

HOW LOW CAN YOU GO?

A review by Cees Bakker, journalist for the Dutch guitar magazine GitaarPlus.



I must admit that I'm a fan of the New Zealand Langcaster products. Not because the proprietor Joh Lang was born like me in the Netherlands, but he doesn't give you a Dutch treat. In contrary since 2003 almost every year Joh comes up with spectacular new product. Not to keep us reviewers busy, any time Langcaster introduces an invention which is a truly good addition for the guitar world. It's remarkable how much efforts such a small company puts in developing their new products. And I must say Langcaster surprises me every time in positive way.

This time (July 2008) Langcaster send me their newly developed Ultra-Lowbucker set. Quite clever because there are maybe as much humbucker players as there are single coil players.



Once again this Langcaster kit is very complete: a 3 way pickup selector switch, a Langcaster neck Ultra-Lowbucker and bridge Ultra-Lowbucker. The difference between these is that the neck pickup has 8 poles instead of 6, to avoid possible volume losses during heaving bending and an extra capacitor to clear up its sound even further. I appreciate this because with normal humbuckers its sound becomes somewhat dull when its volume control is turned down.

Both pickups are supplied inclusive chromed spring loaded installation rims. At the moment these are mend for flat top guitars, but Lancaster intends to supply rims for contoured tops too .4 short and 4 long pickup rim mounting screws are also included. The pre-wired electronic harness contains a master volume- and tone control, an overdrive switch and an overdrive control. Volume- and tone potmeters have a resistance of only 25 KOhm, which is very favourable, because normal guitar potmeters have a value of 250 to 500 Kohm, which results in signal loss. The harness compromises also de Ultra Lo PC board with buffer amp and overdrive circuit, output connector, battery connector and a 9 Volt block battery. Two cable binders, a piece of foam and a chromed selector switch knob are also included. The kit comes with a hands-on installation guide and also a step by step installation manual.

