The Life of Les Paul

Trinity Christmas

Senior Division

Individual Historical Paper

Paper: 1776 Words

There's no doubt that Les Paul was one of the greatest guitarists of all time, though not many people know how he came to be or what his story was. Even though Les Paul passed away in 2009, many argue that he was the best guitar manufacturer ever. His guitars sold millions and his music topped the charts faster than any music. With his many techniques and inventions, he quickly caught people's eye and grabbed the attention of anyone he wanted, breaking many barriers with his most popular creation, his solid body guitar, including his late wife Mary Ford.

At a young age, little Lester was already creating new inventions, starting when he was only nine years old. According to the magazine "The Sound of Genius" Mark Hastell explained, "When Lester was 9, he made a crystal radio, his first invention.[1] Then he made a harmonica holder a year after.", which was quite an achievement for a young boy (See appendix 2). Once his mother came home and noticed her radio all taken apart and her son in the middle of it, she didn't yell at him. She had always encouraged Lester to follow his dreams and try things out, apparently she left out the part of taking apart her radio. Though at the end of his semester at school, his music teacher told his mother, "Your boy, Lester, will never learn music," But nobody could dissuade him from trying, soon teaching himself the harmonica, guitar and banjo[2]. Thankfully Les didn't let that comment stop him, and ultimately proved her wrong.

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[1] Hartsell, Mark. "The Sound of Genius." *Library of Congress Magazine*, vol. 8, no. 6, Nov.-Dec. 2019, pp. 18-21. The magazine "*The Sound of Genius*"

[2] Hartsell, Mark. "The Sound of Genius."

A few years later, Les was back at it again, tinkering and taking apart something else, this time, an acoustic guitar. “The Sound of Genius” has also told us about the young prodigy, “Four years later, he made a solid-body guitar amplifier with his mother's record playing needle, embedding it into his acoustic guitar and wired it to a speaker.”[3] Some kids are great in sports, others in academics, some in technology, but Lester’s was music and inventing. There wasn’t a day where Lester wasn’t tinkering or trying to make something better. A little bit later, he was inventing more, with a bunch of household items. “The Sound of Genius” also stated, “He also built his own machine to cut records, using the nail, belts from a dental drill and a Flywheel from a Cadillac. Lester Paul also made his first solid body guitar by putting strings over a 4x4 piece of pine mounted with pickups.”[4] Once his mother signed him up for piano lessons, he’d have to pass a radio station along the way. A few weeks after passing the station, he became friends with one of the workers and he showed him how radio broadcasting works after he realized his unending curiosity. His mother was his number one supporter when it came to his tinkering and music, so when Les’ favorite musician came into Waukesha, Pie Plant Pete, she took him to see the show and gave her son one of the biggest thrills when she got him back to meet his music idol. Little Les even got to hold Pie Plant Pete’s guitar! After seeing Pie Plant Pete, he got his first gig himself at the prime age of 13! According to Les Paul Guitar Wizard, “That show, at the Schroeder Hotel in Milwaukee is what made him a professional entertainer!”[5] That one show is what made him realize this was becoming real, that this was affecting people and his dream really could work.

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[3] Hartsell, Mark. "The Sound of Genius."
[4] Hartsell, Mark. "The Sound of Genius."
[5] *Jacobson, Bob. N/A. Wisconsin HIstorical Society, N/A.*

Though while all of this was happening, the young musician couldn't read sheet music and he never learned!

Once he was able to get a job, be financially stable and move out of the house, he moved to New York in 1936. According to "Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94", "From country music Mr. Paul moved into jazz, influenced by players like Django Reinhardt and Eddie Lang, who were using amplified hollow-body guitars to play horn-like single-note solo lines. He formed the Les Paul Trio in 1936 and moved to New York, where he was heard regularly on Fred Waring's radio show from 1938 to 1941."[6] He didn't want to stick to one genre, he just wanted to make people happy by his inventions and his music. Another quote from "Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94", "Mr. Paul was drafted in 1942 and worked in California for the Armed Forces Radio Service, accompanying Rudy Vallee, Kate Smith and others. When he was discharged in 1943, he was hired as a staff musician for NBC radio in Los Angeles."[7] His career was starting to take off, even though he had to take a break from his aspiring music career. Coming into service, he lived in New York, after coming out of service, he moved across the country for a job in Los Angeles. "Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94" also gave us this information, "His trio toured with the Andrews Sisters and backed Nat King Cole and Bing Crosby, with whom he recorded the hit "It's Been a Long, Long Time"[8] in 1945. Crosby encouraged Mr. Paul to build his own recording studio, and so he did, in his garage in Los Angeles. After touring for so long, they missed home, so they made Les Paul's garage their recording studio. According to Biography.com, "By the 1940s

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[6] Pareles, Jon. "Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94." *The New York Times* [New York], N/A ed., 13 Aug. 2009, N/A sec., p. N/A. *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2009/08/14/arts/music/14paul.html. Accessed 11 Dec. 2019.

