



TV JONES TV CLASSIC & MAGNA'TRON

GRETSCH-STYLE PICKUPS THAT FIT IN A HUMBUCKER-SIZED HOLE, YOU SAY? **DAVID GREEVES** IS KEEPING UP WITH THE JONESES

When we reviewed the **... Gretsch Power Jet** back in issue 62, we were blown away by its TV Jones Power'Tron pickups. TV Jones pickups have a peerless reputation among Gretsch fanatics, and they've been appearing on the company's Brian Setzer signature models for some years now, which should be endorsement enough on its own. But TV Jones pickups are also available to order direct via the Internet, and with the dollar-pound exchange rate at an all-time high, it means that you can sample a hearty slice of Gretsch twang without having to re-mortgage your home, or sell your grandmother.

The pickups we have here are the TV Classic models, a straight recreation of the '50s Gretsch Filter'Tron mini-humbucker, and also the Magna'Tron, an unusual humbucker which has individual rod-magnet polepieces like a single-coil pickup. Both sets of pickups are fitted into TV Jones' 'TV'Tron' mount, making it possible to drop them into a standard, humbucker-sized cavity. Since few of us actually own a Gretsch, and few other guitars use similarly-sized pickups, the humbucker mounting option is a shrewd move on TV Jones' part. So let's hook 'em up...

BUILD & FEATURES

The TV Classic pickups are meticulously modelled on a

'59 Filter'Tron pickup, from the size, shape and composition of the alnico V bar magnets, to the type of steel used for the polepiece screws, to the shape of the screw heads. The difference, of course, is the standard humbucker-sized casing. Compared with a 'normal' humbucker, the Classic differs in a few crucial respects. For a start, there are two rows of polepiece screws rather than one. The bobbins are narrower and closer together, so there are fewer turns of wire on the coils. This should mean that their output is lower, with a more open, less mid-heavy sound. Out of the box, the polepiece screws are staggered to follow the curved radius of the strings on vintage-style fingerboards, though you can adjust this to suit your requirements. →

GBINFO

TV JONES TV CLASSIC

PRICE: \$125 per pickup (approx. £64), plus shipping

BUILT IN: USA

TYPE: Passive humbucker

IMPEDANCE: 3.96k (neck) & 4.78k (bridge)

DIMENSIONS: 19(h) x 70(w) x 38(d) mm

OPTIONS: Nickel (shown), chrome or gold cover at no extra charge; with standard mount, nickel, chrome or gold, \$120 (approx. £61.50); plastic soapbar-style mount, black or cream, \$110 (approx. £56)

TV JONES MAGNA'TRON

PRICE: \$135 per pickup (approx. £69), plus shipping

BUILT IN: USA

TYPE: Passive humbucker

IMPEDANCE: 3.95k (neck) & 7.66k (bridge)

DIMENSIONS: 19(h) x 70(w) x 38(d) mm

OPTIONS: Nickel, chrome or gold (shown) cover at no extra charge; with standard mount, nickel, chrome or gold, \$130 (approx. £66.50); plastic soapbar-style mount, black or cream, \$120 (approx. £61.50)

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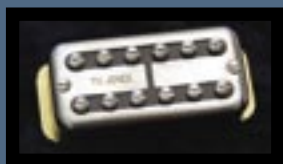
WEB: www.tvjones.com

MOUNT CLEVEREST

WHEN IT COMES TO MOUNTING OPTIONS, TV JONES HAS IT COVERED

■ TV Jones offers a flexible range of pickup mounting options. In addition to the humbucker-sized TV'Tron mount and the Classic mount (a Gretsch-style mini-humbucker which screws straight onto the body of the guitar, pictured right), the company produces the P'Tron mount. This has a plastic cover and the same dimensions as a soapbar-style P-90 pickup.

The TV Classic, Power'Tron (a beefed-up take on the Classic) and Magna'Tron are all available in any of these three mounts. The P'Tron mount comes in



either black or cream. The Classic and TV'Tron mounts come in gold, chrome or nickel, with no extra charge for gold. The difference between chrome and nickel finishes is that, while both are silver-coloured and shiny, nickel has a smokier look and tends to dull and tarnish more readily with time, and in a more pleasing manner.

GBOPINION

TV JONES TV CLASSIC

GOLD STARS

- ★ Vintage humbucker smoothness, but with added sparkle
- ★ Flexible mounting options
- ★ Great build quality

BLACK MARKS

- None

GBRATING



Instead of screws, the Magna'Tron pickups use magnet rods made from a blend of alnico grades. They're designed to produce more attack and twang than the smoother TV Classics, but the Magna'Trons still fall into the 'vintage' category in terms of output. The bridge pickup has taller coils with extra windings, but uses thinner wire than the neck pickup. This is to provide more output without sacrificing clarity. Again, the polepieces are staggered, vintage-style, though here this can't be adjusted.

