

# Les Paul

## Inventor, Gold Record Performer



*Lester Polsfuss, performed as Red Hot Red before he left Waukesha*

1

**Lester Polsfuss** was born on June 9, 1915 in Waukesha, Wisconsin. When he was older he used the name Les Paul. After his parents were divorced he lived with his mother and older brother Ralph.

As a child Lester liked music and inventing things. His first invention was a **harmonica** holder. Using his holder Lester could flip his harmonica with his chin. Les played his guitar and harmonica all around town. He used parts of his mother's telephone and radio to make his voice and harmonica louder. He amplified his guitar with parts from his father's **phonograph**.

When he was in high school Lester built his first solid body **electric guitar**. It was made with a steel train rail. It didn't look like a guitar, but it helped him understand how a guitar works. He also built a machine for his mother to record his performances.

2

**Radio** was new and had only live performances. Teenage Lester played on local radio stations. At 17, he moved to St. Louis to perform on a new radio station. A few years later he was in Chicago performing **hillbilly music** on the radio as Rhubarb Red. At night he learned a new kind of music called "jazz." He started using the name Les Paul when he played jazz.

Les formed his first Trio. The three moved to New York where they performed on the radio with the popular Fred Waring. Les thought about his first solid body guitar. This time he put guitar strings on a 4" x 4" piece of wood and added a guitar neck. It still didn't look like a guitar, but it made the sound Les wanted. He showed his **invention** to the Gibson Guitar Company. They laughed at him. It took Les almost 10 years to convince Gibson to build the solid body electric guitar.

*The Les Paul Trio in New York*



*Les Paul, Jimmy Atkins, Ernie Newton*

In 1943 Les moved to Hollywood. World War II was raging and Les was drafted into the Armed Forces Radio Service. Les made recordings for the troops and learned more about how to record music. Once out of the service, Les' Trio played popular music on NBC radio. The Trio recorded the hit, "It's Been A Long, Long Time" with Bing Crosby. That was their first number one record. Les

built a **recording studio** in his Hollywood garage. Many stars came to Les' studio. He had created a unique sound that everyone liked.

3

When NBC wanted something new on the radio Les did his hillbilly show. But this time he wanted to add a female singer. A friend suggested **Colleen Summers**, who was singing with a cowboy. It wasn't long before Colleen became "Mary Lou" and joined Les on the radio.

Les' mother was his biggest fan. One day she said she couldn't tell the difference between his electric guitar playing and anyone else's. Les was determined to create a unique sound. After almost two years, Les had his New Sound. It included many new ways to record music.

In 1948 Les and Mary were in a very bad car **accident**. Mary had minor injuries, but Les almost died. One doctor wanted to amputate his right arm because it was in such bad shape. Les said, no and had his arm set so that he could play his guitar.

The following year, Les and Mary were married. For the next several years their recordings were at the top of the music charts. They drove across the country to all their **concerts**. They also performed in Europe, South America and Alaska. They recorded their radio shows on tape to be aired later.

In 1952, the Gibson Les Paul solid body electric guitar was introduced. About this time, Listerine asked Les and Mary to create a TV show. **Television** was new and Les wanted to be part of it. Listerine asked the couple to move closer to New York. Les and Mary sold their Hollywood home and moved to New Jersey. At their new home they filmed what may have been America's first reality TV. "Les Paul and Mary Ford at Home" ran for 5 minutes, 5 times a day for 5 days a week. The show combined a short script and a song or two. Some of the 190 shows can be seen on the internet.



*Les Paul & Mary Ford*

4

In the early 1960s, Rock music ended many popular music acts. Les and Mary got divorced. Les retired from performing. He focused on inventing and helping young performers. In 1975, Chet Atkins and Les Paul recorded "Chester and Lester." It won a **Grammy**.

In 1984 Les began to perform every Monday at a jazz club in New York City. He performed until shortly before he died on August 12, 2009.

Les received many awards, but he is the only person to be inducted into both the **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame** and the **National Inventors Hall of Fame**. Some of his awards include the Country Music Hall of Fame, Hollywood Walk of Fame Star, Audio Engineering Society, six Grammy Awards, an Emmy Lifetime Achievement Award, Songwriters Hall of Fame and the **National Medal of Arts** from U.S. President George W. Bush.



*Les Paul at the National Inventors Hall of Fame*