Obituary

Les Paul: A legacy of ground-breaking musical invention

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Les Paul, the American musician and inventor who gave his name to the Gibson Les Paul guitar, died of complications from pneumonia at White Plains Hospital in suburban New York City on August 13 at the age of 94.

As well as being a beautiful player who never sacrificed the musical idea for flashy displays of technique—of which he had plenty—Les Paul was responsible for key advances in musical recording techniques. In a professional musical career that spanned more than eight decades, Paul genuinely revolutionised popular music, a remarkable achievement for a man without formal training in electronics or music.

Born Lester William Polfuss in Waukesha, Wisconsin (100 miles north of Chicago), on June 9, 1915 to George and Evelyn Polfuss, Paul's family were of German ancestry. Paul showed an early and innate musical and technical ability. He taught himself to play the harmonica at the age of eight and then discovered how to program his mother's upright player piano by punching additional holes in its piano roll.

Paul soon moved on to the banjo and finally the guitar, and was one of the early pioneers of playing harmonica and guitar at the same time. Indeed, the neck-worn harmonica holder which he invented is still manufactured using his basic design.

At the age of 13 Paul began playing professionally at a local drive-in restaurant. Frustrated that he was barely audible over the sound of automobile engines and the hubbub of the patrons, he rigged up a phonograph needle in the middle of his guitar which he wired to a radio speaker, thus creating his first electric guitar.

Dubbed the "Wizard from Waukesha", the red-haired teenager dropped out of school and joined a country band, finally ending up in Chicago where he was known as "Rhubarb Red" on WJJD radio. Within two years he was being featured on the NBC network.

After hearing a recording of the brilliant Gypsy guitarist, Django Reinhardt, Paul began rehearsing with bass player Ernie Newton and rhythm guitarist Jimmy Atkins (the older half-brother of guitarist Chet Atkins) to explore the more varied and broader musical horizons offered by the world of jazz.

Known as the Les Paul Trio, the band moved to New York in 1938, played with bandleader Fred Waring and joined Harlem jam sessions with the likes of Louis Armstrong, Art Tatum, Ben Webster, Stuff Smith and Charlie Christian. In 1939 the trio was invited by President Roosevelt to perform at the White House.

Paul continued to experiment with different forms of electric guitar. As he later told rock music author Jim O'Donnell: "What I wanted to do is not have two things vibrating. I wanted the string to vibrate and nothing else. I wanted the guitar to sustain longer than an acoustical box and have different sounds than an acoustical box."

Here we glimpse some of Paul's genius. In general, one of the main problems with acoustic guitars—be they with steel or nylon strings—is their quickness of decay, i.e., the sounds of the notes don't linger for long. Paul figured out that the less the string vibration was dissipated the longer "the return". Add electrification and the instrument could sustain a note for a previously unheard of length of time.

In 1941, after years of experiment—or just "tinkering around" as he modestly put it—Paul came up with the idea of a guitar which would be solid enough to enable the guitar pickups to capture nearly every part of the vibration and at the same time reduce the problems of feedback.

Paul called his invention "the log", a four-by-four-inch board with a neck from an Epiphone guitar, strings and an attached pickup. And to dress it up a bit, he fitted part of an Epiphone hollow-body guitar around "the log". While it was by no means perfect, the instrument provided the basis for a revolutionary transformation of the guitar sound, and eventually new musical mountains for guitarists to climb.

Unbelievably, at least in hindsight, the Gibson guitar company turned down Paul's invention, describing it as a "broomstick with pickups". Undeterred, Paul moved on to Hollywood and formed a new trio, which appeared with Nat King Cole at the inaugural 1944 "Jazz at the Philharmonic" concert in Los Angeles. He regularly performed with Bing Crosby and produced one of his hits—"It's Been A Long, Long Time." During WWII he served under bandleader Meredith Wilson in the Armed Forces Radio Service and toured with the Andrews Sisters.

After the war Paul built a recording studio and took two years off from performing to concentrate on new advances in recording. This included experiments with close-mike techniques, which

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created an intimate, relaxed and more conversational style of singing, and multi-tracking using acetate disks.

