Les Paul
The Search for the New Sound

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Biography written by:

Becky Marburger
Educational Producer
Wisconsin Media Lab
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 always wanted to be himself and follow his own dreams. “Honestly, I never strove to be an Edison,” Les said in an interview with the *New York Times* in 1991. “The only reason I invented these things was because I didn’t have them and neither did anyone else. I had no choice, really.”

Les believed in himself and his ability to renovate the tools and style used to play music, paving the way for future musicians. His mother also believed in him. Evelyn Polsfuss often told her son, “It’s your life. It’s up to you.” She wanted her son to have the confidence to fulfill his goals of becoming a musician and an inventor.

This Wisconsin native accomplished much during his lifetime, including being inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988 and the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2005, as well as helping create a better hearing aid. Les’s self-confidence and support from those around him led him to become a musical genius whose music style and inventions are still used today.
Conclusion

During the 1950s, rock and roll became popular, causing jazz to fade. Eventually, Les and Mary’s show was cancelled but the couple was okay with it. As Les put it, they’d “had a good run.” In 1964, Les and Mary divorced. Les stopped performing in 1965 because he said he’d had enough of the crazy musician lifestyle. Instead he turned all his attention to inventing new sounds.

Les didn’t stay out of the spotlight forever. After encouragement from his mother to go back to performing, Les formed a new Les Paul Trio and began playing in 1984 in New York City. He played a regular show on Monday nights until he caught pneumonia and died on August 12, 2009.

People remember Les for his phenomenal musical talents and inventive genius. Les’s legacy lives on through his music and inventions, which are still used today. He paved the way for future musicians as he developed a new way to play music using electric guitars, amplifiers, and multitrack recorders. Les did not let others deter him from following his dreams and he encouraged others to follow theirs. In fact, Les Paul is still known today among musicians as “the Wizard of Waukesha” for creating sounds never heard before on Earth.

Early Life

Lester William Polsfuss (Les) was born on June 9, 1915, in Waukesha, Wisconsin. His father, George, worked at a car dealership. Les’s mother took care of the family’s home, raising Les and his older brother Ralph. George and Evelyn separated when Les was young.

Evelyn often sang songs as she cleaned. Three-year-old Les quickly learned her songs’ words and melodies. Evelyn believed he was a music prodigy. She encouraged Les’s curiosity about music. Although she was strict, she did not scold her son when he did things like take apart her radio. Once Les even cut the ends off the vertical wood panels that lined the stairwell of their house. Les was trying to tune the boards so he could play songs on them like he would on a xylophone.

Les often watched Evelyn play her favorite German songs on her player piano. The pump and keys working together to make different sounds mesmerized him. Curious as ever, Les punched holes in paper rolls and put them inside the player piano, creating a new sound. If Les did not like that sound, he put tape over the holes and punched new ones.

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.

Europe

Prussia was a German kingdom that was abolished in 1947.
When Les was eight years old, road workers dug a ditch near his home. One of the men noticed Les listening to him play his harmonica. The man invited Les over and gave him the harmonica, Les’s first instrument. Curious Les wanted to know how it worked so he pried off the sides to find out.

As a boy, Les delivered newspapers. One day a fellow carrier told him how to make a crystal set radio that did not require electricity. Les used a crystal and a bedspring to make his own.

When he was eleven, Les earned enough money to buy his first guitar from the Sears-Roebuck Catalog for $4.50. He taught himself how to play and soon wanted to play the guitar and harmonica at the same time. So Les formed a wire coat hanger into a harmonica holder worn around his neck.

By the time he turned thirteen years old, Les joined a band called the Red Hot Ragtime Band. They earned tips playing for live audiences. Les’s father nicknamed him “Red” because of Les’s flaming red hair and his mother gave him the stage name “Red Hot Red.”

Les's first invention was a harmonica holder.

Les and his wife Virginia divorced, and on December 29, 1949, Mary and Les got married. Television was now becoming more popular than radio. The couple moved to New York City to star in their own television show called “The Les Paul and Mary Ford Show.” The hit show aired from 1953 to 1960.

Les and Mary performed for many people, including the Queen of England.

Around this same time Les was asked to put together his own radio show. Since he needed a singer, he hired a talented singer and guitarist named Iris Colleen Summers and Les changed her name to Mary Ford. The pair’s career soared. Not only did they have a radio show, but they also played live gigs and recorded many hit songs.
Growing Career

In 1938 Les married a woman named Virginia Webb. The pair moved to New York City with the Les Paul Trio. The group joined a larger band called the Pennsylvanians that had a half-hour national radio show. Les played his electric guitar because he wanted to be heard over the Pennsylvanians.

Les continued to experiment with his electric guitar. He put guitar strings on a four-by-four-foot wood block. He split a guitar into two, placed the halves on either side of the wood block, and added electricity to create an electric guitar. Les proudly named it the Log and showed it to the Gibson Guitar Company. But the company didn’t like the Log. That did not deter Les; he worked on to improve his creation.

Les moved to California and formed a new trio in 1943. Now he wanted to record all his music on his own. Many of his songs had more than one track, or line, of music but Les could only play one track at a time. So he invented a multitrack recorder which allowed him to record multiple tracks of music and then put them together to make a single song.

The band did not have microphones so people in the back could not hear the music very well. Les made a microphone from a cinder block, a broom, a telephone, and radio speakers. Once people heard the band better, the group collected more tips.

During one performance, a man sitting in the back sent Les a note saying that he couldn’t hear Les’s guitar. So Les stuck a phonograph needle inside his guitar. When Les played, the sound came out the phonograph speaker, amplifying the music. 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

Les wanted to take his playing to the next level. At age fifteen, he traveled during summer break with the Texas Cowboys, a country band. Les knew he was destined to be a performer. After discussing it with his mother, Les quit school at age seventeen, moved to St. Louis, Missouri, and joined a country radio band called the Scalawags.

Les changed his name from “Red Hot Red” to “Rhubarb Red” and played both guitar and harmonica with the Scalawags. He earned enough money to buy an L-50 guitar made by the Gibson Guitar Corporation. The band was a hit on the radio, but the United States’ economy sank into the Great Depression. The Scalawags stopped performing because people did not have money to pay them.

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.

Sunny Joe Wolverton, one of his Scalawag band mates, and Les formed a duo called the Ozark Apple Knockers. They moved to Springfield, Missouri to play music and tell jokes on their own radio show. After two years, Les wanted to try something new—jazz. However, Sunny Joe wanted to stick with country music. The duo split up but remained friends.

Jazz intrigued Les because musicians had the freedom to make up rhythms and melodies as they played. He changed his stage name again, from “Rhubarb Red” to “Les Paul,” and began playing piano. But Les did not earn enough money so he switched back to guitar. He formed a new jazz group called the Les Paul Trio.

The Les Paul Trio became a very popular jazz band. They played for famous singers like Bing Crosby (seated on the far left).