

Les Paul, 1915-2009: His Electric Guitar and Inventions Changed 20th Century Popular Music

His popular songs include "Tiger Rag" and "How High the Moon." *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
25 September 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Shirley Griffith.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English. Today we tell about Les Paul, one of the most influential people in modern popular music. He was a skillful guitarist who played an energetic mixture of jazz and country songs. He was also an inventor.

The electric guitar and recording devices he created changed the sound of popular music and greatly influenced rock and roll.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

That was the song "Lover", first released in nineteen forty-eight. To make this song, Les Paul layered eight recordings of himself playing the electric guitar. Some of the tracks were recorded at normal speed and some were recorded at half speed. Played at normal speed, the half speed recordings sound twice as fast. The song gives a good example of Les Paul's experimental style and inventive spirit.

Les Paul is best known for creating one of the first solid-body electric guitars and the eight-track recording device. He also perfected new recording methods to give special effects to his music.



Les Paul

VOICE TWO:

Les Paul was born Lester William Polfuss in nineteen fifteen in Waukesha, Wisconsin. By the age of nine, he had taught himself to play the harmonica and had built a radio. He also learned to play the guitar and banjo. He could not read music, but he could play music that he heard. And he had a good sense of musical structure.

Les Paul was soon performing in country bands in the Midwest. He left high school to perform full time on radio shows. He performed using the names "The Wizard of Waukesha", "Hot Rod Red" and "Rhubarb Red." He also started playing music influenced by great jazz guitarists including Django Reinhardt.

By nineteen thirty-seven, he had formed the Les Paul trio. He moved to New York City the next year. Les Paul played with many famous performers including the popular singer Bing Crosby.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Around nineteen forty-one, Les Paul invented his famous guitar. He wanted to make an instrument that could play a note longer than notes played on a traditional acoustic guitar. He developed a new kind of electric guitar that had a solid body. On an acoustic guitar, the strings vibrate and the hollow part of the instrument, or the sound box, also vibrates. Les Paul wanted an instrument in which only the strings vibrated.

Making a guitar with a solid body permitted the sound of the strings to last longer because their vibrating energy was not weakened by a vibrating sound box. And this design reduced feedback, a noise problem common with acoustic guitars.

VOICE TWO:



To make his guitar, Les Paul attached guitar strings and two electronic pickup devices onto a flat piece of wood from a railroad track. A pickup is a device that captures the vibration of the metal guitar strings and changes them into electronic sound signals. He called his non-vibrating guitar body “the Log.” It was a very strange- looking instrument, so he hid it inside the body of a traditional guitar.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

Les Paul said that guitarists could play louder and truly express themselves with this new guitar. He said guitarists could become some of the most powerful people in a band. Les Paul was not the only person to make a solid-body guitar. Leo Fender created another version, the Fender Telecaster, in nineteen forty-eight.

VOICE TWO:

The Gibson Guitar Company hired Paul to design a special “Les Paul” guitar. Versions of the guitar he created in nineteen fifty-two are still huge sellers, even today. Some of the top guitarists in the world have used this guitar. They include Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page from the band Led Zeppelin and Slash from the band Guns N’ Roses.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

That was the song “Vaya Con Dios” which Les Paul performed with his wife, singer and guitarist Mary Ford. The two began playing together in nineteen forty-seven. The next year, Les Paul had a serious car accident that left him with severe injuries. His right arm was crushed. Once set, he would never be able to bend his arm again. He decided to have his arm set at an angle so that he could keep playing the guitar.

VOICE TWO:

During the nineteen fifties, Les Paul and Mary Ford recorded many hit songs including “Mockingbird Hill” and “How High the Moon.” Mary Ford performed on Les Paul’s radio show. Later they had a television show. Les Paul continued to experiment with different recording methods. He built his own recording studio in his house. He used technology and electronic effects to add a special sound to his music. In the late nineteen fifties he invented the eight-track recording method known as multi-track recording. Each track could be recorded and changed separately, without affecting the others.

VOICE ONE:

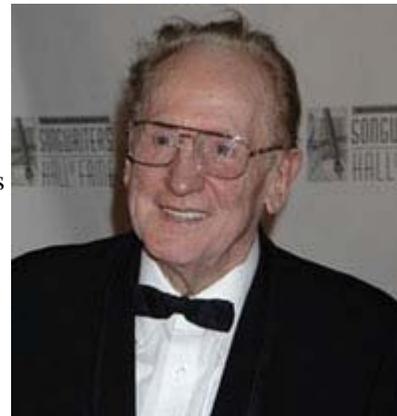
By the nineteen sixties, Les Paul and Mary Ford’s series of hits came to an end and they later ended their marriage. But Paul never stopped improving his guitars and other musical devices. He invented the “Les Paulverizer” device which permitted a performer to echo, or repeat, his or her music.

In the nineteen seventies, Les Paul made two records with the country guitarist Chet Atkins. One was called “Chester and Lester.” It won a Grammy Award in nineteen seventy-six. Starting in the early nineteen eighties, Paul began playing in jazz clubs in New York City. He kept on performing weekly until a few months before his death.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame honored Les Paul by making him a member in nineteen eighty-eight. He was also a member of the Grammy Hall of Fame, Songwriters Hall of Fame and National Inventors Hall of Fame. His last record was “Les Paul and Friends: American Made World Played.” It was released in two thousand five to observe his ninetieth birthday. On the album, Les Paul plays with guitar greats including Jeff Beck and Keith Richards. The album earned him two more Grammy Awards.



Les Paul died in August of two thousand nine. He was ninety-four years old. Someone once asked him if he thought he would still be playing at one hundred years old. He said he did not see why not, as long as people put up with him and he was having fun.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

This program was written and produced by Dana Demange. For transcripts, MP3s and podcasts of our shows go to voaspecialenglish.com. I’m Shirley Griffith.

VOICE TWO:

And I’m Steve Ember. Join us again next week for PEOPLE IN AMERICA in VOA Special English.