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Grosh Guitars '60s Fat Stratocaster Set

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Does the world really need yet another revamped take on the pre-CBS Stratocaster pickup? According to high-end guitar maker Grosh Guitars, the short answer is "yes." After fitting its guitars for years with pickups made by other reputable manufacturers, this company has decided to wind its own, a process that began with a quest



to nail down something that founder Don Grosh and his team still weren't hearing from a host of successful off-the-shelf and custom-order units already on the market.

Grosh's first release in its new Handcrafted Pickups line is the '60s Vintage Stratocaster Set (retail \$240/street N/A, for three pickups), available in Standard, '60s Fat (as reviewed), or '60s V/V/F (with a Fat in the bridge position; \$10 extra for base plate on bridge pickup, as in our test set). Of course, these lauded "vintage pickups" we're constantly raving about vary so much in tone and performance that makers aren't seeking to reproduce just any vintage pickups, but the best vintage pickups. Grosh had a great launch pad for this part of the puzzle: a late-1964 Fender Stratocaster with particularly lively sounding, early plain enamel-wire-wound pickups. Working from there, Grosh and the rest of the team built iteration upon iteration of prototypes in order to add that extra dash of magic to make an already great vintage pickup into a player's dream.

"What I was looking for was more midrange for overdrive, because a lot of Strats just get

lost,” Grosh tells us, “But I still wanted that tight, clean sound, with the big lows and crisp highs.” The road to achieving this involved a considerable amount of R&D in the form of sourcing desirable components, gauging and achieving the ideal magnetic gauss (strength), and winding the coils the old-fashioned way first, on hand-guided winders, then translating that to high-tech CNC winders. In the world of boutique pickup manufacturing “hand wound” still rides in on the white horse while “machine wound” is tying the girl to the railroad tracks, but viewing the process from this limited perspective can be misleading. The computer-controlled aspect of Grosh’s coil winding is a boon to consistency rather than speed, the means of letting them replicate the “best” modified-vintage pickup time after time, rather than just a random and variable vintage-styled pickup. “Those old pickups are all over the map,” Grosh says, “but we have dialed these in and can do it this way every time. We have a CNC winding machine that even controls the tension, and we measure each batch of wire—because the wire varies quite a bit—to calculate how to wind them to make them consistent every time.”

The Grosh Handcrafted Pickups are beautifully packaged in a textured black box with inlay card, wrapped much like the necklace that you should have given your wife or girlfriend on valentine’s day. The attention to detail in this presentation lets you know that this is something the company is proud of and wants you to enjoy from the very outset of the buying experience. Once unwrapped, the Grosh ’60s Stratocaster pickups have the look of mid to later ’60s enamel-wire Stratocaster pickups, with staggered, beveled alnico V magnets inserted into black fiber top and bottom plates that are hand sanded and then lacquer dipped for durability. Push-back cotton insulated hook-up wires complete the package. The ’60s Fat set on review has DC resistance readings of 6.03k Ω neck, 6.05k Ω middle, and 7.13k Ω bridge, with a reverse-wound/reverse-polarity middle pickup for hum canceling operation in positions two and four on a five-way switch. The steel base plate on the bridge unit—a trick borrowed from Telecaster bridge pickups and also used by some other makers—helps to further increase this unit’s midrange response. The standard ’60s Vintage set measures around 0.25k Ω less per pickup than the Fat set, depending upon batch and wire used. Grosh also has plans to roll out other models in the near future, beginning with a P-90 styled pickup called the G-90, and followed by a PAF-style humbucker, a formvar-wire-wound ’50s Vintage Stratocaster set, and a Telecaster set.

I tested these pickups first mounted in a Don Grosh Retro Classic, a three-pickup bolt-neck guitar, then in a Fender Custom Shop Heavy Relic ’60s Stratocaster, with reference to the Fender Custom ’54 pickups originally in that guitar, and the pickups in a genuine vintage 1964 Fender Strat. I was impressed with the Grosh ’60s Fat pickups from the start, and retained that impression throughout my playing, in whatever setting, through whatever amp. Tonally, they were very close to the pickups in the genuine ’64 Stratocaster, but offered that little extra oomph that Grosh tells us he was going for. Comparing the Grosh ’60s Fat set alongside the original pickups in the Fender Custom Shop ’60s Relic helped to reveal the superior clarity and definition in the Grosh set—the vintage side of the equation—while really highlighting the extra punch they achieve in all positions. The bridge pickup approached the kick and twang of a good Tele bridge pickup, and all three avoided that occasional harsh glassiness that even many good Strat pickups can succumb to, while still sounding thoroughly “Strat-like”, with especially

plummy tones from the neck position.

In-between settings on the '60s Fat set are equally satisfying, offering that archetypal funky quack and snap that too often translates to a muffled honkiness in other guitars. Swapping the Grosh pickups into the Fender Relic really brought that guitar to life, and it was an excellent instrument to begin with. The result felt a little like playing a great-sounding guitar for a while, then discovering you've got its volume turned down to 9, and finally turning it up to 10 to reveal added dimension, depth, dynamics and bite. All in all, this is yet another set of Strat pickups that was definitely worth bringing to the market, and the Grosh Guitars '60s Fats are certainly worth checking into if you're still searching for that ultimate modified-vintage Strat sound. —*Dave Hunter*

Contact Grosh Guitars (303) 464-8717, www.groshguitars.com

Price Retail \$240/street N/A set of three (add \$10 for base plate)

Magnet Alnico V

DC Resistance Neck 6.03k Ω , middle 6.05k Ω , bridge 7.13k Ω

Wire 42 gauge plain enamel covered

Polepieces Six fixed alnico rod magnets

Kudos

Rich, clear and crisp vintage-voiced tones with added midrange punch.

Concerns

None.



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