

# THE BIRTH OF STEVE VAI'S GREEN MEANIE

by Larry DiMarzio and Eric Kirkland

Steve Photos: Larry DiMarzio  
Guitar Photos: Michael Mesker



Some of the world's most famous guitars remain forever faithful to their inception — prized for their true-to-original form — and simply become better as they gracefully age. Others only take on their finest form and notoriety after modifications and innovative customization. The latter certainly describes Steve Vai's legendary "Green Meanie." DiMarzio is particularly proud to have played a role in its birth as well as devising its specialized wiring scheme and pickups.

This is how it all happened, as recalled by Larry DiMarzio and Steve Blucher...



When **Steve Vai** landed the **Alcatrazz** tour in 1984, he needed an extra guitar or two for the road. He contacted Grover Jackson and one of the guitars supplied was a Charvel with a basswood, Strat-style body. At that time, it had an amber-to-cherry sunburst finish and a locking Floyd Rose bridge.

This guitar soon began its progression of improvements, hot rod mods, stickers, and experiments to evolve into the **Green Meanie** with Steve Vai at the helm.

DiMarzio got the call in the spring of 1986, shortly after Steve had been selected for the virtuoso slot in David Lee Roth's newly formed band – also featuring Billy Sheehan on bass and Gregg Bissonette on drums. Vai had already used DiMarzios in a number of his guitars, so he asked us to meet him at NYC's **Power Station studio**, where **Eat 'Em and Smile** was coming to life.

When DiMarzio's chief technician Steve Blucher arrived, Vai took him into the live room. The guitar that Steve Blucher saw that day already had a bunch of changes. It was now day-glow green and had three pickups in an H-S-H configuration.

The most radical modification was the removal of wood behind the Floyd Rose bridge, which made it possible for Vai to pull up on the bar and raise the pitch more than two full steps. Although it was typical for a floating Strat or Floyd bridge to have a bit of upward play, this transformed the bridge's range in a revolutionary way. It became one of many alterations first tried on the Green Meanie, later incorporated into Vai's signature Ibanez Jem guitars and ultimately adopted as a standard throughout the industry.

On the first day, Blucher also tested the guitar with Vai's setup, which centered around recently modified 100-watt Marshall heads





from Jose Arredondo and Lee Jackson. Blucher recalled that it was the loudest rig he'd ever heard in the studio, and Vai laughingly supported that memory in a recent interview with Pete Thorn, stating that, "With Dave Roth, the stage volume of the guitar was the loudest thing in the history of man ... Dave could not get enough guitar – he had to have more and more ... When I played a note, if you weren't protected, you would never have children again."

Vai and Blucher then went back into the control room and listened to some of the scratch tracks for the new album to get a better idea of what changes Vai wanted.

From the recordings, Blucher noticed that Vai's deft touch smoothed out much of the brightness he heard while testing the live rig. Vai's picking technique also added a specific warmth and increased bass response that made the guitar sound fuller.

Vai really knew exactly what he wanted in terms of changes: more definition between strings (note clarity), get rid of the muddiness, and it had to retain all its character with distortion and delay. This made perfect sense to DiMarzio, because our goal has always been to get the guitar to sound right. It should sound like what you want, what you hear in your head, with minimal correction, and it has to match well in the context of the gear and the band.

## **GETTING THE SOUND RIGHT**

On Steve Blucher's next visit to the studio, he began changing pickups, starting with the bridge position and usually installing two sets per day. But at the end of each test, Vai requested that the original pickups were to be put back in the guitar as a reference.

Pickup installations were done in the Power Station's maintenance room, where the studio's electronic equipment was serviced, and usually happened while the band was on breaks.



For the next couple of weeks, both Steves worked closely together to refine the guitar's pickups and tone. At the end of each day, Blucher would order new pickups from the DiMarzio factory and make corrections from the previous day's tests.

All the pickup comparisons were done live, although there might have been some A/B test recordings used for the evaluations. David Lee Roth (already noted as wanting a true guitar extravaganza) was also in the control room for most of the guitar tracking.

## A HAPPY ACCIDENT AND A NEW WIRING

While working on the guitar, Blucher discovered that the original neck position humbucker had one shorted coil, but that the other coil was still producing output.

He mentioned it and Vai recalled the sound changing after the high "E" string got caught under the neck pickup during a tremolo dive bomb. However, Vai liked the new "tubey" sound better in position four and wanted to keep it.

Blucher knew that no one had ever split a coil from the neck humbucker and combined it with a single coil in the center position, so he devised a wiring scheme that connected the one coil from the neck humbucker to the middle pickup. Blucher changed the polarity on the center single coil pickup so it would be hum-canceling in both the second and fourth positions (combined appropriately with either the bridge or neck pickups). And he got it all to work with a DiMarzio 5-position switch. (See diagram on page 8.) This exact wiring was later incorporated into the Ibanez JEM.



**WATCH:** Steve Vai demos his different pickup wiring sounds.





Above: The modified lower horn cutaway.  
Below: The (since repaired) bridge area.



After several weeks of comparisons, Vai settled on **PAF Pro™** pickups in both the neck and bridge positions, with an **HS-2™** wired in single-coil mode (top coil only) in the middle position.

### A NEW BODY SHAPE

At some point between takes, Vai asked Blucher about deepening the cutaway on the high "E" side of the body allowing better access to the high notes up the neck.

