By Craig Anderton, Editor in Chief, Harmony Central

A hands-on review of cables? You’re kidding me, right? I mean, unless you’re talking about plutonium-based, gold-leaf MagickalWire® that costs $70 a foot and if you plug the cable in the wrong direction the world explodes, what’s so special about cables?

Well, of course, cables do make a difference. Granted, if you’re plugging a high-output synthesizer into a mixer a couple of feet away, you could probably get away with just about anything that conducts electricity. But for guitar players—where the pickup, amp input, and cable form an interdependent system—it’s a different story. And it’s an especially different story onstage, where reliability—not just sonic integrity—is of paramount importance.

As someone who usually makes his own cables because I figure no one cares about my cables more than I do, I assumed Planet Waves would do their usually good job (I’m a big fan of their whole Cable Station concept). Still, I was surprised that these cables incorporate several novel aspects that add up to more than the sum of their parts.

Overview
First, there’s the cable itself. Cable capacitance involves a tradeoff, so there’s no “ideal” value. More cable capacitance can dull highs when feeding a high-impedance amp. As capacitance forms a resonant circuit with magnetic pickups that creates a response peak, higher capacitance peaks at a lower frequency than cables with lower capacitance. But if the cable capacitance is too low, there’s a tendency for the cable to become microphonic. Planet Waves chose 28pF/foot capacitance, which I feel is the correct midpoint value for as many situations and instruments as possible.

The shielding is braided, not spiral or (horrors) foil that adds to the expense and reduces flexibility somewhat, but is durable and provides best-of-class shielding. The center conductor is 22 AWG gauge, oxygen-free copper wire. Does oxygen-free make a difference? Many musicians swear they hear a difference, although this is difficult to quantify. Suffice it to say it doesn’t hurt and most likely helps. 22-gauge wire is sort of in the middle of commonly used guitar cable gauges, as thinner wire means less resistance to pull, but tend to favor flexibility and suppleness. As a result these are easy to coil, lay flat, and have a good feel.

A tip about plugs
Moving along to the plug, it’s made by Neutrik to Planet Waves’ specs. It’s way different from what I expected—and solves a common connectivity problem. First, the V-shaped scoop that sits just behind the tip is more rounded and elongated than standard tips (Planet Waves calls it a “GEO tip”), so the jack’s contact can be considerably out of tolerance (e.g., closer to either the jack tip or barrel than normal) and still make full contact while locking in properly.

The outer plug shell is metal, and the strain relief is clever. Instead of crimping metal into the cable, there’s a separate, semi-round plastic covering that fits over the cable and has three strips with sets of five “teeth” that push gently into the cable’s outer jacket. Although they don’t extend far into the jacket, the sheer number means that the plastic covering grips the cable well. When you screw on the plug’s outer barrel, it holds the plastic covering in place. If you pull on the cable, the cable—being clamped by the plastic covering—tries to pull on the covering but can’t because the covering can’t move, as it’s held in place by the outer barrel. Meanwhile, you can’t really pull the cable out of the covering, because of the teeth holding it in place.

I thought it would be worth sacrificing a cable to test whether I could rip the cable out of the plug, and I really tried . . . but when I realized I was going to damage my hands rather than the cable, I gave up.

There are two other noteworthy elements regarding the plug. The center conductor is held tightly in place within the barrel, and attached with a micro flame soldering technique that’s another element of improved strain relief and durability. Finally, there’s a small rubber washer where the barrel meets the rest of the jack, providing a tight seal and also making it unlikely that the barrel could come unscrewed accidentally.

Conclusion
Overall, the American Stage cables (which are indeed made in America) nail the two crucial cable criteria for instruments: They’re built to take life on the road, and they make the right sonic choices for getting your signal from point A to point B. Yes, they do cost a bit more than average; but after taking one apart (and failing to destroy it), I understand why: It’s cost-effective insurance for making sure your cable doesn’t fail you at some critical point during a performance.

Planet Waves’ American Stage cables bring reliability, sound quality, and solid construction to cables designed for live performance. Order today with the complete assurance of Musician’s Friend’s 45-Day Total Satisfaction and Lowest Price Guarantees.

Features & Specs:

- 28pF/foot cable capacitance
- Neutrik jack designed to Planet Waves specs with patented GEO tip
- 22-gauge oxygen-free center conductor
- Novel, effective strain relief
- Redesigned tip offers better contact
- Braided shielding
- Metal outside barrel
- Limited lifetime warranty

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