

# 'Tone is king'

Camano man famous for handmade guitar pickups

By ALEX ASHLEY  
Reporter

Most people don't know Kerry Learned, but guitar pickups have heard of him.

Learned, a Camano Island resident, is a bit of an enigma: he doesn't go out much, nobody knows who he is, yet his work as a boutique manufacturer of guitar pickups, along with his brand name, Onamac Windery, is known worldwide.

A guitar pickup is a magnet-to-transducer that captures the mechanical vibrations of the instrument's strings and converts them into an electronic signal.

Today, Learned's pickups are in so-demand that for the past few years, he has had a constant backlog of orders between one and two months. He calls his work "a full-time job and a half."

But there was a time in the not-too-distant past when producing custom guitar pickups wasn't Learned's business at all; he was a mechanic.

Although he came from a musical family — his older brother played drums and guitar, his younger sister played piano and he himself took guitar lessons at 9 — the passion of his youth quickly became cars and hotrods.

After attending Bellingham Technical Institute for automotive, he rebuilt a 1966 Chevrolet Chevelle from the ground up that made the cover of Hot Rod magazine in 1986, just before his 21st birthday.

In time, he became a factory-trained Honda master technician at a local dealer, and eventually foreman at Honda of Seattle.

But then he had an accident, a back injury that led to a major fusion surgery in 1991, and things were never the same.



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Kerry Learned is known worldwide for his innovative approach to shaping a guitar's tone with custom pickup designs. Here, Learned demonstrates how the pieces of a single-coil electric guitar pickup go together.

"After recovery," he said, "I couldn't return to full-time shop work, so I opened my own shop in Mount Vernon."

The shop was Alternative Automotive, Inc., operating on honest business practices and word-of-mouth advertising.

In 1995, Learned had another back surgery, but continued to work through the pain.

"My wife Stacy and I ran Alternative Automotive for over 13 years," he said, "until I physically couldn't do it any longer."

In 2008, Learned and his wife of 23 years sold the business and moved to Camano Island.

"I found myself needing something to keep me sane," Learned recalled.

To avoid the stagnation of an early retirement, Learned turned to his first love.

"I started playing again and building guitars as a hobby to

keep busy," he said.

All four walls of Learned's living room are lined with beautiful electric guitars, mostly Fenders, and several classic amplifiers.

A large tapestry of electric guitars hangs on the wall opposite the window.

"I have so many guitars so I can swap the pickups out and see how they sound," he said.

To save funds on what can be one of the most expensive parts of a guitar, Learned decided to try his hand at making his own pickups.

"I made my own winding machine from a Honda Accord heater blower motor, miscellaneous electronics and some plywood," he said.

A major part of creating guitar pickups is the tightly winding fine metal coil around the base of the pickup — as many as 7,000 turns.

"I was amazed at how good they sounded."

In an effort to cover the cost of his first few attempts, Learned posted a few surplus pickups on eBay.

It didn't take long, he said, for the word to get out, and soon he started receiving requests for pickups from all around the globe.

Learned said the wire pickups are made influences the tone and feel of a guitar, and for that reason is one of the most important components of an electric guitar.

The sound, he said, will change drastically based on several factors: how the wire is wound, the makeup of the metal used in the magnets, and so on.

It's both an art and a science.

## Off the couch on Camano Island

### Training for beach watchers

**ISLAND COUNTY** Camano Beach Watcher training class will be March 19-April 30, and again Sept. 17-Oct. 29. Volunteers expand their knowledge of the environment as they experience a mix of indoor instruction and guided field trips. University level instruction comes from experts in diverse fields with topics ranging from watersheds and ground water, marine biology and oceanography, intertidal beach monitoring, coastal geology, etc. In addition to the sessions, class members will spend at least 20 hours "learning while doing" summer beach projects with the help of a mentor. There is a \$100 fee per person, which covers cost of training. For more information, visit [www.islandnrs/beach-watchers/](http://www.islandnrs/beach-watchers/) or Barbara Bennett/[wbennet@islandnrs.org](mailto:wbennet@islandnrs.org) or call 350-240-5588.

### Buffet brunch

**FROM 9 A.M.** to noon March 8, Sunday buffet brunch will be served at the Camano Island Club, 129 N. Sunset Drive, 9 a.m. to noon. The menu includes bacon, sausage, scrambled eggs, omelets, hash browns, blueberry pancakes, fresh fruit, sweet rolls, juices, coffee and tea. Adult and children's tickets are available.

