

Gear Review: DR Dragon Skin Strings By Dan Miller

Over the years *Flatpicking Guitar Magazine* has not conducted many string reviews. Back in early 1998 we conducted a fairly in-depth review where we compared and contrasted strings from D'Adarrio, John Pearse, High Cliff, Vinci, DR, Pirazzi, GHS, Euphonon, Peavy, Austin City, Martin, and Elixir. This was an extensive string review for the main brands that were available to the acoustic guitar player at the time. Back then, coated strings were relatively new to the market. The first generation Elixir coated strings were out, but not much else. After our initial string review in 1998, the only other string review that we have run was in late 2001 when we compared the Elixir Nanowebbs and the D'Addario EXP strings. This article was titled "The New Generation of Coated Strings." By that time Elixir had changed their formula and coating method and D'Addario, and others, had entered the coated string market.

Today, just about every major string company is making a coated string. Players that like the coated string say that they last longer, feel smoother and faster and, some say, they reduce finger squeak. Those that don't tend to like them say that they don't sound as rich or as loud as the non-coated string and they have a different feel. Typically, the players who absolutely love the coated strings are those who have very acidic hands and thus "kill" non-coated strings rapidly. For those folks, the coated string was a God-send because the coating on the string helped a set of strings last a lot longer for them. Those that don't have the acid hand problem are not as crazy about the coated strings because they tend to be more expensive and they really don't last that much longer for those folks.

Early in the evolution of the coated string those who did not have acidic hands hated them. They really had no reason to like them. They felt different, the coating was thick and tended to mute the sound of the string, and after a while the coating would start to fray. However, as the coating technology improved, the coating got thinner, the sound improved, and the feel came closer to the feel of the non-coated string. Even so, you usually find two camps when it comes to the coated string topic.



There are those who love them and there are those who really don't like them at all.

Recently DR Strings sent me a few sets of their newest coated string, which they call "Dragon Skin." These are handmade strings that have a new generation clear coating, which was invented by the folks at DR. When I put these strings on my guitar, I noticed that they sounded as loud and clear as any non-coated or coated string that I had tried. However, for me the dramatic difference was the playability. The strings felt just like non-coated strings and the string tension made playing seem effortless. I was shocked at how easy it was to play with these strings on the guitar.

For me, when I evaluate a set of strings, I'm listening for rich tone and good volume, I'm feeling for comfortable string tension and a certain tactile feel when my fingers touch the strings. I don't like a slippery string. I like a certain amount of "string grab" under my finger. I'm interested in longevity, but I don't have the "string killer" acidic hands.

All of these elements are very subjective from player to player. Some players like a bright tone, while others like a more mellow tone. Also, each player's feel for string tension and degree of string "slickness" is different. Additionally, for players who have acidic hands, the longevity issue is very important. For those who don't have that problem, one brand of string might last just as long as another.

Personally, I don't particularly like a real bright sounding string, I don't like a slippery string, and I don't like to feel a lot of tension when I push the pick through a string. I don't have acidic hands, so strings will generally last a fairly long time on my guitar. I love the DR Dragon Skin strings because the tension is exactly what I like and the feel of the string is exactly what I like. I also like the tone and the volume, and, after going through several sets, I find that they last just as long, if not longer, than any other string that I've ever used.

In order to find out a bit more about this new string, I called DR and talked with Tom Klukosky, the guy who helped DR owner Mark Dronge develop the Dragon Skin strings. Tom explained to me that first and foremost he and the other guys at the DR facility are players and so they always evaluate strings from the player's perspective. He said that when DR first

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entered the coated string market they were using a coating that they purchased from another company and they were not happy with it. Tom said, "The strings lasted longer, but the sound wasn't there."

Not happy with the coating that they were using, and not able to find any coating on the market that satisfied them, they worked to find their own solution. Tom said, "We wanted to find a coating that would enhance the properties of the string metals instead of detract from them. We also wanted the coating to be similar in consistency to the wire so that the string would not feel like it had a coating. After working for seven or eight years, we found a coating that we feel compliments the sound, feel, and vibration of the metal that is underneath."

Tom feels like the new coating compliments the string metal so well that their coated string actually sounds louder and better than their non-coated string. He said, "We were looking for something that sounded better, but felt the same. We were looking to produce the coated string for the player who doesn't usually like coated strings."

When asked about the comfortable string tension, Tom said that part of that comes from coating, but most of it comes from the fact that DR strings are hand wound. He said that because the strings are hand wound they can be wound tighter and a thicker wrap can be used, therefore they are able to put more mass into a string with the same gauge as one that is purely machine wound. With more mass the string can be brought up to pitch with less tension.

Even though the folks at DR work with string qualities like mass, gauge, and tension, Tom emphasized that they are players and so their research comes more from stringing up and instrument and playing it to see how it sounds and how it feels than from working with charts, graphs, and formulas.

In the past I've used both coated and non-coated strings on my guitar and I've always preferred the feel of the non-coated strings. However, I do really like these DR Dragon Skins. I'll have to agree with Tom. They are the coated string with the non-coated string sound and feel. So, you get the best of all worlds — I give these strings high marks for tone, volume, playability, and longevity. Highly recommended!

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