

Product Reviews

Miller Pickups

By Marc S. Schwartz



From 1948 until his death, Django Reinhardt often played his Selmer guitar with a magnetic pickup made by the French Stimer company. Stimer was an amplifier maker that developed a Dearmond style pickup for the Selmer guitar in 1948. This original model was permanently attached to the guitar by screwing it into the top (gasp!). The model (ST-48) had a built-in volume control and eventually was manufactured with a bracket that allowed it to be installed and removed with ease causing no damage to the guitar top.

In 1951, Stimer made another, smaller pickup for Selmer guitars (ST-51) that was moveable with a “monkey on a stick” setup, mimicking the popular Dearmond archtop pickups. The Stimer Company manufactured these pickups until the late 1980s. Soon afterwards the company closed its doors for good.

The existing vintage Stimer pickups are hard to find and have been in demand by many who play the Selmer-style “Gypsy Jazz” guitar. The sound is far more acoustic than, say, a humbucker on an archtop. The acoustic crunch of a piezo pickup is missing, but the sustain of the magnetic pickup combined with the almost banjo-like tone of the Selmer-style guitar makes a combination that is justifiably sought after.

Dupont guitars, a French manufacturer of Selmer-style guitars has reissued both Stimer pickups with some modifications. The “monkey on a stick” is no longer used on the ST-51 and there are no tabs to permanently mount the ST-48 to the guitar top. Both pickups are mounted using a money-clip bracket that places the

pickup right up against the guitar neck, creating a tone that many will find a bit too warm for Gypsy jazz. In 2001 a small Swiss company was formed to manufacture parts for Selmer-style guitars. Miller Acoustic Guitar Equipment (www.miller-age.ch) makes tuners, tailpieces, pickups and picks. Their pickup is a modern version of the Stimer ST-51. It comes with or without a mounting bracket (without the bracket, adhesive putty is used) and with or without a volume control.

I contacted Rainer Muller, the owner of this enterprise and asked him to send me a pickup for testing. He sent two: his original pickup with a volume control and without a mounting bracket, and a new pickup he has developed for use with silver strings (the kind used by Django and most Gypsy jazz guitarists) that has a bracket, but no volume control. He also indicated that he was developing a bracket for use with D-hole Gypsy guitars (Maccaferri style). The unit without a volume control has a built-in cable. The unit with the volume control uses a supplied cable with a mini plug. Stimer, like Dearmond, used mini plugs, eventually switching to RCA-type plugs. The earliest Stimers, like the earliest Dearmonds, had built-in cables. Miller uses very high-quality Neutrik cables and supplies the entire unit with a beautifully crafted, wooden box. The price for the pickup without volume control is 200 Euros or about \$293US and with volume control it is 260 Euros (plus shipping) or \$380 US. There is a slightly cheaper model available in brass, as opposed to chrome. These prices are on par with the Dupont reissues. These pickups will NOT fit all Selmer-style guitars. The Miller website calls for a clearance of at least 11 millimeters between the strings and the soundboard. My Dupont MD-20 has exactly this clearance, and I still lose the top three notes on the high E string with the pickup installed.



Miller with volume control



jack system so that the pickup can be left on the guitar and the cable removed.

These pickups are engineered with the precision of a Swiss watch and are highly recommended.

Resources: Miller website: www.miller-age.ch

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Lawrence Lucie 1907-2009

Lawrence Lucie died on August 14 in New York at the age of 101. He lived at a nursing and rehabilitation center the last few years. Known as a superb rhythm guitarist, he played with Duke Ellington, Louis Armstrong, Billie Holliday and many others.

He originally studied banjo, mandolin and violin in Virginia, where he was born. He moved to New York at 19 to pursue a career in music, which lasted until 2005, where he last performed at Arturo's in Greenwich Village, playing solo guitar on Sunday evenings. He taught for over thirty years at the Borough of Manhattan Community College and often performed with the Harlem Jazz and Blues Band.



Bill Wurtzel and Larry Lucie



Bill Wurtzel, Phil Schaap, Gene Bertoncini and Larry Lucie at his 100th birthday.

The sound of the Miller pickup is excellent. Having owned a Dupont reissue and a Stimer original, I can report that the sound from this pickup is as good as the original (and better than the Dupont). It is bright, powerful and sustaining, with a tasty blend of acoustic and electric tone--the perfect sound to recreate late period Django Reinhardt or Henri Crolla. With silver strings (Argentine by Savarez is the industry standard silver string maker for Selmer-style guitars), there is a string-to-string imbalance on the original Miller pickup, just as there is the same imbalance with the original Stimers and the Dupont reissues. The B string is particularly "hot." Some players will find this annoying; others will like it, as it recreates Django's late-period sound. Using nickel strings solves the balance problem, but changes the sound of the guitar. This author feels that Selmer-style guitars sound best with silver strings.

Miller's new silver-string version is a godsend. Individual magnets are used to balance the strings (a single magnet was provided in Stimer originals), and this creates, in this author's opinion, the best magnetic pickup yet made for the Gypsy jazz guitar (if you use silver strings). My copy is a prototype, but if you contact Rainer (his e-mail is on the Miller website) I'd bet he would make the new "Argentine string" model upon request. I recommend the attached bracket (the bracket is easily removed and one could use putty as well). I also recommend the attached volume control, which attaches to the guitar's top with putty (BTW, the putty used by Swiss manufacturers like Miller or Schertler supposedly does not damage a guitar's finish). If you do opt for the model without a volume control, you will probably want to cut the attached cable and install a