

1999

Guitar Picks What's So Special About Guitar Picks

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Recommended Citation

Shoaf, Eric C., "Guitar Picks What's So Special About Guitar Picks" (1999). *Publications*. 46.
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Guitar Picks

What's So Special About Guitar Picks

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By [ERIC C. SHOAF](#)



You may have one in your pocket. They only cost about 25 cents. But if you have always used one to play guitar, you are lost if you don't have one. They are picks! Skinny little bits of celluloid, plastic, nylon, or any of a hundred other substances. There really isn't anything special about picks except that you probably use one every day.

Picks finally got some respect back in 1995, with the Miller Freeman publication of the book *Picks!*, by Will Hoover. It's a cute book, and it's informative in an area where little knowledge had previously been gathered.

"Picks are fun," says Hoover. "Fun is the word."

Indeed it is, ask anyone who collects them. The hobby of pick collecting got a real shot in the arm when the Hoover book was released, because there was finally a written reference work that created a common language.

Why collect picks? "Why not?" say collectors. Picks have attributes that make them collectible. There are endless varieties, lots of vintage makes, and your favorite guitar player probably uses one. Wouldn't it be nice to own one of his (or her) picks? They don't take up much space, a ready trader market exists to meet your needs, and vintage picks are cool case accessories for your old guitar. We talked to some pick collectors to find out what inspires them.

"I really like the vintage picks," says Chris Gaylord, a South Carolinian who has collected picks for 18 years. Gaylord has acquired a well-deserved reputation as a plectrologist. His interest in and knowledge of vintage picks has spread beyond the picks themselves and into pick display items such as cards, boxes, and pouches from the vintage era.

"My collection is broad and showcases picks made by several companies, starting with D'Andrea in the 1920s, to Gibson in the '30s and '40s, to the Herco and Fender picks of the '50s, along with a lot of forgotten names like Coast, H&F, and Wabash.

"I have many discontinued sizes and shapes represented in an array of colors and materials such as ivory, tortoiseshell, glass, stone, horn, metal, leather, and celluloid."

Harry Anderson has many vintage picks, but takes a different approach to collecting. Beginning in the mid '80s, Anderson began collecting picks with store logos on them. Now his collection contains picks from 49 states (only Idaho isn't represented).

"I like to describe mine as a general collection" he says. ♦ "It contains picks from nearly every state and 10 countries, and it has several dozen genuine tortoiseshell picks, as well as hundreds of vintage picks. ♦ There are picks made from brass, copper, aluminum, stainless steel, wood, stone, glass, ebony, felt, nylon, coconut shell, pecan shell, buffalo horn, carbonate, and graphite.

"It also contains pick pouches and pick boxes from D'Andrea, Fender, Gibson, McPherson and Herco," he adds. ♦ "I have full pick cards from Nick Lucas and Bob Clifton, as well."

The world of pick collecting took a new turn in February, 1991, when Anderson spoke with Alan Greenwood of VG magazine. Greenwood, VG's publisher, was impressed with Harry's picks and told him he could display his collection at the magazine's booth at the vintage guitar show in Pomona, California, the following year. Anderson easily filled up a 20" X 16" frame with about 150 picks, and the display generated a lot of interest.

Jeff White is a collector with different interests.

"I have a big collection of celebrity picks and my collection consists mostly of bands and artists whose music I enjoy," says White. "For example I am a big fan of Joe Satriani, Steve Vai, Eric Johnson, Gary Hoey, Edward Van Halen, Santana, and Aerosmith. I try to focus on obtaining picks from just these artists first, since they are my favorites. Most of my picks are from rock and roll bands and players."



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But White likes vintage picks as well, and he senses a growing interest.

"My favorite pick of all is a Nick Lucas-impressed pick from the '30s," he said. "Lucas was the first guitarist to popularize the use of a flat pick on the guitar, and bring the guitar out from a background instrument to the forefront as a stand-alone instrument. Due to his popularity at the time, picks were made by the D'Andrea company bearing his name embossed into the pick. This, no doubt, is the first signature pick made. These early examples of the Nick Lucas pick are hard to find, but they're out there," says White.

As one might expect, Hoover also collects.

"Ninety percent of the picks photographed for the book are mine," he says. "We actually shot about 800 photos and only a small number were used. I have thousands of picks now, all vintage." For Hoover, the impetus to collect and to write the book came from fountain pens.

