

Les Paul's Special Place In The History Of Music

For as long as anyone has been paying attention, the evolution of musical instruments has been driven by a symbiotic relationship between instrument makers and musicians. The craftsman creates an instrument, the musician pushes it to the limit, the craftsman responds with an improved model, and progress ensues. This creative process is embodied in literally every product our industry offers today. There's a bookshelf worth of scholarly writing that meticulously details how the increasing musical demands of Bach, Beethoven, and Liszt prodded piano makers like Broadwood, Erard, Chickering, and Steinway to transform the first flimsy piano into the modern concert grand. For a more contemporary illustration of how instrument makers and musicians work hand in hand to achieve progress, you need only reflect on the amazing life of Les Paul.

Les was unique in that he was simultaneously an exceptional musical talent and one of the most creative technical minds in our industry's history—an unprecedented combination. Although he had an uncanny melodic sense, was a gifted arranger, and had a truly original mind, he made no secret of the fact that he was motivated by practical concerns. He first began amplifying his guitar in 1929 because he correctly reasoned that if the audience could hear him, he'd get bigger tips. As the guitarist with Fred Waring's 60-member vocal ensemble, the Pennsylvanians, he saw an amplified instrument as a way to compete with the horn section for coveted solo parts. The unique electrified sound he pioneered earned him 22 gold records, countless hit singles, and a top-rated network television show.

Similarly down-to-earth concerns led Les to invent multi-track recording. Not wanting to hassle with, or pay, other musicians, he saw the multi-track recorder as a fast and inexpensive way to create richly layered orchestrations all by himself. He also was the first to treat recording as a way to enhance rather than simply capture the music. The studio that filled the garage in his Los Angeles home was arguably the world's first home studio.

This intensely practical bent explains why Les's innovations were immediately and immensely successful. He saw how they worked and he never doubted that other musicians would as well. During a 1987 interview, he



said to me, "M.H. Berlin [owner of Gibson until 1970] told me he never thought the electric guitar business would be so big. I came at it from a different point of view. As a dedicated musician, the electric guitar worked for me, and I believed it would open up a whole new world of possibilities for other players. When it took off, I wasn't surprised in the least."

The Les Paul guitar and the 8-track recorder Les designed with Ampex both made their debut in 1952. Since that time, it's something of an understatement to say that they "opened a whole new world of possibilities." Spin the radio dial today, and it's almost impossible to hear anything that doesn't make use of some of Les's pioneering technology. And the process continues: in the nearly six decades since the advent of these incredible inventions, musicians have continued to push them, taking them to places Les never envisioned. However, the debt they owe to him is clear.

The opportunity to chronicle the evolution of the electric guitar, multi-track recording, and Les's other contributions has been a personal privilege for me. He was the last survivor of the original electric guitar pioneers, an extraordinary cast of characters that included Leo Fender, Paul Bigsby, George Beauchamp, and a few others. His passing represents the end of an era, but his impact on our industry and the larger world of music lives on. His remarkable genius has influenced products that now account for more than 10% of the industry's total volume. More significantly, his imprint is discernible in all of the great popular music of the last six decades.

Vaya Con Dios, Les.

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