### Fire Jets meet

**ANNA KNIGHT**, a Reiki master practitioner and crystal healer, as well as a spiritual metaphysical path, is on the agenda for the Fire Jets meeting Mon, March 9. Any

one interested is invited to join the support group for volunteer, part time and full time firefighters, men and women, 10 a.m. at the Madrona Vista Fire Station.

His home workshop, a tiny room in the back of his house, is where it all happens: the walls are lined with shelves full of tools, parts and spoils of war; with half-finished prototypes of guitar bodies; with pickups-in-the-making still waiting for finishing touches.

He passed a couple across the table.

Learned said that aside from selling to what he calls "play-at-home guitarists," who mostly play as an after-work hobby, he also sells to high profile guitar legends like Vince Gill, Tom Petty and Warren Haynes, among others.

"One of those is for Peter Frampton," he said. "That other one goes to Robben Ford."

Learned said there is a degree of satisfaction that comes from knowing his stuff is being played on Broadway, on television, on several records and live venues worldwide.

one interested is invited to join the support group for volunteer, part time and full time firefighters, men and women, 10 a.m. at the Madrona Vista Fire Station.

### Guided walk

**JOIN FRIENDS** of Camano Island Parks members on a guided community walk from Camano Beach State Park to Camano Island State Park Sat, March 7. Meet at 9:50 a.m. at Dry Lake Road and Ivy Way, 1.4 miles from Elger Bay Road. Distance is approximately 3.3 miles one way. A shuttle is available for the return trip. The approximately two-hour walk takes place rain or shine. Wear appropriate clothes and sturdy shoes or boots. Access Dry Lake Road from Elger Bay Road north of Elger Bay Elementary School. Parking is on the Ivy Way cul-de-sac. Dogs are not allowed on winter walks because of safety concerns. Trail booklets will be available at the walk for a suggested \$1 donation. For more information about Friends of Camano Island Parks, visit [friendsofcamanoislandparks.org](http://friendsofcamanoislandparks.org).

### Mark calendars

**FREE VENDOR** tables are available for Earth Day celebration April 22 at Camano Center. If you have a related service or product, contact Joan Schrammeck, 387-9589 or contact Joan@FMSolar.com.

### Host mantis

**SUZANNE KANTER** from Z Gallery in Stanwood will be the speaker at the Mañana Flames Auxiliary meeting Thurs, March 5, 10 a.m. at the Mañana Fire Station, 3651 S. Camano Dr. Lunch will be

hosted by Joan Ruscha, Annie Gray and Pat Foss. New members are always welcome. For more information: [bagnett@frontier.com](mailto:bagnett@frontier.com).

### Work party

**FRIENDS** of Camano Island Parks will have a work party Tues, March 10, at the state parks. Meet at the Camano Island State Park ranger office at 9:30 a.m. Bring lunch; beverage and dessert provided. For more information about Friends of Camano Island Parks, visit [friendsofcamanoislandparks.org](http://friendsofcamanoislandparks.org).

### Quilters

**MARY LOU** Weidman of Spokane will present a trunk show of whimsical quilts to Camano Island Quilters when they meet Wed, March 4, 10 a.m. at the Odd Fellows Lodge, 96 S. Camano Ridge Rd. They will meet again at 6:30 p.m. in Stanwood at the United Methodist Church, 27128 102nd Dr NW.

### CDA clothes

**CAMANO DANCE** Academy (CDA) is accepting clothing and shoes of any kind, in any condition for "Clothes for the Cause," a fundraising company that pays for old clothes in dollars per pound. Donations will be accepted 1 to 2 p.m. March 6, 651 West Dodge Road. Along with garments, they accept shoes, hats, gloves, towels, sheets, blankets, quilts, drapery, purses, belts, rugs and stuffed animals. Donated items are re-worn, reused or ethically recycled in the United States and abroad, making a positive impact on the environment while helping not-for-profit communities.

ings of 36 separate and distinct products.

"I've always operated under the philosophy that if you're honest and provide a superior product, people will find you. It served me well in the automotive business, and it seems to apply to guitar pickups as well."

Today, Learned, who because of his back injury and subsequent surgeries can barely move at times, spends most of his days and nights focusing on his craft.

Sometimes I'll wake up in the middle of the night and there's no Kerry," Stacy said, "and then I'll hear him tinkering away in his shop."

"Tone is king," Learned said. "Accomplished guitarists demand high-quality pickups that produce deeper, richer, more harmonic tone than what is available in the mass produced guitar pickup market. For those who can tell the difference, tone is all that matters and those are the types of people I cater to."

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