

SHOOTOUT AT THE COIL CORRAL

We Rate 24 J-Bass Replacement Pickups

\$4.95 tip of the month: Replacing pickups is the simplest way to improve your

tone. Manufacturers sometimes cut corners when it comes to electronics, so dropping in an after-market pro-quality set can transform even the cheapest axe into a usable workhorse. Great news if you own a J-style bass: There are dozens of replacement pickups on the market. Vintage single-coil, stacked humbucker, quad coil—you name it, it's out there. We rounded up two dozen passive models and headed to our studio for a pickup-to-pickup comparison test.

Just how do you test 24 sets of pickups? Start with several gallons of coffee. Since it would be difficult to maintain an accurate picture of what the first set of pickups sounded like compared to the last, recording each set was the only way to go. Our test bass—which we later dubbed the Testor 2000—was a stock Fender American Standard Jazz. (See page 60.) We reduced pickup installation time by modifying the instrument: Two channels were routed to allow the pickups to be slid in and out



without loosening the strings, and two terminal blocks hard-wired to the pots allowed the hot and ground leads to be inserted into the system. (How fast is fast? Try removing and installing two sets in under two minutes!) After setting the pickup height to $\frac{1}{8}$ " for the bridge and $\frac{5}{32}$ " for the neck, the bass was ready to record via an MIT Ripcord cable, Raven Labs MDB-1 Mixer/Direct Box/Buffer, Mackie 24-8 mixing board, and Alesis ADAT XT. A beautiful '65

Fender Jazz was on hand to keep our ears tuned to the real deal. We recorded each set to an upbeat rock tune, complete with a big kick drum and loud guitars (read: lots of thick, bass-masking frequencies). We used no EQ, compression, or effects. Later, several staffers held a listening party to offer comments on each set's tone. Further testing was done through our Soundlab reference rig.

Before we list our favorite sets, let us say such a test is very subjective. We didn't use measuring devices to determine impedances and resonant peaks. We used our ears, just as you would if you were comparing two or more replacement candidates. That said, here are our recommendations.

Top Tone awards in the vintage replacement department go to the Aero Instrument MP-181, Basslines Antiquity Jazz Bass I & II, Fender Custom

BY SCOTT MALANDRONE

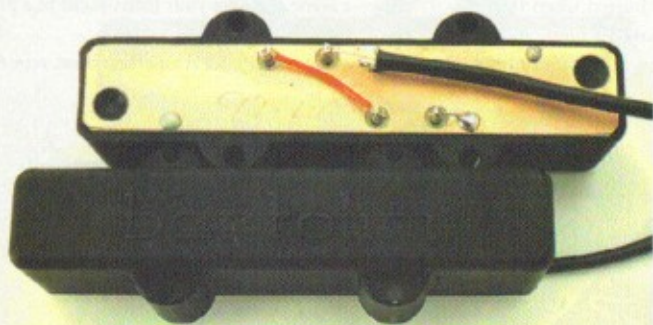
EDITORS'
TOP TONE
AWARD



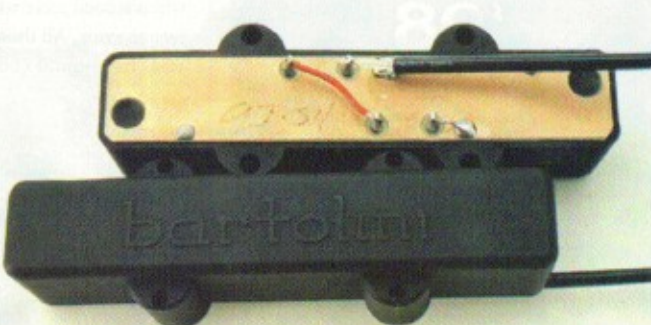
Aero Instrument MP-181



AGI Lace Transensor TSJ-500



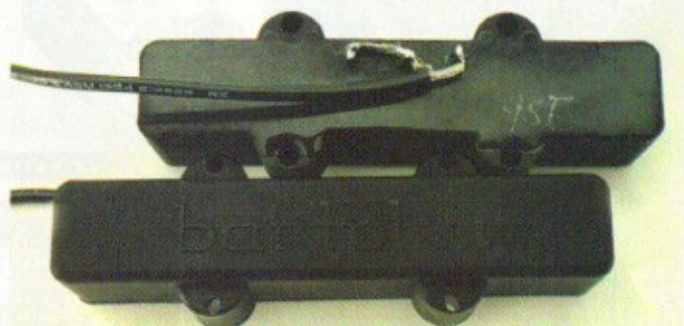
Bartolini 9J#1



Bartolini 9J#4



Bartolini 9K#1



Bartolini 9U



Bartolini 9W4



Bartolini 9W4J

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SHOOTOUT *continued*

Shop '60s Jazz Bass, and Lindy Fralin JB. All of these models offer real-deal tone, and the Antiquities come complete with an old-school look—the screws are even rusted! Humbucker-wise, the DiMarzio Ultra Jazz takes the prize for impressive J-like sound without hum. For recording, it's hard to beat the Basslines Hot SJB-2, Quarter Pound, Antiquity IIs, and the DiMarzio Model J. The Bartolini 9W4J and Lane Poor JB merit Most Innovative icons for their unique coil designs—and distinctive tones. (Honorable mention goes to the AGI Transensor pickups in the Innovative category for smart electronic design.)

One observation: Pickups that sounded great when soloed were usually buried when thrown into the mix. All those crystalline highs and thin mids may sound cool when you're jamming by

yourself—but if you want to really be a part of the team, don't look for a pickup with the "prettiest" sound. For proof, EQ your bass to have presence and punch when played with other instruments. Now listen to it by itself. Not exactly what you would have dialed up playing solo, is it? The point is to keep the big picture in mind—unless, of course, your band is your bedroom.

