

Bare Knuckle Pickups:

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Trilogy Suite: High output Strat pickup set: cost GBP 165

Apache single coils: Vintage Style pickup set: cost GBP165

Intro

Hooray for the Internet! It has to be said that without the Net it is hard to imagine that the custom and bespoke guitar gear industry would be anything like as healthy as it appears to be today. New companies are popping up all the time, offering the dedicated tech head fresh stuff to spend their hard earned cash on.

A new contender in the world of boutique pickups is Bare Knuckle. Their product range encompasses the best of the vintage and modern pickup design with a unique slant. 2 sets of pickups are up for review, showcasing both ends of Bare Knuckle's Strat repertoire.

The trilogy suite set promises to really pack a punch, being very high output Strat sized single coils which Bare Knuckle claim, offer a modern, high output sound, but retaining the fundamental characteristics of the Strat.

The Apache set hark back to the first 1954 Strats, utilising **alnico 3 magnets and **42 gauge formvar coated magnet wire**, just like the first Strats did. These are not 'aged', and so aim to offer a reproduction of what a 54 Strat might have sounded like when it first came off the production line 50 years ago, except that they are slightly over wound for a little more output.**

So with gloves off, it's time to get stuck in to round 1!

The Trilogy Suite:

Weighing in at a hefty 11.25 K Ohm (DC resistance**) for the neck and middle and a massive 15.1 K Ohm for the bridge, the Trilogy suite offers a totally new take on the**

Strat tone we all love. This pickup set has no magnet stagger so is best suited to more modern Strats, but a vintage style magnet stagger is available for no extra cost.

The first thing that I noticed about these pickups is that the covers are on the snug side.

This suggests that the bobbins are slightly oversized, which when you take into account the output of the pickup, is not a big surprise! It does mean that when fitting them though, you need to be careful not to snag to coil windings with any sharp edges which might immediately kill the pickup. The pickup is very neatly made, with no traces of excess wax from the potting process, and the whole set is very professionally presented in a suitably retro box, containing wiring diagram, instructions on installation, warranty card, a set of strings and a Bare Knuckle plectrum!

Sounds:

It goes without saying that these pickups are not exactly shy and retiring. They border on the downright rude right from the outset, with a very characterful brash and forward attitude. If you like to push your preamp hard these will do that for you, no pedals required. In terms of tone they seem to sit in the middle of a tonal triangle, having elements of Strat, Tele and indeed a touch of P90. Compared to a Tele or a Les Paul Junior, they are still a little reserved, but with bags more middle and punch than any other Strat pickup I've ever heard.

The bridge unit, which is the real heavyweight, does a passable Tele impression, but still retains much of the Strat character, with plenty of sharp attack and pop. Turning back the volume introduces a much more characteristic Strat tone, although mids are still emphasised strongly. The neck unit is much more P90 like, although not as open and raw sounding, being still relatively polite when compared to a Les Paul Special. The middle pickup is at it's best used in conjunction with the neck and bridge units to provides those characteristic quacky tones, but as expected, with a dollop of extra juice.

These pickups offer a truly modern interpretation of the Strat and are not for the faint hearted.

Seconds out, round 2.

The Apache single coil set are, from their name obviously inspired by a certain bespectacled guitarist from the 50s. They are relatively low output, at about 6 K Ohm, and promise to offer a much more vintage flavoured ride.

Firstly, I should confess that I don't have a 1954 Strat to compare these pickups to, in fact I don't even have a maple board Strat, (donations will be gladly accepted) so these were test driven in a '60s style slab rosewood 'board Strat. Hopefully this will help put these pickups in context against others that I have reviewed.

Again, the Apaches are neat and professionally presented, but are less snug in their covers which I find a little more reassuring, although I am always paranoid about breaking whatever pickups I'm handling. They have a vintage stagger and are better suited to this vintage radius board.

Sounds: In a word WOW! I have been privileged to play about with some pretty special pickups, and own a set of what I considered up until now to be the best vintage style aftermarket pickups available. The Apaches seemingly offer the absolute best of 2 different types of Strat; with the brightness of a maple board 50s type and the warmth of a rosewood board 60s. Now to be fair, these were installed in a rosewood board strat, so you have to account for a bit of extra darkness and warmth from that, but the Apaches are clear, glassy, articulate, well balanced and well mannered, but with a punch and warmth that belies their lowly DC rating. The neck pickup is smooth and clear, with those crystal but not harsh highs and a snappy bass note. A tiny hint of extra mids offers a vaguely jazzy vibe but no muddiness at all. The middle pickup is classic Strat, again with those crystal highs and solid lows, but with a dollop of springiness and extra

*snap. The bridge pickup is perfect for arpeggios and chord work, having a slightly more exaggerated mid range. Whether it is the weaker alnico 3 magnets or not I don't know, but to my mind single notes seem to ring more freely and for longer with these pickups. Positions 2 and 4 on the 5 way selector are where these pickups really excel. Naturally these positions are hum cancelling, with the middle pickup being **reverse wound reverse polarity**. The Apaches are clear and quacky in these positions, and perfect for Knopfleresque solos and Clapton style 'Power Rhythm'. Often these 2 positions lack a little definition, and can be slightly muffled sounding, but the Apaches retain all of their characterful clarity with an extra fruity quack. These pickups are well suited to any kind of clean work, and anything up to a classic rocky grind. Being in the feather weight category as pickups go you won't want to use the Apaches for Nu Metal or anything too extreme, but that's not what they are about. The Apaches are perfect for the vintage purist looking for a bit of extra push, but without sacrificing crispness or focus.*

I can't offer an absolute verdict on how these would compare to a set of '54 pickups, but I would have no hesitation in recommending them to anybody in the market for a vintage style pickup.

Conclusion.

From first sight I loved these pickups. They were reassuringly well presented, and obviously manufactured with a great deal of care and attention to detail. Neither set slavishly follows a set formula of any kind, with even the Apaches having a slight twist to the vintage theme. Tim at Bare Knuckle claims that all their pickups are designed effectively by ear rather than by a spec sheet and that really becomes obvious when you use these pickups to do what they were designed for. It's fair to say that the Trilogy suite probably won't appeal to the vintage purists, but for anyone who owns a Strat these are a real treat to turn to in those moments when inspiration is taking a break.

Brash, raucous and unsubtle at first, they offer a surprising array of tonal colours when you have time to experiment, and can be very versatile.

The Apaches offer a different experience all together, offering all those sounds that only a Strat can. You won't find any P90 or Tele type tones in these, only pure and completely uncompromised Strat tones, and if those sounds are why you play a Strat then these pickups will never disappoint.