

# A Tribute To The Industry's Guitar Heroes

If you trace the origins of the guitar back to the eighth century when Moors introduced the four-stringed oud to Andalusian Spain, several defining moments stand out. The size and design of instruments classified as “guitarra” in Spain or “guitare” in France varied widely until 1850, when Spanish luthier Antonio Torres Jurado built what many describe as the first modern guitar. He also created the fan bracing pattern that is still the standard among classical guitar builders. Around the same time on the other side of the Atlantic, C.F. Martin developed the widely copied X-brace pattern that made the steel string guitar possible. In the early 1920s, Gibson's Lloyd Loar designed the archtop instruments that ushered in the entire jazz guitar category. A decade later, George Beauchamp patented the electro-magnetic pickup that later was incorporated into Leo Fender's and Les Paul's solid-body guitars. To this list of luminaries, we would add the names of several pioneers of the past four decades. While they may not have had the same impact on the guitar's design and format, they authored important refinements that have placed superlative instruments in the hands of a much wider audience.

Innovation never takes place in a vacuum, so a bit of background is in order. In the mid-1970s, the guitar industry was rocked by a trifecta of adversity. There were demographic problems: As the baby boomers who had propelled the industry after the Beatles debut began aging out of their prime guitar buying years, they were followed by the significantly less numerous “Generation X.” Problems caused by a diminished pool of customers were aggravated by acute economic issues: Soaring gas prices and double-digit inflation reduced consumer discretionary dollars. Added to this, the surging popularity of disco pushed fretted instruments to the sidelines and caused many to speculate that “the guitar is dead.”

By 1978, guitar makers around the world were singing the blues in unison. The distant corporate owners of Fender, Gibson, Guild, and Gretsch responded to the downturn by imposing stringent cost controls that eventually compromised quality. A few years of subpar new guitars sparked a renewed interest in what we now refer to as “vintage instruments:” electrics from the 1950s and early 1960s and acoustics from the 1930s through the late 1960s. It's no accident that most of the notable vintage guitar shops got their start in the late '70s.

Against this backdrop, a group of enterprising guitar builders began asking the question, “Why are the vintage instruments better?” Was it some sort of magic, or was it the

result of using the right materials and construction techniques, and carefully attending to small details like the thickness of a finish, the plating on bridge hardware, the number of winds on a pickup, or the scalloping on acoustic bracing? Through a meticulous process of scientific experimentation, these individuals quantified the attributes of a superlative instrument and then developed standardized production techniques to reproduce them with consistency.

Paul Reed Smith raised the bar on build quality for electric guitars and introduced exotic woods. Seymour Duncan and Larry DiMarzio advanced the art of pickup design. Bob Taylor and Tom Anderson brought in computer-controlled equipment to enhance product consistency. Grover Jackson set a new standard for finish quality. To this partial list, add the scores of individuals who worked behind the scenes and contributed to these efforts. They also spurred established manufacturers to raise their game. At Fender, then CEO Bill



Schultz and his lieutenant Dan Smith brought back the qualities that made “pre-CBS” Fenders so coveted. The controversial Henry Juskiewicz similarly repaired Gibson's reputation. These quality improvements rippled across the globe as they were embraced by high-volume guitar factories throughout Asia. As a result, for \$400, today's first-time buyer can get an instrument that could be used in a stadium concert setting.

Most retailers and consumers take these improvements for granted, given that they occurred gradually. Michael Doyle, Guitar Center vice president of merchandising for guitars, is the exception. As an author and historian with experience in manufacturing and retail, he marvels at prevailing quality standards. “At every price point, today's instruments are unmatched,” he says. “The most spectacular improvements have been at the entry-level price points. Every beginner has access to great sounding and playing guitars. That wasn't the case when I started playing.”

Despite some prominent naysayers, the guitar industry continues to thrive. Based on results over the first three quarters, 2019 is poised to be another up year with projected sales of 2.6 million units. There are numerous reasons for this resilience, starting with the guitar's intrinsic appeal: it's affordable, accessible, versatile, and a thing of beauty. However, the exceptional quality and value of today's product offering also deserves some credit. Beginners who start on a playable instrument that delivers a gratifying experience are more likely to persevere. And for that, we owe thanks to the pioneers of the last four decades, genuine guitar heroes.

**Brian T. Majeski**  
Editor  
brian@musictrades.com