

# Heading for Headway

by Davy Steele



Davy Steele looking pleased with his new Headway pick-up system

Its 9am the phone rings; not a good time for anyone who is a musician; body clocks on different planets and all that. It's the unmistakable Northern Irish cant of Robin Morton.

"Davy there's a guy called John Littler gonna call you, it's about pick-up systems for your bouzouki and guitar, sounds good. bye."

"Eh?wwhhaaa?time?eh—  
wwhhoo—Ro-!! Bye!!"

ZZZZZZZZZZ.

I thought no more of it, in fact I remembered nothing of it, putting the whole thing down to some hellish nightmare involving Robin Morton, (nothing strange there) but no! indeed the phone call came, and John Littler asked me if I would try his systems out.

My bouzouki was made by Andy Tobin, a fine instrument maker from Bristol. He had installed a Fishman pick-up which was OK and with which I had had no major problems. It did not, however, have any controls at the instrument end, which would be a problem if I was doing a solo gig, so this was one of the reasons I showed interest in the Headway system. When John found out it was Andy who had made my bouzouki, he informed me Andy had just given him an order for six pick-ups. So I thought I'll give it a go. John then asked if I would do a review of the HE1/Bz1C pick-up for Living Tradition when I had tested it. I asked him what would happen if I didn't like the system, as I explained I would not lie in the review - I feel quite strongly about that. John said the review was up to me which I thought fairly honest, and it showed a lot of confidence in his product!

I agreed to try it out and immediately called Andy Tobin to ask him to fit the system to my bouzouki for the Battlefield Band's forthcoming tour of the USA. Andy was delighted I was going to use this system, as he was fitting it

to all bouzoukis he made, that required pick-ups. So, it was duly fitted to Shug (that's what I call my bouzouki - don't ask) and sent back. One of the tests I had done myself was to play the old system through my Trace Elliot amp and also record it. This was to give me some idea of direct comparisons.

The thing is, this HE1 pick-up system is tailored to specific instruments, from guitars to mandolins; in other words it's not a one-for-all, hoping the frequencies somehow make it. It did make sense to me, even given the ability to EQ, that the difference between, say for example, a nylon strung guitar and my bouzouki, was really day and night, so something that is geared to doing a specific job is going to be probably better than a catch-all situation. With a sense of "have I done the right thing?" I

plugged in my returned Shug to the amp and waited to give judgment on the newly fitted HE1/Bz1C, which is specifically for bouzoukis, octave mandos and mandocello. The first thing I noticed was that it was definitely quieter in the Trace than the Fishman had been, and there was no annoying scratchy squeaks or rubbing noises that you can sometimes get when putting the guitar on, or moving or touching the leads. In my opinion the

sound coming out of the amp was as close to the acoustic sound of Shug I had ever heard. I was duly amazed - going over the top am I?! Well it really did knock my socks off, and when I recorded it there was a definite warmth to the instrument without losing that bite that a good bouzouki has.

The next test was the tour. I now had more control at the instrument end which meant Rob Van Sante, the Batty's sound man, could do more at the desk end. He also loved the sound Shug now had, and throughout the whole tour we never had any trouble, and that was with using a different sound system every night, I think that's a fairly good test as well. The battery also was long lasting and easily changed when it was needed. All in all, it's a great piece of kit that I have no problem in recommending. In fact it was so good that I decided to put a Headway Electronics "Snake" on my guitar, my 00018 small bodied Martin guitar, (I call Martin ???) - the guitar I'm afraid to put polish on. I think you get my drift? This is the basic acoustic guitar active under saddle transducer pickup system, as it's described. The same as my bouzouki system but no control knobs. (What, drill holes in Martin? Not on your nelly - not on anybody's nelly) I got the

pick up installed by a real bunch of guitar experts who work in a shop that is a way of life in Michigan, (if not the US) called Elderly, The man there was THE MAN. He put in each string and individually eq'd them, according to the installing instructions that came with the pick up. The result was as a really sweet sounding guitar that drew comments from anyone who heard it, and a very pleased Batty.

I am not an expert on sound, I could not tell you what string vibrates at what frequency, well not much anyway, but I know what I like and this sounds great.

Please though, for the best results, make sure the people fitting the system don't have ten gallon hats, lassoes and spurs - you'll only regret it in the end. Although it's also logical to me that installed properly, this system could give a tippy guitar more bottom end and vice versa (so therefore make a lesser quality instrument sound better) the better the instrument and amplification system, the better the sound. If you are thinking about a pick-up system I think you might like this one.

I've probably left wads of information out of this but then that might make you call Headway Electronics yourself, and then you'll be talking to experts, and everybody will be happy. Me? - I'm chuffed! ☺

The "Snake" comes in at about £80 and the HE1 system, depending on what you want, is between £139 to £200. More details from -

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