

Les Paul

# TIMELINE

Inventor, Gold Record Performer, Songwriter, multiple Halls of Fame inductee

## 1915

Lester William Polsfuss is born June 9 in **Waukesha, Wisconsin**, to George and Evelyn Polsfuss. (Lester's mother changed spelling of their last name, but Lester never legally changed his name.)

## 1920s, Growing up years

- Punches new holes into his mother's player piano rolls, creating multi-track effect.
- Receives first harmonica from a ditch-digger.
- Builds crystal radio set and learns about sound electronics from WTMJ radio engineer.
- Receives first guitar, a Sears, Roebuck Troubadour.
- Invents flip-able harmonica holder so he can play both sides while playing guitar.
- Meets idols Gene Autry and Pie Plant Pete when they tour with Chicago's WLS Barn Dance shows.
- Experiments with amplifying and electrifying his guitar at Beekman's Bar-B-Q where he performs for tips.
- Attempts first solid-body electric guitar by filling his acoustic guitar with Plaster of Paris.
- Stretches guitar string over a section of train rail, adds telephone microphone as pickup and amplifies it
- Builds first disc-cutting lathe with Cadillac flywheel, dental belts and nail.



## Early 1930s

- Meets mentor Sunny Joe Wolverton.
- Plays on Milwaukee area radio stations with Sunny Joe Wolverton.
- Great Depression leaves many without jobs.
- Sunny Joe and Rhubarb Red perform for hillbilly radio stations in St. Louis and Springfield, MO.
- Starts to play electric guitar.
- Rhubarb Red and Sunny Joe move to Chicago. Perform on WBBM radio and at World's Fair.
- Jams with jazz greats on Chicago's Southside as Les Paul at night.
- Does jazz show with organ and guitar on WIND radio; plays jazz on WJJD radio.
- For short time, plays piano instead of guitar.
- Converts Bell & Howell movie speaker into guitar amplifier.
- Forms first Les Paul Trio with Ernie Newton and Jimmie Atkins (Chet Atkin's half-brother).



## 1936

- Makes first professional recordings as Rhubarb Red on Montgomery Ward's record label.
- Records 20 sides on Decca with blues singer Georgia White.
- Continues to experiment with designing solid-body electric guitar.
- Performs on several Chicago radio stations with various hillbilly bands.
- Records first sound-on-sound.

## 1938

- Moves to **New York** and joins Fred Waring and the Pennsylvanians on NBC radio.
- Installs two pickups on his hollow body electric guitar for first time.

## 1939

- Plays electric guitar on Waring's national radio show. No one else is playing electric guitars on radio.
- Performs in White House concert for President Franklin D. Roosevelt.
- Uses Philco radio/record player to create pirate radio station in basement of his NYC apartment.
- Cuts first commercial records with trio, doing four sides for Columbia.
- Appears in Gibson's catalog with a Super 400 guitar.

## 1941

- Builds the "Log" in NYC Epiphone factory where he is allowed access on Sundays.
- Gibson executives laugh at Les' suggestion to build a solid-body electric guitar.
- Performs and records with his "Klunker," an Epiphone hollow body with super-hot pickups.
- Suffers extreme electric shock, resulting in severe burns to his hands and weeks in the hospital.
- Trio splits.
- Moves back to Chicago. Becomes music director for WIND and WJJD.



## 1942

- Builds headless guitar from sheet of aluminum.

# Les Paul Timeline

---

## 1943

- Moves to Los Angeles to team with Bing Crosby.
- New Les Paul Trio is hired by NBC radio.
- Drafted into Armed Forces Radio Service, where he creates V-Disc recordings AFRS radio shows, does transcriptions and learns about recording.

## 1944

- Performs with Nat Cole at first *Jazz at the Philharmonic* concert in Los Angeles, jazz's most famous jam sessions.

## 1945

- Plays guitar on Bing Crosby's post-war hit "It's Been a Long, Long Time".
- Converts Hollywood garage into cutting-edge recording studio to record the stars.
- Plays guitar in several movies.
- Gene Autry introduces Iris Colleen Summers (Mary Ford) to Les.
- Revives Rhubarb Red persona for hillbilly radio shows with Mary.



