

FOREFRONT

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DOES THE GUITAR HAVE A FUTURE?

Artists, record execs, and journalists offer a positive take on the guitar's continuing importance in popular music during a panel discussion convened by Fender Musical Instruments



Discussing the future of the guitar (l-r) Doc McKinney, musician and producer; Gina Gleason, lead guitarist with Baroness; Andy Mooney, CEO Fender Musical Instruments.

AS TASTES EVOLVE AND technology transforms the way music is made and consumed, will the guitar continue to play a prominent role in popular music? This was the topic addressed by a panel of artists, record executives, and journalists recently convened in New York City by Fender Musical Instruments. The occasion was the introduction of Fender's redesigned California Series line of acoustic guitars, which combine bold color finishes, a slim neck profile, and the distinctive Fender headstock. However, in a lively panel discussion that touched on the limited attention span of "Generation Z," similarities between skateboarding and guitar playing, and the blurring of musical genres, there was unanimous agreement that the guitar remains a powerful and relevant musical tool, and that any obituaries are premature. "Our brains are wired to enjoy the sound of an acoustic stringed instrument," declared Matt Sweeney, the guitarist and songwriter who moderated the panel, expressing the consensus view. "It's an incredibly versatile instrument that's almost limitless in its possibilities."

The widespread use of computer generated backup tracks in chart-topping pop songs has led some to pronounce the death of the guitar. Noting that similar predictions have been made before, Caiti Green, a marketing executive at Atlantic Records, said that changes in the listening habits of current teens suggest otherwise. Describing them as "the playlist generation," she explained, "They don't listen to complete albums, they pick and choose songs to create their own very personal playlists," which creates "more room for diversity. They'll listen to a synth but they're also open to the guitar." Alan Light, a music journalist, added, "Playlists have



Holding forth on musical trends and the guitar (l-r) Alan Light and Kathy Landoli, music journalists; Scott Igoe, ABC Entertainment v.p.; Caiti Green, marketing director, Atlantic Records.

blurred the distinctions between genres. Kids are listening to more kinds of music than ever before.”

Rising concert attendance is another reflection of interest in guitar. Fender CEO Andy Mooney said, “82 million attended a live performance last year, according to Live Nation. That’s up 20%. Every generation looks to performers on stage for cues, and the guitar is definitely there.” Pointing to the enormous popularity of solo guitarist Ed Sheeran, Sweeney added, “In every generation, there have been hugely popular guitarists and I think there always will be.”

Mooney, however, downplayed the importance of “guitar heroes.” Pointing to the great virtuosos he grew up with, including Richie Blackmore, Jimi Hendrix, and Eric Clapton, he said, “They were great players but they were also impossible for average players to emulate.” Conversely, he noted, punk rock was a compelling motivator. “All of a sudden anyone who knew three chords and had a lot of enthusiasm could perform. Punk has evolved into grunge, indie, and alternative, but they’re all still very accessible and have an important guitar component. It’s very positive.”

Even in musical settings where the guitar isn’t on center stage, it still plays an important musical role. Scott Igoe, an ABC executive responsible for music programming, said that rap artists “Kendrick Lamar and Drake have a five-piece band with guitars off stage. They appreciate the importance of musicians and that a guitar is real and powerful.” He added, “It’s only a matter of time before the guitar comes back on stage.”

Panelists also noted that the guitar remains a critical compositional tool for musicians working in all genres. Doc McKinney, a producer who has worked extensively with Chance the Rapper, The Weeknd, and Florence and the Machine, said that despite his use of Pro Tools and other software, he still relies on a guitar to block out songs. “It’s just more expressive and practical,” he said. Gina Gleason, lead guitarist with the metal band Baroness, performs with an elaborate array of effects pedals but also relies heavily on an acoustic guitar for composition. She added, “I love all the effects, but if it doesn’t work on an acoustic guitar, it’s just not a good song.”

Panelists agreed that mastering the guitar continues to hold a special place with kids seeking peer recognition. Sweeney compared it to skateboarding, stating “Practicing guitar or spending hours in a skateboard park address the same social need.” McKinney added, “When DJs first started manipulating turntables, it was cool. Once anyone could do it with Serato software, it wasn’t cool anymore. Same with guitar; kids want a skill that sets them apart.” Light pointed out that “The School of Rock in our neighborhood is bursting at the seams. They are obviously addressing a hunger to learn.” Green suggested that the generation that has grown up immersed with computers and smartphones is “taking a new interest in the physicality of playing a guitar.” Supporting her claim, she pointed to the enthusiasm

of the sell-out crowds at concerts by Portugal The Man, a Grammy-winning guitar-based band. “You see kids in the audience completely transfixed,” she said.

While some have lamented the “limited attention span” of Generation Z, panelists said that the demographic was enthusiastically taking advantage of new digital tools to learn the guitar. Mooney revealed that Fender Play, the company’s online learning effort, currently has 40,000 subscribers. “We’re just starting to really ramp it up with an Android app, but the growth has been very encouraging,” he reported. McKinney said that the new generation has embraced YouTube and other videos to master the guitar. “This is the ‘do it yourself’ generation,” he said. “It’s great to see financial barriers to learning the guitar come down. It has to lead to more players.”

Mooney said that the continued strength in ukulele sales—1.1 million units in 2017—also holds promise for the future of the guitar. “I think the ukulele could be the start of a lifelong relationship. A ten-year-old starts playing a uke, graduates to a guitar, and over a 25-year period, we sell them a lot of stuff.”

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