



Les Paul talks about adapting to physical challenges

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Excerpts from Les Paul in His Own Words with additional cuts for the lesson reading.

Les Paul, the father of the solid-body electric guitar, gold record performer, inventor of the 8-track tape recorder as well as many of today's recording techniques, had multiple physical challenges. In his autobiography, Les Paul in His Own Words, Les reflected on how each circumstance affected him. Text in italics and in parentheses is added to clarify.

1 Electrical shock at age 26

The doctors said what I'd experienced was very similar to being struck by lightning, the results of which, if not fatal, can leave you with **handicaps** you don't recover from. One doctor was of the opinion that the **numbness** might never go away completely, so I didn't know to what degree I'd be able to regain my playing ability.

I never really believed I wouldn't recover, but the future was very uncertain and the course of my life was changed forever.

While I was laid up, for the first time in my life, I had to take it easy. I couldn't **jam**, perform or do anything I was used to doing because my hands were dead and my energy level was **kaput**. The down time gave me the opportunity to think about everything I'd done, and what I still wanted to do. I was 26 years old and confident of regaining my abilities.



2 Near-fatal accident at 33 years

*Les and Mary were caught in a terrible snowstorm when their **convertible** went off a railroad overpass and dropped 20 feet. There were no seat belts and both of them were thrown through the roof.*

...My back, collarbones, a shoulder and six ribs were broken, I had a fractured pelvis, a punctured spleen, and my nose was smashed. My right arm was completely shattered and the elbow crushed to a pulp. On top of everything else, I contracted **pneumonia** lying out there in the snow unconscious for what they said was eight hours before help arrived. They took me by ambulance to Oklahoma City...It was the general **opinion** of everyone involved that if I did survive, I would never play guitar again. There were many, including my Dad, who predicted I wasn't going to make it....



3 I had **pneumonia**... I was rigged up like a **trapeze act** in the hospital bed. My mental state was shot. My future as a musician, as an entertainer, as the person I'd always been, was one big question mark. Those first weeks in the hospital were a very dark time. I passed the time by reading and listening to the radio. I read one book after another about electronics, **audio engineering** and human behavior, whatever I could find to take an interest in. I was day after day lying in that hospital bed thinking about how I could continue if the worst happened and I lost the arm. And that's when it came to me. I had the plans (for a synthesizer) drawn out in detail, but after my arm was saved, I didn't pursue it.

4 Adapting To Limitations

The (secondary) **surgery** (in California) was successful, but there was a long way to go. My right hand stuck out of the cast and was terribly weak and swollen, so I started right away to exercise my fingers, doing whatever I could to try and restore feeling and movement. The doctors said there was potential **nerve damage** that I shouldn't count on regaining full use of the hand, but I wasn't buying it.

5 I was determined it was going to come back and that I would play again, even if I had to learn how all over again. I could **fret** okay with my left hand, but couldn't get my right hand on the strings because of the **cast**. My solution was to take a guitar stand and have it altered to hold my guitars at a height and angle matching the arm cast. I couldn't grasp a straight pick, so we jammed a **thumb pick** on my swollen thumb, slapped a guitar into the elevator stand, and I started putting down parts. My arm was getting better and I was adjusting to having a frozen elbow, but it was still one day at a time, and very slow going.



6 This time provided an important beginning for all the music and invention ideas I'd stored up during my long (18 months) **recovery**, when my mind was going all the time with the **synthesizer**, electric guitar experiments, **recording experiments** and a million other things. I was thinking, "Oh boy, I could do this, I could do that, and when I get my hand back I'm going to have to learn to pick a different way because it isn't going to be like it was." The long recovery period was quite a challenge, and also a blessing because it gave me a chance to think, and read, and plan, and dream.

Additional excerpts from the blog are available online.