

Les Paul (1915-2009)

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With apologies to Hendrix and Clapton, inventor and musician **Les Paul**, who died Wednesday at 94, was the most influential rock guitarist ever — even though he was only tangentially involved in rock. Paul was important not just for his instrumental virtuosity, but also for his groundbreaking studio developments and creation of the Gibson solid-body guitar that bears his name, the quintessential rock instrument made famous by such legends as Clapton, Duane Allman, Jimmy Page and Eddie Van Halen.



Paul, inducted into the **Rock and Roll Hall of Fame** in 1988 by guitarist Jeff Beck, died in White Plains, New York, from complications of pneumonia. At the Capitol Records building in Hollywood, where Paul helped develop state-of-the-art recording studios beginning in 1948, the flag was lowered to half-mast.

Shortly after news of his death hit the Web on Thursday, Facebook and Twitter feeds lit up with tributes. Slash, whom Paul referred to last year as a "dear friend," tweeted that the guitar innovator "was one of the most stellar human beings I've ever known."

Gary Rossington, the Lynyrd Skynyrd guitarist whose fiery Les Paul licks help bring "Free Bird" to its chaotic climax, thinks about Paul every time he steps in front of an audience.

"I play a Les Paul guitar every night," said Rossington, whose admiration for Paul doesn't stop when he leaves the stage. "I have a framed T-shirt on my wall signed by Les Paul. He was an amazing guitarist."

Derek Trucks remembers playing at Paul's 90th birthday concert at Carnegie Hall in 2005. "We had some great musical moments," said Trucks. "We did an instrumental version of 'Goodnight Irene.' He was always a really sweet guy."

By all accounts, Paul was humble about his importance to music and admired his fellow musicians, regardless of their age. "I learn from them, I enjoy them," he told *Rolling Stone's* Andy Greene in an unpublished interview last November. "If I'm around the rock guys, I enjoy playing along with them. When I'm with the jazz people, I enjoy playing jazz."

As a musician, Paul played a smooth but daring mixture of jazz and country. In addition to inventing his famous solid-body guitar in 1941, he developed studio techniques throughout the Thirties and Forties that are still used in music today, including delay and echo effects, as well as overdubbing and multitracking. His experimentation paved the way for such groundbreaking works as the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and Public Enemy's *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back*, as well as almost every pop song on the charts today.

He formed the Les Paul Trio in the late Thirties, playing alongside stars like Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters. By the late Forties, he and former wife Mary Ford began recording together, and throughout the Fifties scored a string of Top 10 hits for Capitol including "The Tennessee Waltz," "Mockingbird Hill" and "Vaya con Dios."

Born Lester William Polfuss on June 9, 1915, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, he learned the harmonica at age eight but soon moved on to the banjo and then guitar. All along, he invented devices to improve his instruments, like making a pickup to amplify his acoustic guitar. During his teens he played professionally with country bands and recorded hillbilly songs under the name Rhubarb Red. He also liked the jazzier style of guitarist Django Reinhardt, and after forming the Les Paul Trio in 1936, moved to New York City, where the Trio backed singers like Crosby and became regulars on Fred Waring's Pennsylvanians radio show.

Paul kept tinkering with new ways to make a guitar sound different, and by the early Forties had created a solid-body electric guitar that could prolong a single note, making it sound like a horn. Called "The Log," it was the precursor to his Gibson Les Paul guitar. He

then began working on new studio techniques: putting microphones close to individual instruments to reduce noise and help separate specific sounds, playing and recording along with other recordings to create multiple tracks. By the late Fifties, he had invented an eight-track recording machine that would pave the way for producers like George Martin, who created much of the Beatles' mid-Sixties works using Paul's multitrack technology.

After a car accident in 1948 left Paul with a severe shoulder injury, he designed a guitar that allowed him to continue playing. That year, he and Ford released the hit "Brazil," a song that included six multitracked guitar parts. The following year, he launched a radio show and invented an effects-generating synthesizer called the "Les Paulverizer," whose technology is still used onstage by bands today.

His recording career with Ford flowered in the Fifties, and Paul was soon hired by the Gibson guitar company to design a new instrument. Introduced in 1952, his Gibson Les Paul was a variation on "The Log," but its sleek design had much more aesthetic appeal. "We had a monster," said Paul. "We had something that could really, really be powerful." A monster, indeed — it was so loud and so pretty that it eventually made its way into the hands of blues-rock pioneer Clapton and remains a staple of hard rock today, used by artists like Billie Joe Armstrong of Green Day, Kirk Hammett and James Hetfield of Metallica and U2's The Edge.

After divorcing Ford in 1964, Paul focused on his guitar designs, and continued creating effects and amplification devices. He performed occasionally, and in 1976 recorded the Grammy-winning *Chester and Lester* along with fellow guitar virtuoso Chet Atkins. In 1981, after undergoing heart bypass surgery, he began performing more regularly at jazz festivals and in New York clubs, with famous guests like Paul McCartney or Tony Bennett sometimes sitting in with him. In 2005, at age 90, Paul recorded *American Made, World Played* with a string of guests including Clapton, Beck and Keith Richards. The album won Grammy awards for best pop instrumental performance and best rock instrumental performance.

When asked last year if Paul thought he'd still be playing at 100, he said, "As long as the people put up with me, and I'm having fun doing it, why not do it?"