Paul's multi-track experiments involved recording a track onto one disk, then re-recording onto a second disk while the first one was playing. Any variation in the turntable speed and the project would be ruined. The results were brilliant and captured in the instrumental solos of his "Lover and Brazil" and the Top 10 hits "Nola", "Josephine", "Tiger Rag" and "Meet Mr Callaghan". In the 1948 recording, "Lover: When You're Near Me", Paul played eight guitar parts.

But the world of studio wizardry was only beginning for Paul. After Bing Crosby gave him the second tape machine ever to be released on the American market, Paul modified it with an extra playback head. This allowed him to play along with a previously recorded track and mix both together on to a new track. Less than a decade later he commissioned Ampex to build the world's first eight-track tape recorder, later known as "Sel-Sync," (Selective Synchronization) and the core idea behind multi-tracking.

In January 1948 Paul was involved in a near-fatal automobile accident which shattered his right arm and elbow. Doctors said his elbow could not be rebuilt and would be locked in whatever position they set it. Paul had his elbow set at such an angle that he could cradle and pick the guitar. A year and a half later he was back playing.

Divorced from his first wife Virginia, Paul married the singer Iris Colleen Summers in late 1949. Summers, at his suggestion, changed her name to Mary Ford.

Paul and Ford began using his new recording techniques, producing a string of hits, including "Tennessee Waltz", "Mockin' Bird Hill", "How High The Moon", "Vaya Con Dios" and "Hummingbird". In 1951 alone they sold six million records.

Notwithstanding these commercial successes, an ever restless sense of discovery drove Paul on. Unable to ignore the massive success of the Telecaster solid-body guitar manufactured by its rival Fender, the Gibson guitar company in 1951 hired Paul as a consultant in the production of its first solid-body instrument. The Gibson Les Paul was a quality product and unlike the "twang" of the Fender, gave a deep and lasting sustain. Les Paul remained with Gibson until the early 1960s when he objected to their design of a guitar without his input and ended the contract.

Paul and Ford divorced in 1962 and for the next ten or so years he abandoned his musical career to become a "professional tinkerer and inventor". Then in 1976, he recorded some beautiful music with his long-lost protégé, Chet Atkins, and won a Grammy with "Chester and Lester". (See: "Chet Atkins and Les Paul" on YouTube)

Simultaneously—and due in large part to the popularity of players like Carlos Santana and Eric Clapton—the Les Paul guitar became extremely popular. Advances in amplification had dramatically improved the instrument, which, when used with Paul's string bending techniques and added vibrato, gave the guitar a long and wide sustain, even as much as 10-20 seconds. The electric guitar could now sing like a horn or saxophone or a violin.

In the late 1960s Paul more or less retired until the late 1980s when the re-energised 70-year-old guitarist began playing every Monday night at the Iridium Jazz Club in New York City. A virtual who's who of leading rock, blues and jazz guitarists—including Bruce Springsteen, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, Gary Moore, Slash, Dickie Betts, Joe Satriani and Peter Green—came to marvel at Paul's artistry and technique. Many were invited to perform with him on stage.

The recipient of countless musical awards, Paul remains one of a tiny handful of artists given a permanent and stand-alone exhibit in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame where he is named as an "architect" and a "key inductee" along with Sam Phillips and Alan Freed. He continued recording almost up until his death and at the age of 90 was awarded two Grammys for his album *Les Paul & Friends: "American Made World Played"*.

So how should we remember his life? As a great inventor in amplification? Yes, but others were heading down that path and it was only a matter of time before primitive guitar amplification was discovered. As the inventor of multi-tracking? Perhaps, but it was electronics engineer Jack Mullin who shipped the first tape recorder into the US, thus laying the foundations for multi-track recordings.

Where Paul stands alone—at least in my opinion—is as a great musician. With the exception of classical guitarist Andrés Segovia, Paul advanced the guitar more than any one else in last century. He enlarged and enhanced the sound of the instrument and with his licks, note-bending, trills, chording sequences, fretting techniques and wonderful sense of timing opened up a whole new musical vocabulary for guitar players. His life long commitment to the "musical idea" has left us a rich and integral legacy.

The author also recommends that readers listen to the free mp3 files of the Les Paul, Mary Ford, and bassist/percussionist Ed Stapleton NBC radio shows, including their audition, which can be downloaded here.

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