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## Paul gets welcome fit for guitar hero

### Even before sold-out concert, he attracts adoring crowds

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The Wizard of Waukesha has returned to his realm.

It's been nearly 20 years since Les Paul performed in the city where he was born and raised and started out in show business as a flame-haired teenager calling himself Red Hot Red.

But at last, he's back - and ready to plug in. Tonight, the man who was a pioneer in the development of the electric guitar will perform with his trio at the Marriott Milwaukee West hotel. The sold-out, \$300-a-ticket concert is a benefit to raise money for the Les Paul Experience exhibit planned by the Waukesha County Historical Society and Museum. Roughly 350 people are expected to attend.

Paul's arrival early Wednesday evening at Mitchell International Airport had all the hoopla and style of visiting royalty. He was met by a specially designed tour bus dispatched from Nashville by Gibson Guitars, the company that makes the guitar that bears his name. There were clusters of homemade signs proclaiming "Waukesha Welcomes Les Paul" and "Welcome Home Les." He was serenaded by a class of high-school rockers who had prepared a song for the occasion. Then he got a ride to the Downer Theatre for two full-house screenings of a new PBS documentary film, "Les Paul - Chasing Sound."

When Paul arrived at the airport on the arm of Waukesha Historical Society director Sue Baker, he was immediately mobbed by photographers and autograph seekers. Up front was 9-year-old Shane Furrer of Waukesha. Shane, the winner of a Les Paul look-alike contest, arrived for the occasion in a white sailor suit and harmonica on a neck brace, just like the young Red Hot Red.

The man born Lester Polfuss in Waukesha on June 9, 1915, is a blend of two American archetypes: the tinker-in-your-garage inventor and the self-taught musical innovator. There are more famous musicians, but very, very few who are more influential or enduring.

In the 1940s, Paul was an innovator in the design and development of the solid-body electric guitar. Perhaps more important, he helped popularize the instrument as a recording artist with his then-wife, Mary Ford, and later by lending his name to the solid-body Gibson guitar that became the weapon of

choice for two generations of rock and jazz musicians.

But his biggest contribution is the one for which he's least known: He introduced the technique of multitrack recording, which revolutionized modern music.

Several years ago, Paul told the Journal Sentinel what Paul McCartney once said to him: "I don't care how much guitar you played, I don't care how many hits you had, you invented that multitrack recording, and that made the difference."

At 91, Paul is still a working musician, performing every Monday night with his trio at the Iridium nightclub in Manhattan. In fact, he was there this week. Two years ago, he played on his own tribute album, "American Made, World Played," with such friends as Steve Miller, Keith Richards, Eric Clapton and Sting.

Although he was in Madison in 2004 to accept a lifetime achievement award from the Wisconsin Foundation for School Music, Paul hasn't played in his hometown since appearing at his late mother's 100th birthday party in 1988.

On the bus to the Downer Theatre, Paul said he's busier than ever. Having just collected two Grammys for "American Made, World Played," he's planning three new albums. The first would be a country album built around tracks he recorded 70 years ago. He often refers to country music as "hillbilly music" as they did back in the '40s and '50s, and says it's the music his mom always wanted him to play.

"When I was with Fred Waring, my mother said, 'You're playing the wrong stuff.' She called in (to the radio station). She wanted Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys. 'That's the kind of music you should be doing,' she said. 'Not all that highbrow stuff.' "

When the country album is done, Paul wants to follow with a jazz album and then a blues disc. There's also a book project in the works with Milwaukee music publishing house Hal Leonard.

Wednesday was Paul's first chance to see "Chasing Sound." The executive producer is former Milwaukeean Glenn Aveni, and the movie will debut on PBS on July 11 as part of the "American Masters" series. The DVD is set for release on Aug. 14.

The documentary offers a glimpse into Paul's Mahwah, N.J., home, where he's lived since the 1950s. There's a bit with Keith Richards onstage where Richards picks up his guitar, looks at Paul and says, "So you're the guy who made this?"

There's also footage of Paul on stage in New York, including a bit with his old Milwaukee buddy Jon Paris playing harp and singing "Let the Good Times Roll." Paris was at the theater with his mom to greet Paul and is hoping to play with him at tonight's benefit show.

What seems constant through all of it is Paul as a man at work. He tried retirement back in the '60s, and it didn't take.

"Working gives me a reason to get out of bed in the morning," Paul said. "I look at other people my age, and they're not like I am. It's still fun to play for the people."

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