If you're thinking of replacing your J-Bass with an overpriced boutique model, try installing new pickups first. You may be surprised at what you hear, and you might stumble on a tone you never thought your bass was capable of producing. (You also may find that the extra clarity of those new pickups shows you really do need to practice!) And by all means, if you don't feel up to doing electronic work, do yourself—and your bass—a favor and take your instrument to a pro repair shop.

See comparison chart, page 63



PICKUP RATINGS

In this Product Profile, the ratings reflect both subjective (Warmth and Clarity) and objective (Output) factors. These scores are intended to indicate only the "personality" of each pickup so you can make meaningful comparisons; therefore, a higher score does not mean that one pickup is better than another—just different. In the case of Output, in particular, you may not want or need a louder pickup, so a score of 3 (average) may be more desirable for you than a score of 5 (really loud). The final category, Sound, reflects our opinion of the overall performance of each pickup given the parameters of this review only. Rating pickups is a lot like rating wine—your taste is what counts.



Old meets new. A stock '65 J-Bass sits next to the "Testor 2000," a modified Fender American Standard J-Bass. Note the pickup routs.

MANUFACTURER	MODEL	MADE IN	LIST PRICE	WARRANTY	TYPE	MAGNET MATERIAL	NUMBER OF CONDUCTORS	SCORE	COMMENTS
Aero Instrument	MP-181	USA	\$150	One-year limited	Single-coil	Alnico 5	Two	Warmth: 5 Clarity: 3.5 Output: 4 Amplified Sound: 5 Recorded Sound: 4 Value: 4.5	Heavy lows, distinct upper mids, and round top that's cool for fingerstyle rock, blues, and country. (And '70s-style funk.) Broken-in vibe that's fun to play. On tape, pickups have big bottom for a J, although the tone can get a bit thick.
AGI	Lace Transensor TSJ-500	USA	\$89.95 each	One-year limited	"Transensor" single-coil	Ceramic	Two	Warmth: 3 Clarity: 2 Output: 2 Amplified Sound: 2 Recorded Sound: 2 Value: 2	Quiet, hum-free operation with low output. Decent punch with subdued top end. Rather small-sounding in the track. (For better lows, AGI's Jeff Lace recommends 100kΩ volume pots instead of 250kΩ.)
Bartolini	9J#1	USA	\$150	One-year limited	Split-coil humbucker	Ceramic and iron	Two	Warmth: 4 Clarity: 4 Output: 2 Amplified Sound: 4 Recorded Sound: 3 Value: 3.5	Super-deep fundamentals with pro-sounding sheen. Vintage-like character with modern appeal. Could use some preamping, though, as output is very low. More neutral-sounding in studio. "Not a bad sound, but it kind of disappears in the mix."
Bartolini	9J#4	USA	\$150	One-year limited	Split-coil humbucker	Ceramic and iron	Two	Warmth: 4 Clarity: 4.5 Output: 2 Amplified Sound: 4 Recorded Sound: 4 Value: 3.5	Similar to above, but a dash more top-end openness. (And it could also benefit from a preamp.) Records well with lots of oomph.
Bartolini	9K#1	USA	\$150	One-year limited	Split-coil humbucker	Ceramic and iron	Two	Warmth: 4 Clarity: 4 Output: 3 Amplified Sound: 4.5 Recorded Sound: 4 Value: 4	Slightly more output than 9J series. Early-J warmth with a blend of brilliance and a harmonics. A bit one-dimensional in the studio, although the top-end clarity really cuts.
Bartolini	9U	USA	\$129	One-year limited	Single-coil	Ceramic and iron	Two	Warmth: 4 Clarity: 4 Output: 3.5 Amplified Sound: 4 Recorded Sound: 3 Value: 3.5	Sounds like a Jazz, but you have to really dig in. A bit muffled sounding on tape. "Refined." "Would kill with a good preamp."
Bartolini	9W4	USA	\$163	One-year limited	Quadracoil	Ceramic and iron	Two	Warmth: 5 Clarity: 2 Output: 4 Amplified Sound: 4 Recorded Sound: 3 Value: 3.5	Nice & beefy with good string separation. Top end is smooth but a bit tame. Sounded compressed and chorused recorded against track.
Bartolini	9W4J	USA	\$163	One-year limited	Quadracoil	Ceramic and iron	Two	Warmth: 5 Clarity: 3 Output: 4 Amplified Sound: 5 Recorded Sound: 4 Value: 4	Similar to 9W4s, but more bark and a bit more bite. Good mid emphasis and upper-end attack in the studio.
Basslines (Seymour W. Duncan Antiquity)	Antiquity for Jazz Bass	USA	\$200	One-year limited	"Pre-aged" single-coil	"Aged & Distressed" Alnico II	Two	Warmth: 5 Clarity: 3 Output: 3 Amplified Sound: 5 Recorded Sound: 4.5 Value: 4	Old-school look, old-school tone. Vintage-like top is very '65-ish, but with no harshness. Warm and musical with pleasing low mids.
Basslines (Seymour W. Duncan Antiquity)	Antiquity for Jazz Bass II	USA	\$200	One-year limited	"Pre-aged" single-coil	"Distressed" Alnico 5	Two	Warmth: 4 Clarity: 3.5 Output: 4 Amplified Sound: 5 Recorded Sound: 5 Value: 4.5	Similar to Antiquity but more punch—and a ton of bottom. Top end voiced slightly lower for cut. "Lows have a real feeling of support."