Installation

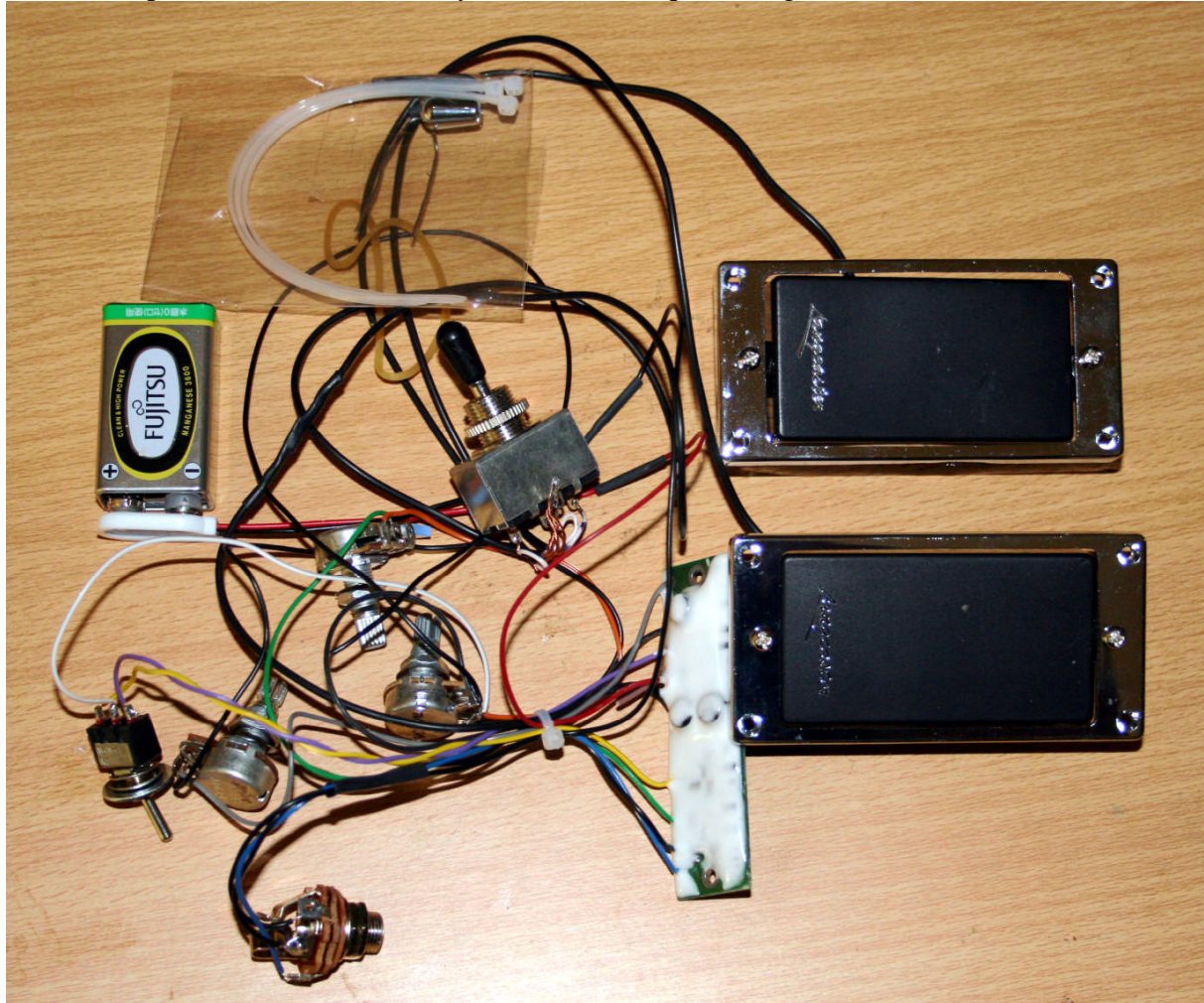
Provided that you can handle a soldering iron, screwdrivers and a pair of nippers the installation is fairly simple. The guitar that you want to upgrade must have a Les Paul type configuration, which means 5 holes. But since the kit's potmeters are far more smaller then conventional guitar potmeters it could be possible that you can install this Ultra-Lowbucker kit in 3 hole 2 humbucker guitars also, provided that the control cavity has space enough for the new components. Then you have to drill 2 extra. holes. The victim of this review was a well made and good sounding Michael Kelly Patriot Hot Rod guitar from 2007.



Dismantling this guitar didn't give any problems, but I had to take off the hot rod tailpiece, because the neck pickup is mounted in it. All parts of the kit fitted well although I had to use the original mounting rim for the neck pickup, because this guitar has an arched top. All wires went fluently through the various channels because these are very thin. As all signals are low impedance, this doesn't hurt the sound. The whole new control system is fully wired so the only soldering required is the two leads from the pickups to the pickup selector switch and the wire from the PC board to the same selector switch. The earth lead was fed underneath the tailpiece, the battery was connected and I tested the kit on good functioning.

Everything was okay so the output connector was set in place and all nuts were tightened. The tailpiece assembly and neck pickup were tightened and the guitar was restrung. A piece of foam was placed onto the potmeters and the battery on top of that. Cavities lid were closed and ready steady go for blast off..

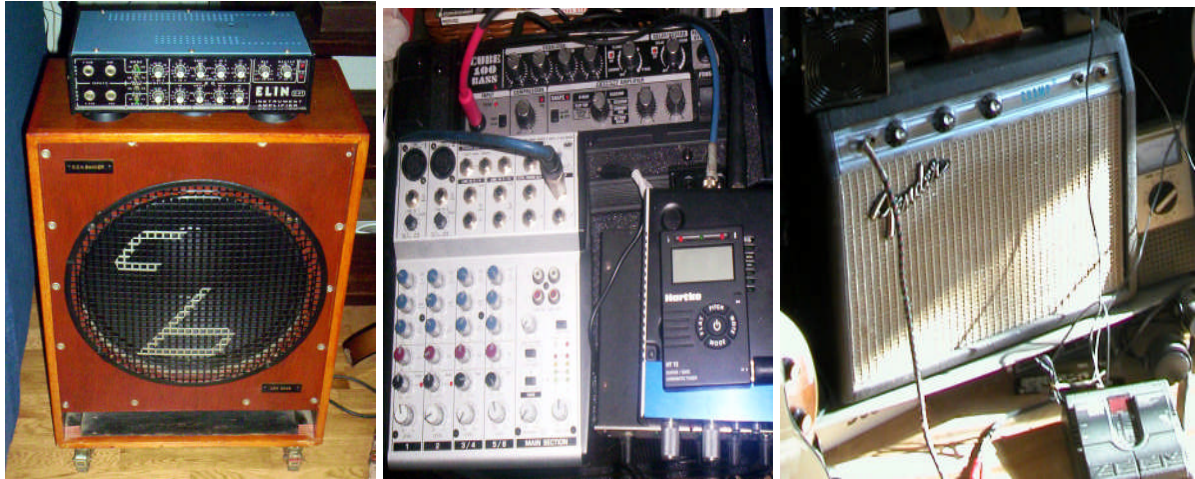
The whole procedure took me nearly 4 hours, but a qualified guitar technician will do it faster.



