LES PAUL
The Search for the New Sound
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“It’s your life. It’s up to you.”

These are the words of encouragement Evelyn Polsfuss often spoke to her youngest son, Les. She believed in him and wanted Les to have confidence to pursue his dreams. For Les, that dream was to discover a new sound. “I wanted sounds that had never been heard before on Earth.” And create new sounds is exactly what he did. His inventions and music paved the way for musicians today.

Lester (Les) William Polsfuss

Courtesy of the Les Paul Foundation.
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, Evelyn, cared for her family until the couple separated. Evelyn often sang songs to Les and his older brother, Ralph, as she cleaned. She noticed how Les quickly learned to repeat the songs’ words and melodies.

Evelyn knew Les was interested in music so she did not scold Les when he did things like take apart her radio. Les often watched his mother work her player piano. He sometimes punched holes in paper rolls and put them into the piano to try to 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.

Europe
Late 1800s

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

A road worker was playing the **harmonica** while digging a ditch near Les’s home. Eight-year-old Les watched him play so the worker gave Les the harmonica. This was Les’s first instrument.

As a boy, Les worked as a newspaper carrier. A fellow carrier once told him how to make a crystal set radio. Les got a crystal and used a bedspring to make his own.

When he was eleven years old, Les earned enough money to buy his first guitar for $4.50 and taught himself to play. He wanted to play guitar and harmonica at the same time. Les made a harmonica holder from a wire coat hanger to wear around his neck.

The budding musician began to perform for live audiences and earn tips. His mother gave him the **stage name** “Red Hot Red” because of his red hair. When he was thirteen years old, he formed a band called the Red Hot Ragtime Band.
The band did not have microphones. People in the back could not hear Les singing very well so he made a microphone using a broom, a telephone, and radio speakers. Once a man in the back sent Les a note saying he couldn’t hear Les’s guitar. Les fixed this problem by sticking a phonograph needle inside his guitar. When Les played, the sound came out the speaker that was hooked up to his instrument. Les had created his own 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

When he was fifteen, Les spent his summer break traveling with the Texas Cowboys, a country band. Les wanted to be in a band full time. After discussing it with his mother, Les quit school at age seventeen and moved to St. Louis, Missouri to join 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. This took place during 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, one of his Scalawag band mates, and Les formed their own band. They played music and told jokes on a radio show. After two years, Les decided he wanted to play jazz. Sunny Joe wanted to stick with country music. The duo split up but remained friends.

Les changed his stage name from “Rhubarb Red” to “Les Paul.” He played piano but did not earn enough money. He went back to guitar and formed a new jazz trio 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).
Growing Career

Les married a woman named Virginia Webb in 1938. He and Virginia 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.

The young inventor continued to experiment with his electric guitar. He put guitar strings on a wood block. Then Les cut a guitar in two and put the halves on each side of the block. Next he added electricity. Les’s new electric guitar made the sound he was looking for. He proudly named it the *Log*.

Les moved to California and formed a new trio in 1943. He also invented a **multitrack recorder**. Usually an entire band would have to play a song together and record all the instruments and vocals at the same time. But with the multitrack recorder, Les could record each track, or line, of music separately. He could then put all the tracks together into a single song.

Les asked the Gibson Guitar Company to manufacture the *Log*, but they refused. They didn’t like how it looked different from other guitars made at the time.
Les was asked to put together his own radio show. Since he needed a singer, Les hired Iris Colleen Summers to sing and play guitar. Les had her use the stage name Mary Ford. The pair had a hit radio show and played many gigs.

Virginia and Les divorced. On December 29, 1949, Mary and Les got married. Television was 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.

The couple earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame in 1960.

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

During the 1950s, rock and roll became more popular than jazz. Les and Mary’s show was cancelled. The couple divorced in 1964. Les stopped performing in 1965. He said he’d had enough of the crazy lifestyle of a musician.

Les didn’t stay out of the spotlight forever. His mother encouraged him to perform again. He formed a new Les Paul Trio and began playing in 1984 in New York City. He performed a regular show every Monday night until he died on August 12, 2009.

Les paved the way for future musicians. He created a new way to play music using electric guitars, amplifiers, and multitrack recorders. People remember Les for his musical talents and still use his inventions today. Les Paul, called “the Wizard of Waukesha” by musicians today, achieved his goal and created sounds never before heard on Earth.

Courtesy of the Les Paul Foundation.

Les’s music and inventions are his legacy. What do you hope your legacy will be?
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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