

# WILKES 'THE ANSWER' SLIDING PICKUP SYSTEM

## QUESTIONING THE ANSWER

A ONE-PICKUP SYSTEM CAPABLE OF PRODUCING EVERY GUITAR SOUND IS THE UNIVERSAL DREAM OF PLAYERS AND MAKERS ALIKE. NOW LEADING BRITISH GUITAR CRAFTSMAN DOUG WILKES CLAIMS HE'S MADE THE ULTIMATE BREAKTHROUGH. HE CALLS IT 'THE ANSWER'. IN TUNE ASKED THE QUESTIONS!

There can't be many guitarists who haven't dreamed wistfully about being able to extract both humbucking and Strat-like single coil sounds from their one favourite guitar. Having to change from a Gibson to a Fender mid-set never feels perfectly comfortable, and even if you have one guitar fitted with humbuckers and an identical one fitted with single coil types, it still means having to own two guitars and changing over as your need for different sounds dictates. Dozens of different pickup types have been tried over the years; each trying to give you every possible sound from one guitar. We've had humbuckers with switchable coils, extra pickups on Strats and Gibsons, umpteen different phase and tapping concepts - but none of them have worked perfectly. They've inevitably left some sounds which just weren't available.

The solution, according to Doug Wilkes of Wilkes Guitars, lies in a novel sliding twin pickup system which he's called - appropriately enough if it does what's claimed - 'The Answer'. Still in the prototype stage when we were loaned our test sample, Doug had fitted his new system to a basic 'Strat-like' bitza Wilkes guitar which has been his test bed during the evolution of this pickup concept 'The Answer' is, like so many good ideas, blindingly simple. In a sense it follows the original 'sliding pickup' concept developed by the legendary Dan Armstrong back in the 1960s. Dan's idea was to enable players to vary the sounds of their guitars or basses by mounting the pickup in such a way that they could slide it more or less where they wanted along the guitar's body, shifting the pickups' position beneath the strings. Gibson, too, had a sliding single pickup on one of their basses, back in the 1970s.

Doug's system, however, takes the concept considerably further. At a glance, it looks like two single coil pickups mounted together on a sliding rail, so that they can be adjusted in position wherever you want them. However, appearances can be deceptive, because the Wilkes system is actually a *single* pickup, split into two halves. The magnetic fields are opposed, so that when you set the two sections close together you get a genuine hum-cancelling twin coil effect. Separate the halves, however (by depressing the pickup you want to move just slightly, then re-



positioning it) and the effect is to exactly duplicate two single coil types. Why *two* as opposed to three pickups a la conventional Strat? The reason stems from Wilkes' desire to avoid the 'false' or 'double note' effect you get on a typical 3 pickup Strat or similar guitar (especially when lightly strung with a low action), where the magnetic pull of having three pickups acting on the string contributes to (even if it isn't the sole cause of) that unharmonious and clashing overtone effect on the low E string which is a common failing of this type of guitar. Two pickups just don't magnetically *pull* as hard on the strings, yet give you all the sound combinations you want.

Moreover, The Answer seems to eliminate 'dead spots' - admittedly these aren't such a problem on guitars as they are on Precision basses and their copies, but they *can* exist, and disturb your sound quite annoyingly. With this sliding pickup system, such dead spots can be almost completely negated by placing the pickups at the optimum harmonic points beneath the strings. Roll on a bass version!

The main benefit of The Answer, however, lies in its ability to enable you to get almost any sound from your guitar. On our sample model, placing the pickup halves close together near the bridge delivered a fierce Eddie van Halen searing 'humbucker on a Strat'-type snarl, the sort of sound which you'd normally have to fit a good humbucker onto your Strat or copy to obtain.

In itself this is a major achievement, but then you can slide the pickup halves apart, so that a more typical single coil Hendrix-

like scream can be obtained. Adjust the relative positions once again and you're immediately getting a Knopfler sound. 'In Between', humbucking - all the normal Strat sounds are there, but with a vastly finer control, simply because you can set the positionings (thus controlling the sounds to a minute degree) as you want them. The system also supplies phase switches and one or two pickups on/off, combined with a single volume plus one control - flexibility indeed!

Imagine one guitar from which you could obtain all the usual Strat single coil sounds, *in addition* to humbucking effects. Add to that almost infinite flexibility of being able to vary your tones by setting the pickup halves where you will, imagine a Strat or Strat-like guitar without dead notes, double or 'false' notes on the low E and you can see why Doug Wilkes is probably justified in calling his new system 'The Answer'! All we can say is that we've tried it, and it works - with a vengeance!

Now for the *really* good news! The Answer is going to be available as an add-on to almost *any* guitar. The actual amount of routing-out of the guitar body needed to fit the Wilkes system is pretty minimal, and should be well within the scope of any competent repairman or *genuinely* capable do-it-yourselfer. Wilkes are currently negotiating with those West German aces Schaller for them to manufacture The Answer in economic quantities and, although a fixed price wasn't available as we went to Press on this issue, we understand from Doug that he is hoping for a retail price *below* £100 to be achieved.

If such a retail price is genuinely possible then The Answer will *definitely be just what its name suggests*. With this system fitted to a Strat (*be it a genuine US or a Sprier type*), Tokai, Ibanez - almost any well manufactured guitar, in fact - you'll have one instrument which can deliver all the usual Strat tones, humbucker effects and more. Consider, too, that it can eliminate some of the inherent flaws in the sounds of this type of guitar, and you can see why we consider Doug's appellation appropriate - *The Answer it certainly is!* Although the system isn't on the market yet, readers interested in the concept can get details by contacting Wilkes Guitars at Unit 15, Trent Industrial Estate, Botteslow SL, Hanley, Stoke-On-Trent, Staffs. Phone (0782) 260136.