"I went to a fountain pen show and looked at all the cool swirly plastic," he recalls. "At least I thought it was plastic until I found out it was celluloid. When I realized picks were made out of celluloid, too, I knew I was onto something."

As one who came to pick collecting only very recently, Jeff White relates, "I was never intrigued to start collecting picks until about two years ago, when I met a member of Steve Vai's band and he gave me one. I then thought I would do a search on the Internet to see if anyone out there collected signature picks. Low and behold, there is actually an on-line community of people who collect picks and trade them back and forth for certain artists.

"Once I got involved in trading picks within this group, my collection just took off."

The online community to which White refers is called Pick-net, and details can be found at White's website, <http://home.earthlink.net/~jeffwhite/theuniversalpicktrader.html>.

Pick traders on the internet swap duplicates to fill out collections. Trading has helped White build a fine collection in a short time, though he says his is on the small side.

"I have about 900 signature picks, which is a modest [amount], since some traders I know have thousands. I also have roughly 300 vintage and 200 promo picks," he says.

Anderson got started collecting when some vintage picks were new! While in high school, he bought a Gibson ES-150 and a multicolored Mosaic pick he still has.

"That was 1954, in North Dakota," he says. "How it stayed with me all these years, I don't know." Anderson now has over 3,000 picks in his collection, but he still makes regular runs to find old ones. "They are harder to find now than back in the '80s," he remarks. "Small towns and old mom-and-pop music stores are still good for finding them. I've got plenty of duplicates, so I do a lot of trading now."

Gaylord has an impressive collection of vintage picks, but oddly enough his first collectible pick was from a celebrity.

"When I was in the seventh grade, someone gave me a Paul Stanley block logo pick," he said. But now he says he has too many to count.

"I currently have thousands," he effuses, adding he enjoys trying to unearth old picks. "Vintage picks can best be located in old music stores, but other places may have old picks, including pawn shops and antique stores. My dad added drug stores to my list of places to look. In earlier times, these were considered variety stores, and many sold guitar strings and picks."

VG also has a couple of budding pick collectors on staff. Dave Kyle, the roadworthy reporter from Nashville, has a small collection.

"I started collecting when I was doing stagehand work for rock and roll bands," he said. "They would leave scads of them laying around. And being a guitar player, I thought they might come in handy. Having been around some of the most famous players in the world, it's kind of nice to have a little something to remember them by."

Steve Patt, VG's former product reviewer extraordinaire and a family practice physician, has started a mini pick museum at his shop.

"I actually kick myself for not starting earlier," he said. "When I think of the live shows I've seen - Jeff Beck with Nicky Hopkins and Rod Stewart at the local ice rink, The Who at a small joint in Baltimore, and Jimi Hendrix at a real dungheap in Washington, I could've snagged picks willy nilly!

"They're a lovely and ephemeral way to capture the moment, and aside from their historical significance, quite nice to look at."

Hoover captured a bit of that ephemeral nature in his book and notes that celluloid, the material used to make picks from the beginning, is now being phased out and replaced by plastics.

"I'm sorry to see celluloid go, but I'll keep looking for picks. They are out there hiding in a million dresser drawers, in old brown and pink cases, and on dusty shelves in stores."

Perhaps you would like to start collecting.

"People of all ages can afford and enjoy this hobby," says Gaylord. "A person should have no problem finding at least one field that suits them."

"My hat's off to all the early collectors who turned me on to this non-dangerous mania," Patt adds. "Including my friend Guy DeVillie,

who publishes the *Pick Tips* newsletter. It's a great help."

If you start collecting, remember there are as many varieties and colors as you can imagine. They don't cost a lot and don't take up much space. You can also get celebrity picks for a minimum of effort. Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to your favorite celebrity's fan club or management company. Many will send you picks free of charge. Celebrity picks are among the most popular on the Internet. If you opt for vintage picks, you can find traders among your guitar-fan friends, on the Internet, and in *Pick Tips*. If you look carefully, you'll find picks for sale at guitar shows, or at older music stores.

You may have to spend some money to get certain picks, but don't let that spoil your fun. "Most pick collectors are into trading," says Anderson. "They seem to be having a whole lot more fun than the ones trying to make money at it."

It could just be that pick collecting is the most equitable of all the hobbies associated with vintage guitars. And as Gaylord notes, "Haley, my 6-year-old daughter, has been at it for a year now."

Pick selection courtesy of Chris Gaylord. Photo: Brett Sterrett.

This article originally appeared in VG's May '99 issue.

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