As you'll notice from the tech spec boxes at the top of this review, in both sets of pickups the bridge pickup has a

■ Big polepieces create a unique look for the Magna'Trons



higher impedance, and hence a higher output than the neck pickup. This is standard practice and compensates for the fact that the string is vibrating less nearer the bridge. The spacing of polepieces on the neck and bridge pickups is different too. This is an unusual feature – most pickup manufacturers use the same spacing for all positions – designed to suit the string spread of most traditional guitars. The neck units cover a spread of 48mm, while the bridge pickups span 52mm. On our test-bench guitars, this means that the poles of both sets of pickups lie directly under the strings, but you might want to check the string spacing on your guitar. A few millimetres either way is nothing to worry about.

According to TV Jones, the only difference between these pickups and the mini-humbucker-sized models designed for Gretsch guitars is the bottom plate and cover, which are designed to fit a conventional

humbucker cavity. The plate and cover are held together by two healthy blobs of solder, and the pickups have been waxed potted to remove air gaps in the pickup and coil, making them less prone to microphonic feedback.

SOUNDS

When assessing how any particular pickup 'sounds', you have to take into account the sound of the guitar they're in. How well a pickup reproduces and enhances the guitar's natural tone through an amplifier is the real indicator of how good it is (with the exception of mental, mega-gain humbuckers, which couldn't care less what they're stuck to). In the interests of impartiality, we decided to install these TV Jones pickups in a pair of pretty ordinary, mid-priced guitars. The Magna'Trons we put in a cost-effective LP-style guitar which has a lively, rocky sound, with plenty of jangle. The TV Classics find themselves in a full-depth,

"THERE SHOULD BE A COUPLE OF TVs IN EVERY GUITAR-PLAYING HOUSEHOLD"

■ The TV Classics have two rows of adjustable polepieces



■ Soldered covers then the whole thing is wax-potted



DETAILS

OPEN, TRANSPARENT, VINTAGE TONES: NOT YOUR AVERAGE HUMBUCKERS BY ANY MEANS



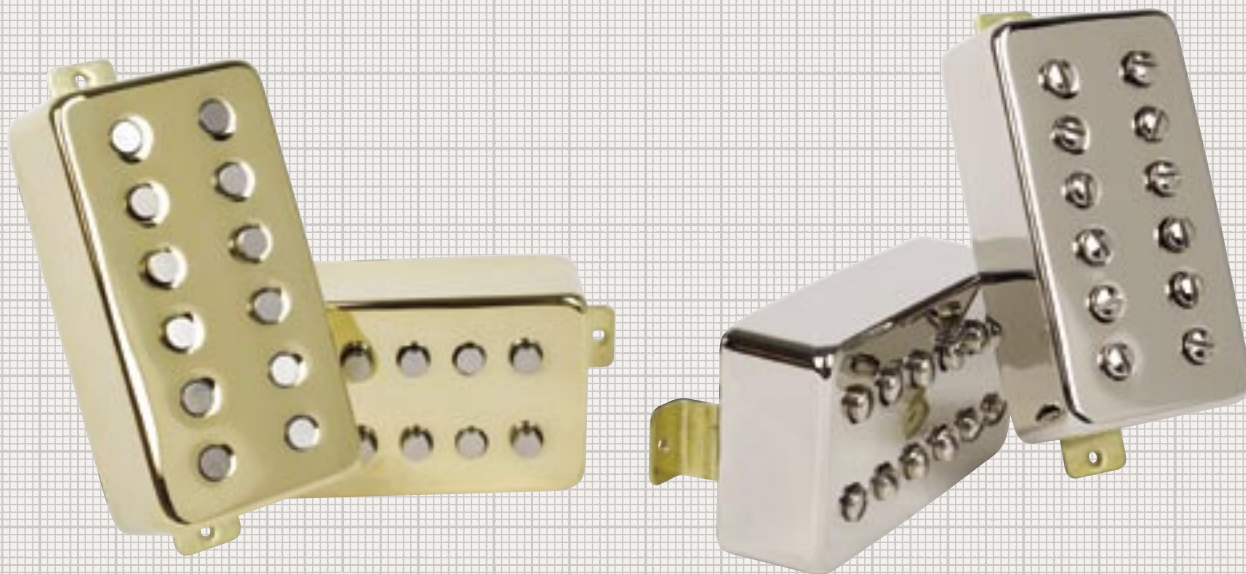
■ There is no fancy cloth hookup wire, or any coil-splitting options here



■ The TV Classics are all about vintage, low-power PAF-type tone



■ Twang's the thang for the Magna'Trons; more power than the TV Classics too



GBOPINION

TV JONES MAGNA'TRON

GOLD STARS

- ★ Positively addictive twangin' tones
- ★ Flexible mounting options
- ★ Great build quality

BLACK MARKS

- None

GBRATING



hollowbody jazz box. As you'd expect, this guitar has a warmer, more bassy sound and less sustain, but still with plenty of top end. But these are not stunning-sounding guitars by any means – the TV Jones pickups have their work cut out for them.