## 1946

- Trio tours U.S. with Andrew Sisters.
- Les' mother complains that every guitar player sounds like Les.
- Leaves Andrew Sisters tour. Returns to Hollywood garage studio.
- Spends two years inventing revolutionary recording techniques to create his "New Sound."
- Makes first sound-on-sound commercial recordings using disks.

## 1947

- Appears in movie, *Sarge Goes to College*.
- Plays "Lover" for brand new recording company, Capitol Records.
- Signs recording contract with Capitol.



## 1948

- January 26 Les and Mary are in horrific car accident in Oklahoma during winter storm.
- Doctors recommend amputating Les' badly damaged right arm.
- Persuades doctors to set arm so he can continue to play.
- Capitol releases "Lover" and "Brazil", Les' first "New Sound" recordings with overdubbed guitars.

## 1949

- Les and Mary play their guitars together for first time in public at opening of Waukesha's Club 400, owned by Les' dad and brother, George and Ralph Polsfuss.
- Les chooses Mary's stage name of "Ford" from Milwaukee phone book.
- Bing Crosby commissions Ampex Corp. to produce first U.S. tape recorders. Gives first Ampex model to Les.
- Orders additional recording head and invents Sound-on-Sound tape machine.
- Hosts radio show, *Les Paul at Home*, which airs for 23 weeks.
- Les and Mary are married December 29, 1949 in Milwaukee.

## 1950

- After nearly 10 years of Les trying to convince Gibson to build solid body electric guitars, company begins to design the electric guitar with input from Les.
- Has three instrumental hits.

## 1951

- Les and Mary have seven hits including "How High the Moon." Sell six million records.
- Les and Mary play London Palladium and Grand Ole Opry among countless venues.
- Records popular jingle for Rheingold Beer.
- Voted number one guitarist in country by *Down Beat* magazine.
- Signs with Gibson.

## 1952

- Les and Mary have eight hits.
- Gibson introduces Les Paul solid-body electric guitar.
- Gibson makes two mini-guitars for Les to use during live performances.
- Move to Mahwah, New Jersey.



# Les Paul Timeline

## 1953

- Release of Les and Mary's biggest hit, "Vaya Con Dios".
- Listerine sponsors *Les Paul and Mary Ford At Home*, 5-minute television shows (170 episodes) recorded in their Mahwah, NJ home.
- Envisions 8-track tape recorder. Works with Ampex to refine and manufacture 8-track.
- Explains sound-on-sound on TV with Alistair Cooke.



## 1955

- Proposes use of light for recording sound as guest speaker at Audio Engineers Society convention.
- Designs Capitol Records' echo chambers and recording studios for iconic California building.

## 1956

- Debuts The Les Paulverizer, a remote-control attached to his guitar to manipulate taped accompaniments he and Mary use during White House concert for President Dwight D. Eisenhower.
- Receives patent for Combined Bridge and Tail Piece for Stringed Instruments.

## 1957

- From 1947 to 1957 sells over 10 million records while with Capitol.
- Ampex delivers first operational 8-track recorder to Les.
- Capitol Records contract ends as rock and roll pushes Les and Mary off the charts.
- Les and Mary sign with Mitch Miller at Columbia Records.

## 1958

- Inducted as honorary member of Audio Engineering Society.

## 1960s

- Receives Hollywood Walk of Fame star with Mary Ford.
- Receives patent for Electrical Musical Instrument, Les' design for single magnetic pickup.
- Les and Mary divorce.
- Performs in Japan with son Gene.
- Retires from performing.
- Continues to experiment with pickup designs and other electronics.
- Right eardrum breaks. Almost dies in surgery to repair ear. Needs additional surgeries on his ear.
- Begins work on improving hearing aids.
- Gives Gibson all his guitar drawings and guitar secrets.
- Gibson produces Les Paul Recording Guitar incorporating Les' design with low impedance pickups.



