECS

Manufactured by: Vintage Vibe Guitars (925) 337-0991; vintagevibeguitars.com

MODEL H540-42 SW

PRICE \$172 (set of two). Single pickup \$89 plus S&H

MAGNET Tested with Alnico V (alnico II and III and ceramic optional)

DC RESISTANCE Neck 7.08k \square , bridge 8.09k \square

WIRE 42 gauge

POLEPIECES Six adjustable threaded steel poles in one coil, six fixed steel slugs in the other

KUDOS Warm, rich neck tone with good definition. Barky, punchy bridge tone with good chime and clarity.

CONCERNS None.

Vintage Vibe Guitars SP-90 and H540-42 SW Pickups

Tested by Dave Hunter

Rather than simply taking one of the more common paths of replacement pickup manufacture—attempting to reproduce dead-accurate vintage pickups, or making heavily modified hotrod units – Vintage Vibe Guitars blends a dash of originality with a dash of vintage voicing in an effort to produce something that might prove an all-purpose replacement for many players. Pete Biltoft, head honcho of the Oregon-based operation, has only been in the business for 11 years, but has already developed a comprehensive range of single-coil and humbucking models to cover just about every popular format of drop-in replacement. The pickup-winding market is a competitive one these days, and everyone needs a gimmick of sorts. Among those proffered by VVG are the ease with which magnets can be swapped in many models, alternative bobbin-top and cover materials (pearloid, tortoiseshell, MOT among them), and the personal, hands-on service that a small owner/operator shop can provide. Also notable: All pickups on test here have “scatter wound” coils that have been potted in a vacuum-sealed wax bath for low microphonics. On review are two sets from different outposts of the VVG range: one a modified single-coil trio called the SP-90 (retail \$184/street N/A, set of three), and the other a standard-style humbucking pair, the H540-42 SW (retail \$172/street N/A, set of two). I tested both sets through a range of high and low-gain amps, with and without effects pedals.

SP-90

The “P-90 in a single coil” format has been gaining ground in recent years, with similar designs coming from makers such as Lindy Fralin, Rio Grande, and Harmonic Design. The main difference between many of these (including this SP-90 set from VVG) and a standard Strat-style pickup is in the placement of two bar magnets *beneath* the pickup as per Gibson’s original P-90, with adjustable threaded-steel polepieces used in the coil itself, rather than the magnets and polepieces being one and the same, and fixed, as in the original Fender design. The steel-in-coil variation elicits a little more beef and body, while the magnet-in-coil format (the traditional version) is known for its enhanced treble, full lows, and overall clarity. VVG’s SP-90s are wound with 43-gauge wire rather than the 42 AWG of the traditional Gibson P-90 or Fender Stratocaster pickup, enabling Biltoft to fit adequate turns of wire onto the coil without making them too deep for the pickup routes of most Stratocasters (he does point out that the routes in Fender ’57 Reissue

Stratocasters are a bit too shallow to carry these, without modification, though, reportedly, they do fit Fender's other Strat models). Specs-wise, the SP-90 set offers moderate DC resistance readings of 8.06k \square neck and middle, and 9.54k \square bridge. It's worth noting that wire gauge affects this reading, so the SP-90s won't be as "hot" as pickups wound with 42-gauge wire.

The SP-90s are made with grounded shields for noise reduction, and hum is also eliminated in the in-between settings on a five-way switch (neck+middle and middle+bridge) thanks to a reverse-wind/reverse-polarity middle pickup. Our review units were supplied with alnico V magnets installed, but each model as purchased is provided with the customer's choice of two magnets (one in, one out for swapping, along with instructions for doing so), and other magnets can be purchased to extend the tone-tasting sessions. In relative terms, of the magnets available, ceramic would make this set a more contemporary and high-gain option, while alnico III and alnico II would make it "mellower vintage" and "mellowest vintage" respectively.

I tested these pickups loaded into a Fender American Standard Stratocaster, with reference to a set of Custom '54 Strat pickups in a Fender Custom Shop '60 Heavy Relic Stratocaster, and the original pickups in a '64 pre-CBS Stratocaster. As equipped, the SP-90s don't have significantly more output than either of the standard Strat sets, contrary to what you might expect from the "P-90-style" description, but they do nail the rounder tone of that very different breed of single-coil, with a bit more body overall. The results are heard in tamer highs, a more pronounced midrange, buoyant but slightly softer lows, and a slightly gritty edge in the overall voice, which many P-90 fans agree is part of that pickup's character. Through a distortion pedal or a cranked amp, all of this translates to a thicker, fuzzier, and somewhat smoother overdrive tone at the expense of a little clarity and definition. There's still some quack and snap in there, in the in-between settings especially, and the instrument retains much of its essential character, but it presents a very different flavor on the whole to that of either of my reference Strats. (Note, too, that pickups wound to sound hotter with these alnico V magnets would sound too hot for many tastes once loaded with the optional ceramic magnets.) Aside from purely sonic considerations, advantages of the P-90-style design are found in its ability to sit a little closer to the strings, if desired, without creating adverse magnetic pull, thanks to the magnets' positioning at the bottom of the coil rather than in the polepieces within it, and the flexibility of adjusting individual polepieces to suit your own preferred string-to-string output balance.

H540-42 SW

Made approximately in the image of the hallowed Gibson PAF (as are 90% of the full-sized humbuckers out there), the H540-42 SW is a direct drop-in replacement for any pickup using the standard two-screw humbucker mounting. This set is wound with more traditional 42-gauge wire, loaded with alnico V magnets, and can also take any of the replacement magnets offered by VVG. As supplied, this is a standard-output set (7.08k \square neck and 8.09k \square bridge) with a "punchy vintage" voicing, but would be significantly hotter and more contemporary sounding with ceramic magnets installed, or progressively smoother and softer with the lower numbered alnico variants. The ease of swapping magnets in this set also simplifies any effort to achieve the "Peter Green mod" by reversing the polarity of the magnet in one pickup. The H540-42 SW is made with a grounded shield, comes with four-conductor wiring for popular coil-tapping options, and can be ordered with any combination of black, cream, and/or white bobbins, covered or open-coil (as shown).

I tested this pair loaded into a Hamer Artist, with reference to a pair of Burstbuckers in a Gibson Custom '57 Reissue Les Paul VOS, and the original PAF humbuckers in a '61 Les Paul/SG Standard. On clean to early-crunch amp settings the H540-42 SW pair is clear and sweet, with good string definition. The neck pickup is warm and smooth, but with decent clarity for this position, which translates to great single-string blues leads when you ramp up the amp gain. In the bridge, this pickup proves sharp enough to get some twang out of clean amp settings, while eliciting nice ringing jangle from arpeggiated chords—two hurdles that many humbuckers fall down on. Wind it up, and there's plenty of that pushy, slightly nasal bark that helps your lead tone cut through. I wouldn't say the H540 set has quite the dimension or overall richness of any of the better original Gibson PAF humbuckers I have tried, but they compare favorably to many other high-end, vintage-voiced humbuckers on the market today.

Conclusion

Both VVG sets on review exhibit careful construction and considerable attention to design and functionality, and will make great tone-tweak options for plenty of players. I do have slight reservations about the ultimate virtue of the magnet-swapping options these VVG pickups present, because I would expect any great pickup to be designed from the ground up with a specific magnet material choice in mind. As a middle-ground template for some fun experimentation, on the other hand, they offer a nifty twist on tone tweaking. Overall, the SP-90 and H540-42 SW provide good-sounding replacement options at prices that are entirely reasonable for hand-made pickups, and, as such, they are a welcome addition to the market.