



Les Paul
1915 – 2009

Somewhere There's Music

Les Paul left us too soon. Unlike the other guitar greats who played to the end, he was 94 years old.

Les Paul succumbed to complications from pneumonia, and passed away on Aug 13, 2009, with family and friends nearby. He played his last performance just three months prior—for his 14-years-and-running, Monday night gig at New York City's Iridium Room. Les Paul's influence on contemporary recording studio practice is so strong that he will forever be associated with the gear, the craft, the cult of audio. But it was musicianship that ensured his place in history. It was his hallmark to bend technology in service to music.

Born in Waukesha, Wisconsin in 1915, Lester William Polsfuss was a gigging musician by the age of 13. He dropped out of high school at the age of 17 to perform in St. Louis, and followed the well-worn path of American music from St. Louis, to Chicago, to New York. His name would mature with him—Red Hot Red, then Rhubarb Red, and finally Les Paul. The Les Paul trio was formed in New York in 1936, and it was the Les Paul trio he led at the time of his death more than 70 years later.

The Gibson Les Paul electric guitar, one of the best-selling electric guitars of all time, is descended from the elegant logic and technical drive that dis-

tinguished Les Paul's entire career. He had goals as a guitarist, and, finding nothing available that could achieve them, he invented. A solid body electric guitar solved problems of feedback, volume, and an edgy tone, while improving playability and making possible whole new styles of music. Unphased by the look, Les Paul built

his "log" solid body prototype in the early 1940s out of a scrap piece of wood, strings, and a pick-up. This successful proof-of-concept led to his relationship with Gibson and the world's longest-running electric guitar line, the one that bears Les Paul's name.

Les Paul took delivery of the Ampex 5258 Eight Track recorder, serial number 1, in 1957. It was the world's first multitrack tape recorder possessing Sel-Sync, the ability to play and record synchronously in a single head stack. The age of nondestructive overdubs without generation loss had arrived. But his life on the cutting edge of sound recording technologies and his contributions to recording studio techniques started well before this.

Sound-on-sound recording—in which a new performance is recorded while playing along with a previously recorded take—was the technique that enabled Les Paul to step out of traditional jazz and forge innovative "new sound" popular music. Record a track. Play it back, and play along, recording both. Play that back, and play along, recording the three elements. And so on. Seems intuitive but laborious in this age of cut and paste. Les Paul did it with the rather permanent, low-fi by today's standards, acetate disk. Layers were recorded until a mistake was made, the noise and crackle took over, or until a fine piece of art was created, as in 1947 with "Lover (When You Are Near Me)."

Les Paul's use of sound on sound

demonstrated profound musicianship, not just an infatuation with a new studio trick. Sound on sound was a challenging recording technique; acetate disks were an unforgiving media. Les Paul, the arranger, would record the least significant parts first, and the most important parts last, so that the resulting "mix" was not overwhelmed by the accumulating noise floor and bandwidth limitations of the format. With Les, there's always an artistic layer to it. He didn't just outsmart the limitations, he leveraged them. "Lover (When You're Near Me)" explores half-speed recording even as it stretches the concept of sound on sound to its technical limits. Oh, and Les Paul did all this in his home, beating everyone else to the home studio craze by 40 years.

Leaving acetate for tape by 1950, Les Paul used an Ampex 300 mono tape deck with an added playback head for an improved form of sound-on-sound recording. That additional head would play the accumulated performance into headphones. Les would perform additional guitar parts and the resulting mix—playback plus live—would be recorded onto tape over the prior performance.

Les Paul pushed sound-on-sound recording to its highest form of art in "How High the Moon (1951)," recorded at home and featuring his bride, Mary Ford, on vocals. That the inventiveness led to a #1 hit is typical of Les Paul. His production approach wasn't a technical trick, it was a music-making necessity. The precision harmonies of Mary Ford and the lightning-fast runs of Les Paul—demonstrating his self-professed Django Reinhardt influences—were all captured under the pressure of fully destructive, one-take, no-mistakes recording. The distinctive textures of other early 1950s hits "Mockingbird Hill," "Vaya Con Dios," "Whispering," and "Tennessee Waltz," pleased the music-buying public and piqued the interest of a generation of sound recordists keen to find new sounds

through whatever technical means necessary.

Milestones such as the solid body electric guitar and sound-on-sound recording keep company with a stream of other innovations. Les Paul built record-cutting lathes, tape delays, reverb chambers, and effects devices. His home-studio techniques aggressively explored close-microphone recording techniques. He was consulted when the reverb chambers were built at Capitol Studios in the middle of the 20th century, and his expertise in sound quality was sought when the Iridium Room Jazz Club changed locations at the beginning of the 21st century.

His tinkering wasn't limited to music-making contraptions. Shattering his right elbow in a horrific car crash in 1948, he permanently lost the ability to flex his arm. He advised the surgeon to set it in the bent playing position, a one-time foray into medical practice that successfully enabled him to play for another 60 years.

Les Paul's passion for playing music enabled him to overcome severe arthritis, and a 1980s quintuple bypass surgery. He was a true lifelong musician. He played for Nat King Cole, the Andrews Sisters, and Bing Crosby in the 1950s; in the new millennium, he played with Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Peter Frampton, Buddy Guy, Keith Richards, Steve Miller, Sting, Sam Cooke, and other superstars. He played for President Eisenhower, and received the National Medal of Arts from President Bush. The Grammy Awards didn't exist during his string of major hits in the 1950s, but he went on to win three different Grammy Awards in three different genres decades later: country (1976), rock (2005), and pop (2005). He received the Grammy Trustee Award in 1983, and a Technical Grammy in 2001. Les Paul is in the Grammy Hall of Fame, the Inventors Hall of Fame, and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He didn't just win awards; his colleagues saw fit to name an award after him, The Mix Foundation Les Paul Award. He was awarded

Honorary Membership in the Audio Engineering Society in 1958, and it was only his confinement to a hospital while recovering from that automotive accident that kept him from being part of the very founding of the society in 1948.

There is a six-bar coda at the end of "How High the Moon" that neatly sums up the wit, the chops, the fun, and the artistry of Les Paul. Pristine, layered vocals orchestrated into jazzy harmonies complement glossy guitar sounds with showy riffs. The fabricated rhythm section—seemingly made-up of guitar, bass and drums—were in fact all played by Les Paul on a single guitar. An imaginative hit single was created through the clever musical arrangement of a dozen vocal tracks plus a dozen guitar tracks. Brilliant musicianship, empowered by technical advances, and guided by visionary production wisdom, led to the creation of an iconic recording. That's all Les Paul.

Alex Case