

Born Lester William Polsfuss, Les Paul grew up in Waukesha, Wisconsin, while the historic little town was still a resort area. From early in life, Les was a tinkerer, playing music on kitchen utensils and trying to figure out how things worked. His first instrument was a harmonica given to him by a worker on a nearby water main. His mother promptly boiled the harmonica. Not long after that, he got his first guitar, a Sears model that he often stuffed with socks and plaster of Paris trying to change the sound.

By his teens, he was playing with local bands, eventually dropping out of high school to go to St. Louis and play with a radio band there.

Les Paul, guitarist - When he was younger, Les played country and hillbilly music under the stage name of *Rhubarb Red* (for his bright red hair). With each new musician he met, he absorbed new styles and interests. In the early 1930s, Les moved to Chicago where he met jazz and blues greats including Art Tatum, the amazing jazz pianist. By the end of the decade, he had moved to New York where he played on Fred Waring's radio show. There he befriended Jim Atkins, older brother to guitar legend, Chet Atkins. Jim gave Les an expensive Gibson archtop, the first professional quality guitar he had ever owned.

In 1943, in the midst of World War II, Les was drafted, and he served as guitarist for the Armed Forces Radio Network where he backed such acts as Bing Crosby and the Andrew Sisters, connections that would help him after the war was over. In 1944, he was a last minute replacement at the first *Jazz At The Philharmonic* in Los Angeles where he

played spectacularly with greats like Nat King Cole, who at that time was best known as a jazz pianist. This was before he became a popular singer.

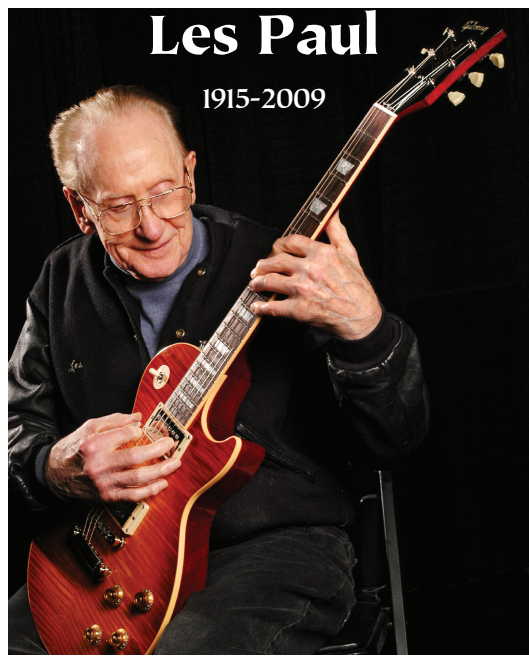
Les Paul, guitar builder - Les Paul was always frustrated by the sound of his guitars. Virtually all guitars at the time were acoustic, and so they were only as loud as a player could make them. In the midst of other players and singers the guitar could easily get lost, and to play louder by playing harder really changed the tone of the instrument.

In his New York apartment, Les continued to experiment with ideas for a better electric guitar, one with the richness of an acoustic, but louder and with other sound properties. There he created several versions of "The Log" from 4 x 4 lumber, a guitar neck, and electric pick-ups under the strings. He would house these in the shell of an old Epiphone acoustic guitar until eventually he had an electric guitar that was playable.

But things did not always go perfectly with his work. At one point in the early 1940s, Les electrocuted himself losing his hearing and requiring heart surgery. It took him almost two years to recover.

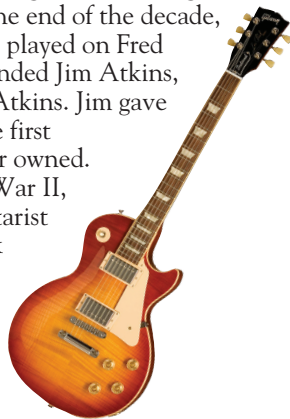


Les and "The Log"



Les Paul

1915-2009



The Gibson Les Paul original in sunburst

Les took his idea for this guitar to Gibson, a top guitar maker, but they didn't show any interest in it until the Fender corporation made an electric guitar of their own, the model that became the Telecaster. The guitar that was created in the new partnership with Gibson still bears Les Paul's name and is a favorite of many of the top guitarists in styles of music from rock to jazz to blues to country. The list is long and includes Jeff Beck, George Benson, Chuck Berry, Eric Clapton, Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, B. B. King, John McLaughlin, Wes Montgomery, Elvis Presley, Keith Richards, Carlos Santana, Eddie Van Halen, and Neil Young.

Les Paul, inventor - It wasn't just the electric guitar that sparked Paul's creative mind. In a recording session with Bing Crosby, Les complained about the sound they were getting, so Crosby suggested that Paul should build his own studio.

Crosby bought him a professional Ampex tape deck and backed his efforts which eventually led to the development of the first viable multitrack recording system. Until that time, all musicians were recorded together all going into one track. This huge advance led to today's extremely complex systems used for commercial recordings and film scores, now using dozens of tracks. This technology also led to effects that we take for granted today including delay effects, phasing, sound-on-sound, and overdubbing.

From pop artist to legend

Throughout his long and winding career Les Paul was at one time a chart-topping recording artist. For years in the late 1940s and through the 1950s, Les and his wife Mary Ford had a string of hits using his unique sound-on-sound recording which made their voices and Les' guitar sound unlike anything people had ever heard.

But it wasn't this commercial success that has endeared him to musicians and music lovers to this day. It was a warm personality that found him playing with the amazing array of musicians hinted at above. And it was his unending curiosity about what could be achieved with his guitar and with his recording equipment.

He has been honored with many, many awards from Grammys to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, where he has a stand-alone exhibit. There have been documentary films about his life and work, and NAMM has created a special Les Paul award to acknowledge creativity in music.

Perhaps the true nature of his love of music can be seen best in the fact that he continued to play regularly at a local club until just before he died. Top musicians of every sort often dropped in to play with him and visit their old friend. He was buried back in his home town in Wisconsin where visitors from all over the world come to pay their respects.



The first multitrack on display



Les Paul and Paul McCartney