## 1970s

- Receives patent for Method for Electronically Reproducing Music and Improved Electrical Pickup.
- Capitol releases album of Les and Mary's greatest hits.
- Les and Bucky Pizzarelli play Town Hall in New York, appear on ABC and perform at Carnegie Hall.
- Les' left eardrum breaks. Additional surgeries result in permanent hearing impairment.
- Emerges from retirement to record *Chester & Lester* with Chet Atkins.
- Receives Grammy for Best Country Instrumental Performance for *Chester and Lester*.
- Mary Ford dies September 30 in Los Angeles after lapsing into diabetic coma.
- Records *Chester & Lester* and *Guitar Monsters* with Chet Atkins.
- Receives Recording Academy's Grammy Hall of Fame Award for "How High the Moon".



## 1980s

- Undergoes quintuple by-pass heart surgery at Cleveland Clinic.
- Plays on TV concert series *Rock 'n' Roll Tonight* with Jeff Beck and others.
- Receives Trustees Award from Recording Academy.
- Launches regular Monday night gig with his trio in New York City at Fat Tuesdays. Performs until 1994.
- Inducted into Hollywood Guitar Center's Rock Walk of Fame.
- Featured in Cinemax, *Les Paul: He Changed the Music*.
- Inducted into Rock and Roll Hall of Fame as "Architect of Rock 'n' Roll."



# Les Paul Timeline

---

## 1990s

- Inducted into Big Band and Jazz Hall of Fame.
- Designs and builds sound diffusing wall for Studio 2 in Mahwah home.
- TEC Hall of Fame inaugurates annual Les Paul Award. Les is first recipient.
- Launches two Monday night gigs at New York's Iridium Jazz Club. Performs until two months before he passes in 2009.
- Inducted into New Jersey Inventors Hall of Fame.
- Receives John Smithson Bicentennial Medal from Smithsonian Institution.
- Featured in popular Coors beer commercial: Young guitarist: "What's your name?" Les replies: "It's on your guitar."

## 2001

- Awarded Technical Grammy by Recording Academy.



## 2004

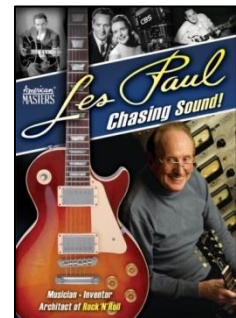
- Receives Emmy Lifetime Achievement in Engineering.
- Permanent exhibit opens at Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum.

## 2005

- Celebrates 90th birthday with tribute concert at Carnegie Hall.
- Inducted into National Inventors Hall of Fame.
- Receives Sammy Cahn Lifetime Achievement Award from Songwriters Hall of Fame.
- Receives Grammy award for Best Pop Instrumental Performance for "Caravan".
- Receives second Grammy for Best Rock Instrumental Performance for "69 Freedom Special". Both recordings are from *Les Paul & Friends* (Capitol), his first new album in almost 30 years. Among Les' musical partners for recording were: Keith Richards, Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, and Buddy Guy.
- Named Inventor of the Year by *EQ Magazine*.

## 2007

- Receives National Medal of Arts from U.S. President George W. Bush.
- Release of documentary, *Les Paul: Chasing Sound*.
- Plays sold out concert in his hometown of Waukesha, WI.



## 2008

- Receives American Music Masters Award from Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.
- Plays sold out concert in Milwaukee for opening of exhibit at Discovery World.

## 2009

- Named One of the Ten Best Electric Guitar Players of all Time by *Time Magazine*.
- Receives Bravery in Radio Award from William Patterson University's Brave New Radio Station for his 1950s' radio shows.
- Dies in White Plains, NY on August 12. Buried in Waukesha, WI.



## 2010

- Receives Honorary New York Emmy.
- Receives Joe Meek Award for Innovation in Production from Music Producers Guild.
- Inducted into New Jersey Hall of Fame.

## 2011

- Receives star on Nashville's Walk of Fame.
- Google creates iconic playable Google Doodle guitar to honor Les Paul's 96th birthday.
- Included among *Rolling Stone Magazine's* 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time.

## 2018

- Inducted as first person into Audio Engineering Society of Wisconsin's Hall of Fame.