

Les Paul

Inventor, Gold Record Performer



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

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Lester Polsfuss, who later became Les Paul, was born on June 9, 1915 in Waukesha, Wisconsin. He was the second child of Evelyn and George Polsfuss, descendants of German immigrants. After his parents were divorced when he was five years old, Les lived with his mother and brother Ralph.

As a child Les was interested in music and engineering. His first invention was a harmonica holder that allowed him to flip his harmonica with his chin. As a teen, Les played his guitar all around town. He experimented with amplifying his voice and harmonica by using parts from his mother's telephone and radio. Next, he amplified his acoustic guitar with parts from his father's phonograph. In high school he experimented with building a solid body electric guitar. His Rail guitar was primitive, but it was the start of his guitar evolution. He also built a recording lathe so his mother could record his radio performances.

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Radio was new and featured only live performances. As a teen, Les played on several local radio stations. At 17, he moved to St. Louis to perform on a new station. A few years later, he was in Chicago performing hillbilly music on the radio as Rhubarb Red during the day and learning jazz in the evening as Les Paul.

After forming his first Trio, he moved to New York where the group performed with the very popular Fred Waring. While on the show, Les transitioned from playing acoustic to electric guitar. Les returned to his experiments with the solid body electrical guitar. This time he strung a 4" x 4" piece of wood with an Epiphone neck like a guitar. Although primitive in appearance, it produced the sound Les had been chasing. He showed his invention to Gibson and argued that solid body electric guitars were the future. They were not interested and it took Les almost 10 years to convince Gibson that he was right.



*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 soon was drafted into the Armed Forces Radio Service. While making recordings for the troops he learned more about recording techniques. Once out of the service, Les' Trio became regulars, playing popular music on NBC radio, where he connected with his idol, Bing Crosby. Les' Trio recorded the hit, "It's Been A Long, Long Time" with Bing and went on tour and recorded with the popular Andrew Sisters.

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When Les modified his garage into a recording studio, he attracted all the big stars of the day. Les became known for making the best quality recordings.

When NBC wanted to add a hillbilly radio show Les offered to resurrect his show from his St. Louis and Chicago days. He wanted to add a female singer. A friend from Chicago suggested Colleen Summers, who was singing backup for Gene Autry. It wasn't long before Colleen became "Mary Lou", and joined Les' Ozark Apple Knockers.

Les' mother was his biggest fan. When she said she couldn't tell the difference between his electric guitar playing and that of other performers, he became determined to create a unique sound. Relentless experiments led to Les Paul's New Sound, which introduced his many new recording techniques including reverb, phase shifting, and sound on sound.

In 1948, just as Les' New Sound was being released, he and Mary were in a horrific car accident. Mary had minor injuries, but Les' multiple injuries included a shattered right elbow. After refusing to allow a doctor to amputate his right arm, Les had his arm set so that he could play his guitar.



Les Paul & Mary Ford

The following year, Les and Mary were married. In the next several years their recordings skyrocketed to the top of the music charts. The two drove from one concert to the next, crossing the country. They also performed in Europe, South America and Alaska. At the same time, they recorded their radio shows and sent tapes to Hollywood to be aired. They were on top.

In 1952 the Gibson Les Paul solid body electric guitar made its debut. About this time, Listerine asked Les and Mary to create a TV show. Television was new and Les couldn't resist. Listerine wanted the couple to be closer to its New York headquarters. Les and Mary sold their Hollywood home and moved to New Jersey where they filmed what may have been America's first TV reality show. "Les Paul and Mary Ford at Home" ran for 5 minutes, 5 times a day, 5 days a week. The homespun show combined a short script and a song or two by the duo. Some of the 190 shows can be seen on the internet

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The introduction of Rock music in the early 1960s stifled many previously popular acts, including Les and Mary. The couple divorced in 1964. Les retired from performing to focus on inventing and helping younger performers. In 1975, Chet Atkins convinced Les to record what would become the Grammy-winning album, "Chester and Lester."

In 1984 Les started performing every Monday at a jazz club in Manhattan and continued performing to within a couple of months of his passing 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' Technical Grammy Award