Starting with the TV Classics, we're immediately impressed by the clarity and transparency of the sound. It's very open and honest, with really deep lows and chiming highs, and a smooth, uncluttered mid-range. These are all characteristics of the best low-output, vintage-style humbuckers. What sets these pickups apart is an additional edge and definition that's more akin to a single-coil pickup. Played clean, there's lots of scope for toneful jazz and blues playing. Moving into overdrive territory, tonal character and note definition are preserved, and the sound is neither too edgy nor too muddy. Given that these are vintage-style, lower-output pickups, for higher-gain sounds, you might need to bring a stompbox into play depending on the amp you use. But we like the way these pickups sound at lower gain settings the most.

While the TV Classics are to be commended for their clarity, the Magna'Trons are all-out twang monsters. With two rows of alnico rods apiece, these babies have real punch and bite, especially the overwound bridge unit. These pickups bring out the natural brightness in our LP-style guitar and open up new avenues of rockabilly riffing we'd not have expected from the thing. It's a world away from the stereotypical warm and muddy humbucker tone, and, with the amp cranked, there are elements of Fender Telecaster and P-90-equipped Les Paul Junior in there. But the sound is also distinctly Gretsch-like and very satisfying at that. Clean or dirty, there's a real snap to each note that's just so satisfying.

It's also worth mentioning that both sets of pickups are exceptionally quiet and resistant to hum. If you're drawn to lighter, brighter sounds, but want much less noise and slightly more tonal body than single-coils, these are definitely worth considering. Similarly, if you're lumbered with a dark-sounding guitar, either set could help put the sparkle back.

GBCONCLUSION

A TOUR DE FORCE IN TWANG AND TONE

■ **These TV Jones pickups have so much about them that's to be recommended, from the great sounds to the top-notch build to the price, which is especially attractive if you live in the UK. On this evidence, there should be a couple of TVs in every guitar-playing household.**

The TV Classics feel like vintage PAFs with the lid taken off. The sound is open and airy, with a wide and even frequency response. The Magna'Trons meanwhile could turn any guitar into a rock'n'roll animal, with a healthy helping of rockabilly attitude. Superlatives aside, these pickups have the feel of real quality about them and, even when you factor in shipping and tax, they are still excellent value. Absolutely superb. **GB**

• **Turn over to read an interview with TV Jones, the man behind these pickups**



TV JONES © GLENN HOLLAND

MEET MR JONES

WE SPEAK TO COMPANY FOUNDER TOM JONES TO FIND OUT A BIT MORE ABOUT HIS PASSION FOR PICKUPS...

The TV Jones company is based in Poulsbo, WA, just outside the city of Seattle. Head honcho Tom Jones has been, at one time or another, a Fender setup technician, a repair man, not to mention guitar tech to some world-famous names, from Billy F Gibbons to the White Stripes. He's also an independent consultant to the Gretsch Guitar Company. We have some burning questions for him...

How did you first get into Gretsch guitars, Tom?

"In the early '90s I worked in the guitar department of a violin shop in Long Beach, California called The World Of Strings. That shop was run by Jon Peterson. One day a gentleman called Rich Modica came in with an old Gretsch guitar from 1959. Rich needed some work done on the guitar. I came to find out it belonged to Brian Setzer, one of my guitar heroes. This was his main guitar that he used in the late '80s and early '90s; I believe it was given to him by Steve Miller. That was the first Gretsch guitar I really got a chance to study and play. I really loved the way it sounded and the way it played. It needed some work done on the neck. Apparently Brian liked my work



■ The Gretsch Spectra Sonic, designed by TV Jones and Rich Modica

because I'm still working on his guitars today."

When did you start building your own pickups?

"I stated taking apart old Fender pickups around 1994/95. My father bought me a sewing machine motor and from that I made a coil winder, and used the foot pedal as my variable speed control. I would guide the wire onto bobbins and experiment. It was the only way I could learn. I'd take a lot of notes; I still have the books of notes. I learned what made pickups sound bright, dark, and so on."

What's special about your pickups?

"My pickups differ from a lot of pickups available today because they're made by hand in large quantities. We've refused to go offshore to have our bobbins wound. Everything's done 'in house' with our own parts, which we have made with our own tooling and moulds. We use very high quality parts, all made in the USA. For example, we have our own pole screws made from a certain type of steel that gives a certain tone. Our process and parts are very similar to how they did it in the late '50s and early '60s, so it's as close as you can get to true vintage sound."

How much of the 'Gretsch sound' is down to the pickups, and how much is down to everything else?

"I would say that much of the Gretsch sound has to do with the pickups, and the reason I say this is, if you put Gretsch pickups in a Les Paul, it will sound very similar to a Gretsch in tone. The pickups have a lot less magnet wire which gives you a cleaner sound, less natural mid-range and more of a clanky/clean sound that growls when you dig in hard. Just like if you put Fender pickups in a Gibson, it'll sound kind of close to a Fender, but not identical because you have the scale length and all of the other ingredients that make it sound like a Fender. But, back to your original question, the pickups have a lot to do with the Gretsch sound."

We loved the Spectra Sonic guitars you designed for Gretsch, are there any more in the pipeline?

"There are new designs all ready to go but I just need to develop the prototypes. There may be something that the TV Jones company will have available, but if Gretsch is interested that would be great too. They're a great company to work alongside of - it's been a great relationship." **GB**