



WHERE WOULD THE ELECTRIC GUITAR WORLD BE - WITHOUT THE ELECTRIC GUITAR?

On June 9, 1915 a baby named Lester William Polsfuss was born into the world. On August 13, 2009 at the ripe old age of 94, Lester William Polsfuss died. The space between birth and death of this man's life was filled with supreme innovation, invention and skill.



This man gave the world of guitar playing and recording, some of the legendary styles and inventions we all take for granted today. If you still haven't caught on as to who I am writing about, perhaps you will be more familiar with the name of Les Paul, innovator and guitarist extraordinaire. Without Les's input, I doubt very much that the solid body electric guitar would have enjoyed the popularity it does today. He virtually invented the thing! Add to this his other discoveries in the recording field such as 'over-dubbing', tape delay, phasing effects and multi-tracking, then stack that lot up on guitar techniques such as licks, trills, fretting and the way he structured chord sequences, and you virtually have a one man dynamo to which

so much is owed by so many.

His family were of Prussian descent who lived in Wisconsin where Les was born. He first took an interest in the harmonica which he started playing when he was eight years old. He messed around a bit with banjo playing but soon fell in love with the guitar. In fact, the likes of Bob Dylan, Donovan and thousands of guitar players who string a harmonica round their neck, owe Les a debt of gratitude too. Why? because he also invented the first harmonica holder that fitted round the performers neck, enabling his hands to be free to play guitar at the same time. As the years progressed and his talents grew, Les worked with quite a few bands and also worked for Radio in Chicago playing Jazz. One of his first recordings made in 1936 was under the alias 'Rhubarb Red'. This transpired to be his 'hillbilly alter ego'. He also accompanied the blues artiste Georgia White. Strangely



however, he was strongly influenced by French Gypsy Jazz manouche guitarist, Django Reinhardt who he actually became acquainted with after the Second World War. He even paid for Reinhardt's headstone after Django died in 1953.

Tragedy struck Les a few years earlier, the year after the war ended in 1948, when as a result of a near fatal automobile accident, he shattered his right arm and Doctors told him they were doubtful that the elbow could be rebuilt. This would result in a loss of movement in his arm, which would remain permanently in whatever position it was set in. Les therefore, instructed the surgeons to 'set his arm at an angle that would allow him to cradle and pick the guitar'. It took him a year and a half to overcome this trauma.

His first guitar, nicknamed 'The Log', was made in 1939. It was one of the first solid-body electrics to appear on the market. Gibson Guitars did not express an interest in his idea of a solid body electric guitar until Fender started producing theirs. In the early 1950's Gibson designed a guitar taking Paul's suggestions into account and gave it to him to try. This led to a contract between them for a guitar that became known as the "Les Paul" model. The rest is history! Just about every guitarist since has either played or owned one.

Les was a lover of tinkering and experimenting with all kinds of electronics. It was during one such session in his garage in 1948, Les released a record on the Capitol label entitled "Lover, when you're near me". Les played eight different electric guitar parts, some recorded at half-speed, which when played back at normal speed would double up in tempo. According to historians:

'This was the first time that multi-tracking had been used in a recording. These recordings were made not with magnetic tape, but with acetate disks. Paul would record a track onto a disk, then record himself playing another part with the first. He built the multi-track recording with overlaid tracks, rather than parallel ones as he did later. By the time he had a result he was satisfied with, he had discarded some 500 recording discs.'

Not to be left out of the equation, his wife, Mary Ford, joined Les for a number of recordings, many of which made the US top 40 charts. Always the innovator, Les persuaded Ampex to develop two and three-track tape recorders. These machines became the standard for professional recording studios in the 1950s / early



1960s. He also paid Ampex to build the first 8 track recorder in the mid 50's. He hosted his own Radio and TV Shows in the 50's and what he was achieving was unbelievable across the whole spectrum of musical inventions. I seriously doubt there has been another person who did what he did during their lifetime in the music related industries. Even today, if you listen to some of his early recordings, you can't help but be amazed by his guitar playing and early tape echo effects.

Like many people of his ilk, the pressures of touring and lifestyle led to his divorce from Mary in the early 60's. He then spent a period of years in semi-retirement before re-emerging and by the late 1980's, he returned to live performances. An amazing career was rewarded in 2006 when he received two Grammy Awards for his LP "Les Paul & Friends: American Made - World Played".

It is right that we pay tribute to someone we all owe so much to and lament his passing, whilst at the same time, celebrate the gifts he gave to us and shared with us. Where the hell would the electric guitar world be withoutthe electric guitar? And where would all our guitarists, both great and small, be without the fantastic "Log" known Globally as The Gibson Les Paul, in all it's various versions down through the years.

Thanks Les, no one did it better!

Paul Brett

