

Les Paul

FATHER OF THE MODERN GUITAR

Over a career that lasted almost eighty years, Les Paul became known as one of the greatest guitar players of all time, but he was also an inventor. His innovations in guitar design and recording technology are still seen and heard today.

Born Lester William Polsfuss on June 9, 1915, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, young Les began playing the harmonica at age eight, but soon became obsessed with the guitar. He also was interested in electronic devices in his household, and he enjoyed tinkering with them to understand their parts and how they worked. At the time, most guitars were not electric and could not be heard over louder instruments. But Les Paul knew that the telephone, record player, and radio in his home all included hardware that could make sounds louder, and as a teenager, he began experimenting with the guitar to create a bigger sound.

In 1932, Paul dropped out of high school to become a professional musician. Within five years, he was living in New York, performing weekly on radio shows and in a well-known jazz band. At the time, he was one of many guitarists who were beginning to connect their instruments to amplifiers to make them louder, but Les Paul was convinced that an even bigger, clearer sound could be achieved if the guitar's body wasn't hollow. In 1941, he took a piece of solid wood, attached a guitar neck and strings to it, and plugged it into an amplifier. He called his instrument "the Log," and today, it is considered an important step in the development of the modern solid-body guitar. Paul donated "the Log" to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Paul showed his invention to the Gibson guitar company in 1946, and though he'd attached "wings" (curved sides cut from an old guitar) to the instrument to make it look more like a guitar, the company didn't think that Paul's electric guitar would be successful. It was not until the rival guitar maker Fender Electric Instrument Company built their own solid-body



electric guitar that Gibson realized Les Paul had a good idea. In 1952, Gibson began selling the Gibson Les Paul electric guitar model that is still made today. Over the years, the Gibson Les Paul has been used by many greats like Jimi Hendrix, Keith Urban, Neil Young, and Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin.

Paul continued to play, record, and tour, but he eventually left the road to create his own sound. In the home studio that he built, Paul experimented with new recording techniques by moving microphones around, changing the recording speed, and layering recordings on top of one another. These techniques impacted the way that music is recorded in studios today.

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LES PAUL: FATHER OF THE MODERN GUITAR, CONTINUED

In 1948, Paul signed a record contract and recorded many jazz songs that became hits. He was also successful playing music with his wife Mary Ford, a country music singer and guitar player. Their duo, Les Paul & Mary Ford, had a hit with their version of “How High the Moon.”

Les Paul played guitar until months before his death, at age ninety-four. Arthritis in his fingers affected his playing skills and limited his public performances in his later years. He kept relearning how to play the guitar and performed weekly at a New York jazz club from 1984 until 2009.

“I think an appropriate title for Les would be ‘the father of modern guitar,’” said Henry Juszkiewicz, the former head of Gibson Guitars. “Les really brought the guitar into the modern age and created the modern sound.”

After Paul died, he was honored for his role in developing the electric guitar, changing studio practices, and turning the guitar into a superstar.



ABOVE: “The Log” (1941)

PRESENTED IN COLLABORATION WITH:



LISTEN

- “Lover”
- “How High the Moon”
- “Mockin’ Bird Hill”
- “Vaya Con Dios”
- “Tiger Rag”

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. As a child, which three electronic devices did Paul use to experiment with sound?
2. Circle the word “amplifiers” in paragraph three. Underline the clue words and phrases that help you understand the meaning of the word.
3. Explain Les Paul’s greatest impact on music in your own words. Highlight evidence for your answer in the text.

Sources: *The Birth of Loud: Leo Fender, Les Paul, and the Guitar Pioneering Rivalry that Shaped Rock ‘N’ Roll* by Ian S. Port, National Public Television, *The New York Times*, *Rolling Stone*