Sound

How low can you go? To be specific to 120 Ohms. All Lancaster pickups are the only real low impedance pickups by nature and construction in the world. If you want to know more about the philosophy and anthology behind it, please have a look at the Lancaster website: www.lancaster.com. Anyway the advantages are obvious: much higher output and sustain; absolute noise free in clean mode even under the worst circumstances like stage lighting, computer- and TV interferences, a tonal spectrum far beyond the conventional guitar pickups and cable lengths until 200 feet/60 metres without any signal or frequency loss. The Lancaster Ultra Lo pickups built into my Musima Strat already surpassed all my other high output guitars (see my review of the Ultra Lo pickups). But when I plugged the transformed Michael Kelly into my good old 1973 silver face Fender Champ (my best reference amp for moderate sound levels) I was flabbergasted. Compared to the Ultra-Lo pickups the Lancaster Ultra-Lowbuckers offer much more volume, definition, a nearly endless sustain and once again completely noise- and hum free.. Hats off to you mr. Lang! Although I'm more bass- then guitar player I judge the Ultra-Lowbuckers as the next of kin, whenever you play jazz, country, rock, heavy metal or whatever; these new pickups will improve your playing pleasure for sure.

Joh Lang told me that he prefers amplification of his instruments through 12 and 15 inch speakers, due to the broad frequency spectrum of his pickups. So I found the following solution. I put my upgraded Michael Kelly guitar into a Behringer Eurorack UB 802 mixer. The right hand output goes to my custom ELIN bass stack with a 15 inch speaker, which stands on my right hand side on appr. 4 metres distance. The left output is connected to my Roland Cube 100 Bass combo with a 12 inch double conus speaker, which stands on 2,5 metres on my left side. And I use the effects send control of the mixer to feed the Fender Champ, which stands 2 metres behind me.



In this way I get a true 3-dimensional guitar sound. Bat way out of hell! And with the built-in overdrive I don't need an Ibanez Tube Screamer any more: it's all there and way beyond. On stage you need only a D.I. box or microphone before your amp and leave the rest to your (hopefully) capable soundman.

By the way I found a whole new application for the Ultra-Lowbucker pickups. These are so sensitive that you can alternate your guitar playing with rhythmic tapping on the guitar body, which is amplified loud and clear.

Value for money

I was pleasantly surprised by the price of these Lancaster Ultra-Lowbucker kits. The standard 6-string executing costs US \$ 370/ Euro 245 inclusive postage and for the 7-string execution Ultra-Lowbucker 12P for 7-string guitars kit set Lancaster charges US \$ 395/Euro 260 inclusive postage. Compared to the 'name brand' replacement pickups these are depending to the country you live in on par or above the value of 2 humbucker pickups only. So you get the harness and overdrive for free.

Conclusion

Well Jo Lang did it again. The new Ultra-Lowbuckers are definitely an improvement for any kind of Les Paul type guitar, cheapo or the real thing and everything in between it. They sound fantastic, the construction is state of the art, the kit is very complete and easy to install. Overdrive sound is very personal, but for me the Ultra Drive is fine.

In the Michelin guitar taste book I should rate this kit with the maximum three stars!