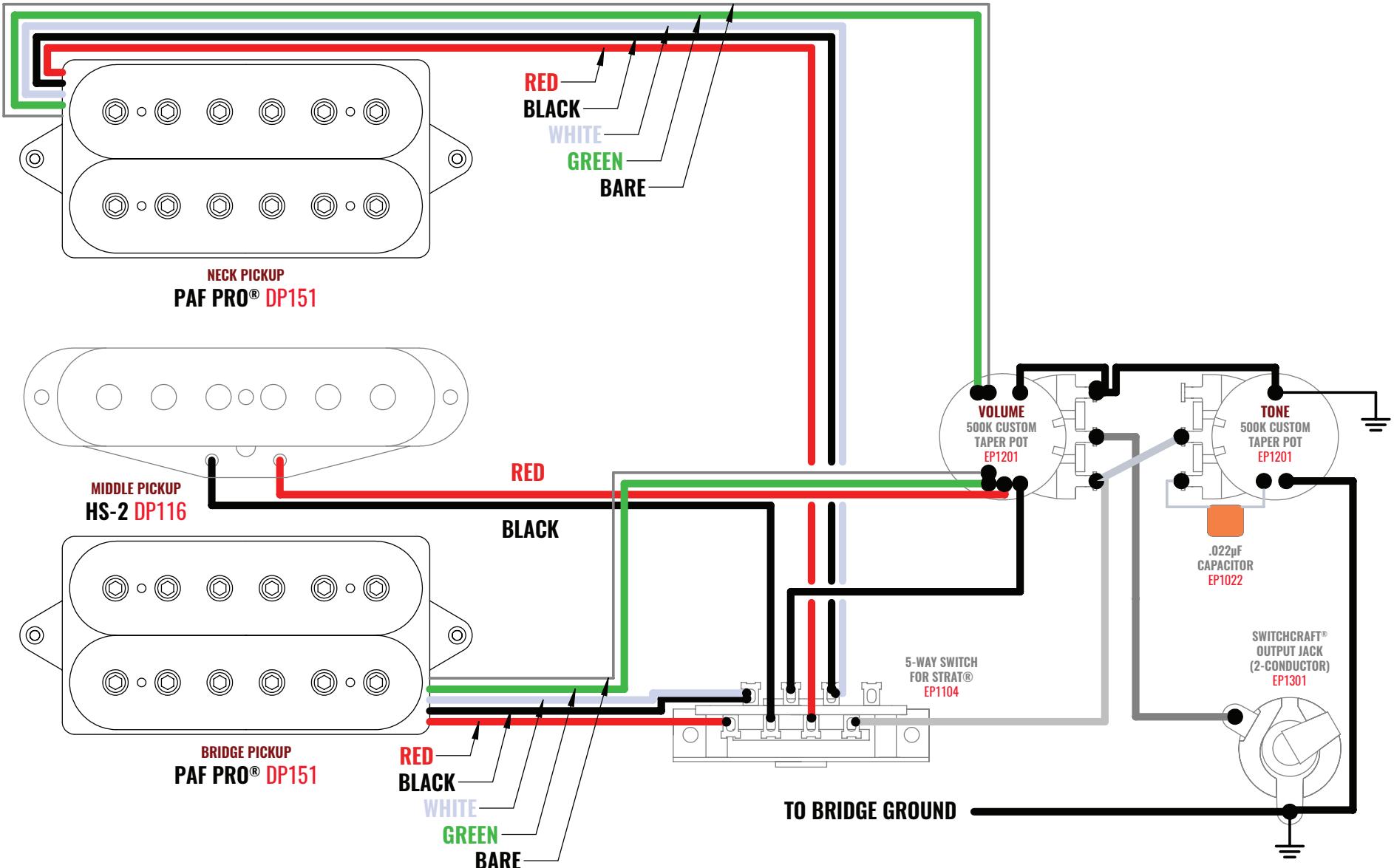
After the session ended that day, Blucher took the guitar home and recut the lower bout of the guitar on his kitchen table with a Dremel Tool, remarking that he had to stuff towels under his apartment door to keep the smell of the overheated basswood from alarming his neighbors.

### CRASH OF THE GREEN MEANIE

In the middle of the 1986 David Lee Roth live tour, Blucher got a call from Elwood Francis (Vai's new guitar tech) and was told that the body of the Meanie had split and the bridge had pulled out right before the band was to play a sold-out show in Madison Square Garden. Did he know of anyone that could do a rush repair? Blucher recommended the guitar be overnighted to Roger Sadowsky, of **Sadowsky Guitars** and helped arrange the guitar's return as soon as the glue was dry.

Once the David Lee Roth tour ended, the Green Meanie was retired and is now on display at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in Cleveland, Ohio. During those few short years, it became a visual and sonic extension of Steve Vai's seemingly limitless musical gifts, his singularly eccentric style, and capacity for turning sound into a luminous being. No one could have imagined the monster it would become, the countless players it would inspire, instruments it would influence, and timeless music it would bring to life. ☀





 **DiMarzio®**  
**Wiring**

## PAF Pro® Green Meanie H/S/H WITH SPLIT COILS

The original wiring for Steve Vai's legendary Charvel "Green Meanie." The 5-way switch is wired so that Position 1 = neck; Position 2 = neck (1 coil) & middle; Position 3 = Middle; Position 4 = middle & bridge (1 coil); Position 5 = bridge. For a complete wiring kit including all the hardware in the diagram above, [click here](#).