



Gibson Tony Iommi Signature Humbucker

Gibson's first-ever signature pickup artist returns with a humbucker that could be a dark horse

BY ROB LAING

▶ AS BLACK SABBATH say goodbye, Tony Iommi's guitar story continues - and the return of his signature humbucker is great news for those of us looking for some added Ironman in our diets, without stumping up for a full-blown signature guitar.

Tony Iommi's return as a Gibson signature artist actually came about as a result of these pickups, after the request came in for Gibson to make him some more bespoke humbuckers. Things moved on from there and restarted officially with production models based on Iommi's first "Monkey" SG Special starting in 2020.

Those models stayed authentic to the original with P-90s. But the Black Sabbath legend has previous form when it comes to signature humbucker pickups with Gibson - his was the first signature humbucker set launched back in 1997, based on a design he was using in his UK-made Jaydee guitars. Ten years later Iommi put his name to another first with the first Epiphone signature model, an ebony version of the G-400 - and its Sabbath crucifix inlays weren't the only notable addition.

"I insisted they put my signature pickups on it," Iommi told me in 2011. "Which were expensive really to go on that, but I didn't want them to just put my name on the guitar and that was it. I wanted it to be at least something that I'd use. And that was my deal all along with Gibson."

The guitarist has carried that commitment on for his return to the Gibson fold, and now players have the chance to upgrade their own SGs (other guitar models are available) with his current choice. But Iommi's tone has undeniably changed over the years, so where do his humbucker sit as an option for other players as well as those compelled by the power of the tritone?

Build

The thoughtful folks at Gibson UK have saved me getting my trusty ol' soldering iron out by sending an Epiphone SG with the Iommi pickups preinstalled. I specifically asked for this model from the "Inspired By Gibson" Standard range rather than a full-fat Gibson SG Standard because ickups are the obvious upgrade choice for more affordable guitars. Though I've been mightily impressed with the stock ProBuckers I've encountered from the Epiphone range.

With no visible polepieces like most Gibson 'buckers, the look is more sleek and minimalist for the chrome covers - but the construction here is different too.

Under the cover is a combination of Alnico II and ceramic magnets with blades rather than pole pieces designed to offer a more consistent sound for the magnetic field when Iommi is bending strings. Something that plays a huge role in Sabbath songs such as Iron Man and Into The Void.

The other key requirements for Iommi were sustain and clarity in the high-gain scenarios he

"It's unlike any humbucker I've tried before"

thrives in. There were also distinct needs that have been consistent through his career; "We had to make sure it worked with my light gauge strings and low tunings, but still pack a punch," notes the man himself. "The result has got some serious output."

With this in mind the humbucker is waxed potted and epoxied to prevent a feedback fest at high gain and volumes, and the 15.7k pickup (our reading) features four-conductor wiring for series, parallel, and split coil options if the player desires. Notably, there is no Iommi humbucker 'set' available to buy - the pickups I have here are the same, designed for bridge or neck positions just like Iommi has.

Sounds

Alongside the Epiphone SG Standard I have some added context with an Epiphone SG Modern and my own 2005 Faded Special (with a stock 490T humbucker in the bridge and a Seymour Duncan '59 I installed in the neck). I need to get around to installing a JB in the bridge, but maybe this pickup might present serious competition for the slot?

Iommi's origins lie in the bite and punch of the P-90 from his original "Monkey" 1964/'65 SG Special, and there's an unmistakable growl to the midrange of the bridge here that feels linked to Sabbath's trailblazing early '70s era. But compared to my own SG Special and the Modern Gibson has loaned us for ProBucker comparison, the highs sound a little rolled off from the Iommi pickup and it makes for a distinct sound that is much more obviously reminiscent of Iommi's own lead tone than even I was expecting. It's also quite appealing for a lower gain crunch blues tone through a UA Lion '68 Plexi modelling amp pedal.

Moving back to the SG Modern's ProBuckers and the difference is stark; the Iommi is so much more focussed and articulate compared. The low end is tighter for palm muting and it's a real upgrade to the Modern for power chord-based playing because the highs aren't creating unwelcome transient distraction and the clarity for low note bends is undeniable.

In the neck this pickup is a notable change; neither flutey or flabby, and it's actually an excellent clean sound to my ears. The loaner Modern sounds thinner and more jangly through a Fender Deluxe Reverb compared. There's a mellow character from the Iommi that's quite distinct with the mid focus, unlike the usual humbucker experience for me. Perhaps there's something in opting for a neck pickup that isn't designed for that role alone.

Verdict

With the price here on the premium side for a pair - and it should be noted the construction

musicradar. VERDICT



This humbucker is a must-try if you're looking for an upgrade and play heavier music, or indeed just want to try something a bit different in the humbucker stable. Because just like Iommi was capable of exploring far more with Sabbath than juggernaut riffs, this is more than just a heavy metal pickup.

PROS

- + A refreshing mid-pronounced take on a humbucker.
- + Tight low end and refined, tamed highs.
- + Surprisingly appealing cleans.

CONS

- Pricey for two.
- Some may not appreciate there's no designated neck or bridge humbucker.

SPECS

TYPE: Alnico 2 / ceramic humbucker pickup
FEATURES: Four conductor wiring as standard, wax potted

process of these pickups is probably unique for Gibson - only Iommi diehards will probably do the double. But even as a fan, and someone who has drifted from traditional 'buckers towards the brighter clarity of Firebird and Wide Range options for my guitar mids, I was genuinely delighted with just how distinct and impressive Iommi's signature humbucker is.

The real cherry on the cake was when I tuned down to drop D; even with guage 10 set of strings the sense of snarl and definition with the expected thickness was really satisfying as I rolled through some Sabbath, old Silverchair and Helmet riffs. A lot of fun! Then bringing in the bite rather than chime of the middle strings for some discordance with the low end is a real weapon to wield, while extended chords in higher gain levels don't seem to suffer from a clash of frequencies because the highs are rolled back so judiciously.

The return of the Iommi Signature Humbucker is a welcome one. It's unlike any humbucker I've tried before, probably because the blueprint has evolved from a hum-cancelling take on a P-90 into the demands of higher gain levels as Iommi's rig has changed over the years. But the voicing is so well considered that cleans aren't overcooked with compression and those drive-drenched E string bends really do sound great. Should we have expected anything less from Iommi and Gibson?

