

STRINGED THINGS

Buying guitar parts from China

In previous blog posts, I've mentioned buying guitar parts from China via ebay. I thought I would go a little bit deeper into this practice. There are pros and cons of doing this.

When I assembled a solid body guitar from parts for the first time, I had to hustle to get reasonably-priced parts. Buying all brand-new parts would've been prohibitively expensive. Also, at the time (almost 30 years ago), the guitar parts industry wasn't as big or competitive as it is now.

Nowadays, unless I was going for a high-end guitar, I probably would populate the guitar with parts from China. To obtain the parts, I go on ebay, search for "guitar parts from China" or something more specific, pick an item, order it and pay with PayPal. Within about two weeks, a little "e-package" from China shows up in my mailbox with the part.

I always limit my ebay search to "buy-it-now" items, because I don't want to hassle with waiting out an auction. I also am careful to check out the shipping cost, as some vendors will sneak in a shipping cost that's exorbitant. Most of the parts I buy either include free shipping or charge a small, reasonable fee.

Shipping

Now, you already may have noticed a problem with buying guitar parts from China. It takes a while to get them. After all, they are coming from China via surface shipment. You can pay extra for faster shipment, but then you would be just as well off ordering something from an American vendor (who might be selling you a part made in China).

If there's a part I know I'm going to need in a couple of weeks, I might go the China route. I also stock up on certain items that are inexpensive. For example, you can get screws inexpensively. I often manage to lose a pickguard screw or some other kind of screw when working on a guitar. It's handy to have some extras on hand.

On the day I wrote this, I ordered nine feet of shielded wire. One of my guitars does not have shielded wire going from the jack to the input lug on the volume pot. So, I want to upgrade it with shielded wire. In all likelihood, I'll find other guitars that will need shielded wire. Or, I'll need it for future projects. For about four dollars (shipped), I'm all set with shielded wire for some time.

Sometimes, I'm willing to postpone work on the project just to get a decent price on a part. I needed a nut for a Strat-style neck. The local guitar shop had a nice nut for around \$13. I passed on it because I was afraid I might destroy the nut when I installed it. I also didn't want to spend \$13. I or-

dered six plastic nuts from China for less money than the one nut at the music store. Now, the nut at the music store was of much higher quality than the plastic ones I got from China. However, I knew if I messed up the nut installation, I would be able to chuck the nut and try another without crying over a lot of lost money. In the future, I just might go for that \$13 nut, provided I have the confidence I can install it properly.

If you know you are going to need a part in the future and don't mind parting with the money, a part from China may do the trick. One last thing – usually, the quoted shipping prices don't include any form of tracking. It may be offered, but only for an additional fee. I've never paid for tracking. Were I to take a chance and buy something pricey from China, I would definitely get tracking. I've never had a part from China fail to be delivered.

Price

It's important to do your homework and know the going rate for the parts you are ordering. You could actually pay more to get a part from China than you would pay for getting it from the U.S.

For example, I was shopping for Wilkinson two-point tremolos recently. I discovered an American dealer who was selling two-point Wilkinson tremolos for the same price, including shipping, as the China sources. I haven't bought one yet, but if I do, I'll definitely go with the American vendor.

I also limit my total spending on a part or an order. I've never tried to return a part I've bought from China. I don't think it would be worth the hassle. Were I to get an obviously defective part, then I would attempt a return. But I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for the refund!

I also like the fact that there is no minimum order for parts from China. You can pay \$2 for a packet of screws and get it delivered to your door. Always make sure that the total cost of the item – part plus shipping – is competitive.

Quality

So, what about the quality of the China-made parts? I see the quality as similar to a low-end import guitar. Such guitars may sport parts from the same source as the ebay "from China" parts.

My project guitars aren't made to be sold or to be compared to high-end, professional grade guitars. So, I don't need expensive parts. Now, I won't buy just any part from China. I'm "picky about my pickups." I might buy a cheap pickup from China as an experiment. But I used to wind pickups as a hobby, so I have definite ideas about what I want in my pickups. I have bought pickups from China, but my expect-

tations have been low. If I were to want a good value in a hot humbucker, I'd probably look at a GFS (guitarfetish.com) pickup. If an alnico slug pole pickup for a Strat was the ticket, I probably wouldn't buy from China.

That being said, there are some brand name pickups available from China. Wilkinson comes to mind. I've never personally tried a Wilkinson pickup, but the brand has a good reputation. For example, I just checked and there's a Wilkinson brand humbucking pickup on ebay for \$19. Other humbucking pickups from China are running as low as \$11 a *pair*. I would expect to pay about \$19 for a reasonably good, low-priced hum bucking pickup. I might take a chance on the Wilkinson.

Another thing to consider about pickups is personal preference. A pickup that sounds good to me might not sound good to you. Some pickup makers offer a return privilege. You probably wouldn't get that from a China vendor. So, you're taking a chance. But you're also taking a chance with an expensive U.S.-made pickup. The choice is yours.

You also should look at the specifications on the part. If you are familiar with the part you are buying, you can get some idea about the quality of the product. If you're buying a bridge, you'll know that chrome saddles aren't as good as stainless steel saddles.

A disadvantage of buying parts from China is that the item descriptions are sketchy or difficult to understand. If you're not comfortable with the description, then don't buy the item!

Summary

So, you need to be a bit of a gambler when buying guitar parts from China. I don't guarantee that you will be satisfied. I always have been satisfied, but I've set my expectations in line with the price I'm paying. If you think you could benefit from buying parts from China, stick your toe in the water. Buy some inexpensive parts you know you will need some day. For example, stock up on some pickguard screws or tremolo mounting screws. Don't spend a lot of money. See how the process works for you. As with most things in life, your mileage may vary.