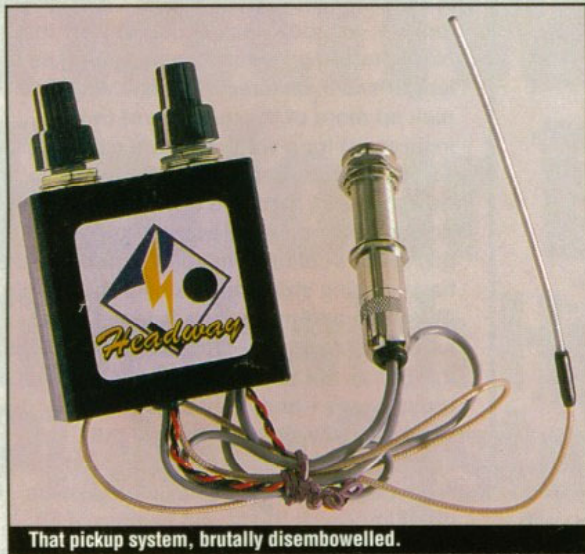


MAKING HEADWAY?

● SOUNDS



to achieve this in their detailed instructions.

Installing the G1 preamp means drilling two mounting holes in the guitar's side. The main concern, of course, can you bear to alter your vintage or just plain prized acoustic? If you can, it'd be a good idea to additionally reinforce the side of your guitar. For vintage owners (or just anti-drill freaks) Headway suggest a method of pre-setting and fitting the preamp internally, or if you're dead against knobs of all types – as, Headway mention rather ruefully, they're discovering – they've just released a fixed EQ version with the preamp mounted on the endpin socket, rather like Fishman's Matrix system.

The system comes pre-wired, so there's no soldering. Plugging into the endpin socket automatically switches the battery on, and heavy duty Velcro pads are provided for fitting the battery holder.

In conclusion, the actual fitting of the Headway pickup is similar to many under-saddle systems such as Fishman, EMG, Ashworth and Barcus Berry, but the coaxial piezo cable makes it especially similar to the USA-made Highlander system; the Highlander's preamp is notably different, but the pickups' likenesses mean that the two systems share certain performance qualities – particularly a warm and natural tonal quality, having some of the characteristics and flavour of a soundboard transducer.

Generally, then, the Headway system is well made and well presented; there's room for improvement in the style and size of the control knobs, but Headway tell us this issue is being addressed.

Bill Puplett

To gain more perspective on Headway's new pickup we asked TGM's Guitar Doc Bill Puplett to fit and road-test the system...

Even if you're a bit of a dab hand with a screwdriver, bear in mind that, like Fishman and EMG, Headway recommend pro installation of their pickup and preamp. Why? Well, under-saddle pickups can be a very tricky breed. Special tools and jigs are often needed to achieve the fine tolerances required for optimising the efficiency and response of the transducer, especially if your guitar's saddle slot needs deepening or widening. You should expect to pay £40-£70 for fitting an under-saddle system such as this; more if the job is especially difficult.

The Headway's coaxial pickup cable is round in section; I found the best results by milling a rounded channel in the bottom of the saddle slot. The HE1 will still work if installed in a normal flat-bottomed slot, but fitting it snugly in a round channel improves the overall response and seems to allow the pickup to sense more of the instrument's natural character.

The Headway's pickup is sensitive along its entire length so it caters for all string spacings and should fit virtually any length slot without cutting (difficult and not advised). The HE1 requires a $\pm 45^\circ$ 2.5mm hole drilled at the treble side of the slot (watch the strutting!), and the pickup is then inserted from the inside of the guitar. Various types of saddle material are recommended; I found the accuracy of the fit of the saddle more critical than the saddle material, though of course there'll be subtle audible differences and really soft saddles aren't recommended. Also, once the instrument has settled under string tension, the outputs of the strings may need tweaking to make sure they're balanced: Headway outline various ways

Compared to the mizzly brashness of some parlours, the Hathway has a pleasantly sweet, open timbre and a laudable amount of volume considering the body size. The cedar and maple combination works well, the easy-breathing warmth and immediacy of the cedar keeping the maple's natural brightness from sounding too dominant but allowing it to contribute to a well defined tonal response across the strings and a jaunty sustain.

In their brochure Headway throw a lot of electronic whys and wherefores at the reader in support of the claimed wondrousness of their electro system. But so much for words. What does the thing sound like? The answer is, pretty damn good. Perhaps, like me, you've come across electro-acoustics whose amplified sound bears scant resemblance to what you've been hearing acoustically. Here, however, this system powers the Hathway most sympathetically, bringing out rather than submerging its natural timbres and acting as an extension to the instrument rather than trying to subvert it with some kind of Jekyll-and-Hyde personality change.

Just as impressive, though, is the system's smoothness and tonal transparency. A balanced maturity is immediately evident; I rarely needed to depart from the EQ's centre settings, except for tonal experimentation.

On an operational note, the EQ controls – all offering a broad range for tonal treatment – work on a cut/boost basis, but the centre detentes are so subtle that, apart from knowing that their 'flat' positions are at nine o'clock with the pots vertically in line, you might just as well treat them as continuous controls. I wouldn't mind betting, though, that unless your instrument has some particular tonal skew that needs ironing out or you're after a special setting, you'll find yourself dialling up more or less to those central positions. On a basis of the less EQ the better, that's a persuasive commendation.

VERDICT

This is the first Hathway I've seen or played, and though there are elements of the finishing that lag behind the exacting standards of most UK luthiers, there's little doubt Paul Hathway is delivering the goods in terms of general craftsmanship and sounds – and at starting prices of around £700, he's also doing so very competitively. For that reason alone, his is a name to add to the Brit hit list.

And so are Headway. Whether they're offering, as claimed, the world's finest active under-saddle pickup systems must be arguable – specifications and company

superlatives aside there are so many subjective factors which come into play, not least, prosaically, such a seemingly trivial thing as whether you're a fan of concentric controls. Personally, I'm not.

But the system does sound extremely good (and natural) and the price is well on the case. If players and makers are moved to start preaching the gospel according to Headway in significant numbers (Lowden, for instance, have favourably assessed the system but say they've no immediate plans to change from their regular EMG and Fishman systems), then it's a name we're likely to hear more of in years to come. **G**