

Les Paul

FATHER OF THE MODERN GUITAR

Over a career that lasted more than 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 the electric 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.

Les began his career as a professional musician first in St. Louis, then Chicago and by the time he was 23 he was living in New York, performing weekly on radio shows and in a well-known jazz band. At the time, like some other guitarists, Les connected his guitar to an amplifier to make it louder, but he 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 electric guitar. Paul donated "the Log" to the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum.

Paul showed his invention to the Gibson guitar company in 1941, 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 its own solid-body electric guitar that Gibson realized Les Paul had a good idea. In 1952, Gibson began selling the Gibson Les Paul solid-body electric



guitar model that is still made today. Over the years, the Gibson Les Paul has been used by many greats including 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 for two years 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 changed the way that music is recorded in studios today.

In late 1947, Paul signed a record contract and earned many #1 hits and gold records. He also achieved success

Continued on back

LES PAUL: FATHER OF THE MODERN GUITAR, CONTINUED

playing music with his wife Mary Ford, a country music singer and guitar player. Their duo, Les Paul & Mary Ford, had many hits including their 1951 version of “How High the Moon,” which spent nine weeks at #1 on the *Billboard* chart. Les Paul performed weekly at a New York City jazz club from 1984 until two months before his death, at age ninety-four. Arthritis in his fingers affected his playing ability, so he kept relearning how to play his guitar.

“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.”

Even after Paul died, he continued to be recognized for his role in developing the solid-body electric guitar, changing recording studio techniques, and turning the guitar into a superstar.

PRESENTED IN COLLABORATION WITH:

THE
Les Paul
FOUNDATION



ABOVE: “The Log” (1941)

LISTEN

- “It’s Been a Long, Long Time”
(Bing Crosby and the Les Paul Trio)
- “Lover”
- “Mockin’ Bird Hill”
- “Vaya Con Dios”
- “Tiger Rag”
- “How High the Moon”

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. As a child, which three electric 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*