

Handout 4 - Abigail Ybarra

You may not know the name Abigail Ybarra, but you have likely HEARD her work. Abigail was crucial in crafting the sound of Fender guitars and her work definitively influenced the sound of popular music.

Abigail was a pickup winder at Fender for more than fifty years. A “pickup” is a device that captures, or senses, the vibrations produced by musical instruments, particularly stringed instruments such as the electric guitar, electric bass guitar, or electric violin. A pickup converts vibrations



to an electrical signal that is amplified, often with an instrument amplifier (such as a guitar amplifier) to produce musical sounds through a loudspeaker. Abigail Ybarra’s critical role as part of the team building pickups for Fender electric guitars meant that her hands literally shaped the tone of how those instruments sounded to generations of players and music fans. Abigail was vital in setting the standard for the sound of the electric guitar in the twentieth century.

Abigail Ybarra joined Fender in 1956 as a teenager seeking work to help support her family. At the time, demand for the guitars Leo Fender invented were ever-increasing. With that increased demand came company growth, and Leo’s manufacturing team was expanding to meet the many orders coming in. Tagging along with her cousin who was applying for a job at the flourishing company, Abigail submitted an application and was hired on the spot. With her small hands and a resolute work ethic, Abigail found she was perfect for the skilled and meticulous work involved in winding the metal wire that was housed inside a Fender pickup, and Leo trained her himself.

While to some winding pickups could be boring, Abigail discovered that the detail and precision involved in the craft matched well to the level of excellence she always strove for in her work. As her expertise developed, Abigail introduced experimentation to the job by exploring how the sound her pickups produced changed when the tension of the wound wire was altered. Certainly there were pickup winders on Fender staff before and during Abigail’s decades-long tenure, but her precise methodology and depth of knowledge was an unmatched contribution that both defined and raised the company’s sonic profile to new heights.

The legacy of Abigail’s work can be heard in the thousands of classic recordings that are the bedrock of popular music and culture. Fender guitars, with Abigail’s pickup handiwork, have been played and treasured by guitarists like Steven Van Zandt, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix, Buddy Holly, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and countless others. The last Fender guitar Abigail wired pickups for was purchased by Keith Richards of the Rolling Stones and the band Los Lobos played at her retirement party in 2013. But before she left her valued and cherished role at the company, Abigail made sure to share her technical artistry by mentoring and training a new pickup winder at Fender, Josefina Campos.

So remember Abigail Ybarra’s name and tell your friends and family about this amazing woman, because Rock and Roll and many other genres would not sound as they do today without her amazing work.