Les Paul
The Search for the New Sound

PBS Wisconsin Education

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Glossary

abolish (v): .......... to end or do away with

aspiring (adj): .......... hoping for or working toward a goal

Great Depression (n): .......... a time period from 1929 through the 1930s when it was hard for people around the world to find a job or earn money

harmonica (n): .......... a musical instrument; sound is made when the player inhales or exhales into it, vibrating the reeds inside

immigrant (n): .......... a person who comes to live in a new country and stays there

legacy (n): .......... anything handed down from the past to future generations

multitrack recorder (n): .......... a machine that enables a musician to record different single tracks and combine them into one recording

player piano (n): .......... a self-playing piano that makes music by reading the holes punched in a spinning paper roll

rhubarb (n): .......... a plant with a thick pink or red stem and large green leaves

separate (v): .......... to stop being a couple or husband and wife

stage name (n): .......... a name performers use that is not their legal name

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Les Paul’s mother often told him, “It’s your life. It’s up to you.”

She wanted her son to go for his dreams. Les was a musician and an inventor. He dreamed of creating a new sound. Musicians today still use Les’s inventions and music.

Lester (Les) William Polsfuss
CONCLUSION

Rock and roll became more popular in the 1950s. Not as many people were listening to jazz anymore so Les and Mary’s show was cancelled. The couple divorced in 1964. Les retired in 1965.

Les’s mother told him he should start performing again. He formed a new band in 1984. Les played until he died on August 12, 2009.

Les created new ways to play music using tools like electric guitars and multitrack recorders. People still play Les’s music and use his inventions today. And musicians call him by a lasting nickname, “the Wizard of Waukesha.”

EARLY LIFE

Lester William Polsfuss (Les) was born on June 9, 1915, in Waukesha, Wisconsin. His father worked at a car dealership. His mother took care of the family’s home. His parents separated when he was young.

Les’s mother knew he liked music. When he did things like take apart her radio, she did not punish him. Les liked watching his mother work her player piano. He sometimes punched holes in paper rolls and put them in the piano to see if they would make new sounds.

Moving to Waukesha

In the early 1900s, there were many German immigrants living in Waukesha, including Les’s grandfathers. His paternal grandfather immigrated to the United States from Prussia to escape wars and poverty. His maternal grandfather moved from Germany to the United States in search of a new job. Life was not always easy for immigrants. When Les’s mother was young, she had to drop out of school and get a job to help earn money for her family.

Prussia was a German kingdom that was abolished in 1947.
Instruments and Experiments

One day a road worker played the harmonica as Les watched. The worker gave Les his harmonica. This was Les’s first instrument.

Les worked as a newspaper carrier when he was a little boy. A fellow carrier told him how to make a radio that worked without electricity. Les made his own. He used a crystal and a bedspring.

Les bought his first guitar when he was eleven years old. He wanted to play the guitar and harmonica at the same time. So Les took a wire coat hanger and made a harmonica holder to wear around his neck. It was Les’s first invention.

Les began to perform and earn tips from people. His mother gave him the stage name “Red Hot Red” because of his red hair.

Les moved to California and started a new radio show with a singer named Mary Ford. She sang and played guitar. The pair recorded many songs and played gigs.

Virginia and Les divorced. Mary and Les got married on December 29, 1949. The couple moved to New York City to star in their own television program. The hit TV show aired from 1953 to 1960.
Growing Career

Les married a woman named Virginia Webb in 1938. He moved with Virginia and his band to New York City.

Les kept experimenting with his electric guitar. He put guitar strings on a wood block. Then he cut a guitar in two and put the halves on each side of the block. Finally, he added electricity. He named his new electric guitar the Log.

Les invented other things too. He created the multitrack recorder. This tool let him record all his music himself. Usually a band had to play the parts of a song together to record it. But with the multitrack recorder, Les could record parts of the song at different times. The parts could then be put together to make a song.

Some people could not hear Les sing very well because the band did not have microphones. So he made one using a broom, a telephone, and radio speakers. But people still could not hear Les play his guitar. He put a special needle inside his guitar and hooked it to a speaker and electricity. Les had created an electric guitar.

Interview with a Musician

Meet Isaac! He is an aspiring musician from Wisconsin who sings, plays instruments, and writes music.

Q: How did you become interested in music?
Isaac: I've been interested in playing music ever since I can remember. I got my first guitar when I was around three years old and music is all I've ever wanted to do since.

Q: What is most challenging about playing in a band?
Isaac: Rehearsing…Getting people together to practice is one of the hardest parts of being in a band. It’s hard for everyone to find time.

Q: What is your favorite part about playing an instrument?
Isaac: Playing an instrument makes me feel like a whole different person. It makes me feel better than anything in the world.
Hitting the Road

During his summer break from school, Les traveled with a country band called the Texas Cowboys. He was only fifteen years old.

Les quit school at age seventeen to join a different country band.

Les changed his stage name from “Red Hot Red” to “Rhubarb Red.” He played guitar and harmonica with his band. This took place during the Great Depression. The band stopped performing because people did not have money to pay them.

Les and one of his band mates decided to form their own band. They played music and told jokes on a radio show. Les soon decided he wanted to try playing jazz. His partner wanted to stick with country music so the duo split up.

Then Les changed his stage name to “Les Paul.” He played piano but did not make much money so he went back to the guitar. Les formed a new band called the Les Paul Trio.

Evelyn signed Les up for piano lessons. The teacher sent him home after a few lessons with a note that said Les would never learn music and not to send him anymore.