[7] Pareles, Jon. "Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94."

[8] Pareles, Jon. "Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94."

Paul had established himself in the jazz world, recording with such stars as Nat King Cole, Rudy Vallee and Kate Smith."[9] Once again, he'd gotten recognized and had made it good for himself, reaching his goal of making it in two different genres. People were really beginning to recognize him and realizing he wasn't a joke and that he was serious about a music and inventing career. After getting recognized after trying to be in the industry for so long, he got to do some collaborations with some people, getting him more in the world. Another quote from Biography.com states, “In 1941 the perfectionist in Paul believed he could improve upon the common amplified guitar. To do so he attached strings and two pickups to what was essentially a wooden board with a guitar neck. Paul called it the "the log," and while it drew some early criticism, mainly for its look, it produced just the kind of sound its creator had been looking for. "You could go out and eat and come back and the note would still be playing," He later described it. He could never rest, wanting to make and modify everything he could get his hands on.” [10] After he got recognized, he got called onto play live on St. Louis radio stations, calling himself Rhubarb Red. One quote from “Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94” states, "In 1947 Mr. Paul teamed up with Colleen Summers, who had been singing with Gene Autry’s band (See appendix 3). He changed her name to Mary Ford, a name found in a telephone book."[11] Once his guitar was in production, 1948 wasn’t the best year for young Lester Paul’s music career. Biography explains, “Even though in 1948, when Les Paul shattered his right elbow, he was mindful of his career and asked it to placed at the slightest angle so he could still play guitar.” By the time his invention had finally gotten embraced, it was in the 1960’s and it was first embraced by rockers. Biography.com

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[9] *Biography.com Editors. "Les Paul Biography." Biography, A&E Television Networks, 2 Apr. 2014, www.biography.com/musician/les-paul. Accessed 4 Dec. 2019.*

[10] *Biography.com Editors. "Les Paul Biography."*

[11] Pareles, Jon. "Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94."

states, "In the 1960s, the rock world embraced and adored his instrument. By then, Paul had teamed up with the guitar manufacturer Gibson, which had hired him to design a Les Paul guitar. Paul had approached Gibson in 1941, but it took 10 years, and Leo Fender introduced his solid body guitar for Gibson, for the company to develop what is now known as the Gibson Les Paul."[12] (See appendix 1). Later he got a side partnership with Gibson, which really helped him get to fame and get recognized. Although after the partnership happened, Les ended up injuring his arm, almost unable to play the guitar ever again. Biography.com explains, "Even though in 1948, when Les Paul shattered his right elbow, he was mindful of his career and asked it to be placed at the slightest angle so he could still play guitar."[13] Later after his recovery, he got a side partnership with Gibson, which really helped him get to fame and get recognized. Once he got the partnership, he would get recognized everywhere and in 1952 it debuted, and is still the most used guitar to date. Biography.com claims, "Working there, Paul helped revolutionize record-making and pave the way for some of the greatest recordings in pop and jazz music history"[14] It showed how much he really contributed to the music industry. After meeting his late wife, Iris Colleen Summers, he later changed her name to Mary Ford after marrying. His wife, Mary Ford, was also a musician. Later in the 1960's, they started making music together, Les playing guitar while Mary sang. They made chart toppers together, their music including Les' inventions the moment they were finished. "The innovative records Paul made alone with his wife, Mary Ford- "Lover", "Brazil", "Tennessee Waltz", "Vaya con Dios", and "How High the Moon"- blew minds and sold millions of copies. Les Paul made many great songs which sold millions of copies for each, including "Brazil",

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[12] *Biography.com Editors. "Les Paul Biography."*
[13] *Biography.com Editors. "Les Paul Biography."*
[14] *Biography.com Editors. "Les Paul Biography."*

"Lover", "Tennessee Waltz", "Vaya con Dios", "How High the Moon" that all included his chart topping songs in the 1960's that all had overdubbing and multi tracking in them."[15] Without Les' creations, we wouldn't have the music today, dubstep and EDM wouldn't even be a thing.

Unfortunately, Les started having complications with pneumonia and it ultimately took his life. Les Paul did so many amazing things that the world has remembered him for, such as his guitar, overdubbing. multi tracking and so much more. He left behind great inventions, songs, a very successful career and a long life. Biography.com says, "According to Rolling Stone magazine, Paul died from complications associated with pneumonia on August 12, 2009. Other sources have listed August 13 as the date of his death, but his memorial in Waukesha, Wisconsin, lists August 12 as the official date. Paul was laid to rest in the Prairie Home Cemetery alongside his mother."[16] Les Paul was a great man, he saw his future at nine years old! He couldn't read sheet music, but he learned how to play the piano, figure out how radio broadcasting worked and he never stopped his tinkering habit. Lester Paul broke a giant barrier with his inventions, he didn't back down from what he wanted to do, that was the biggest barrier broken.

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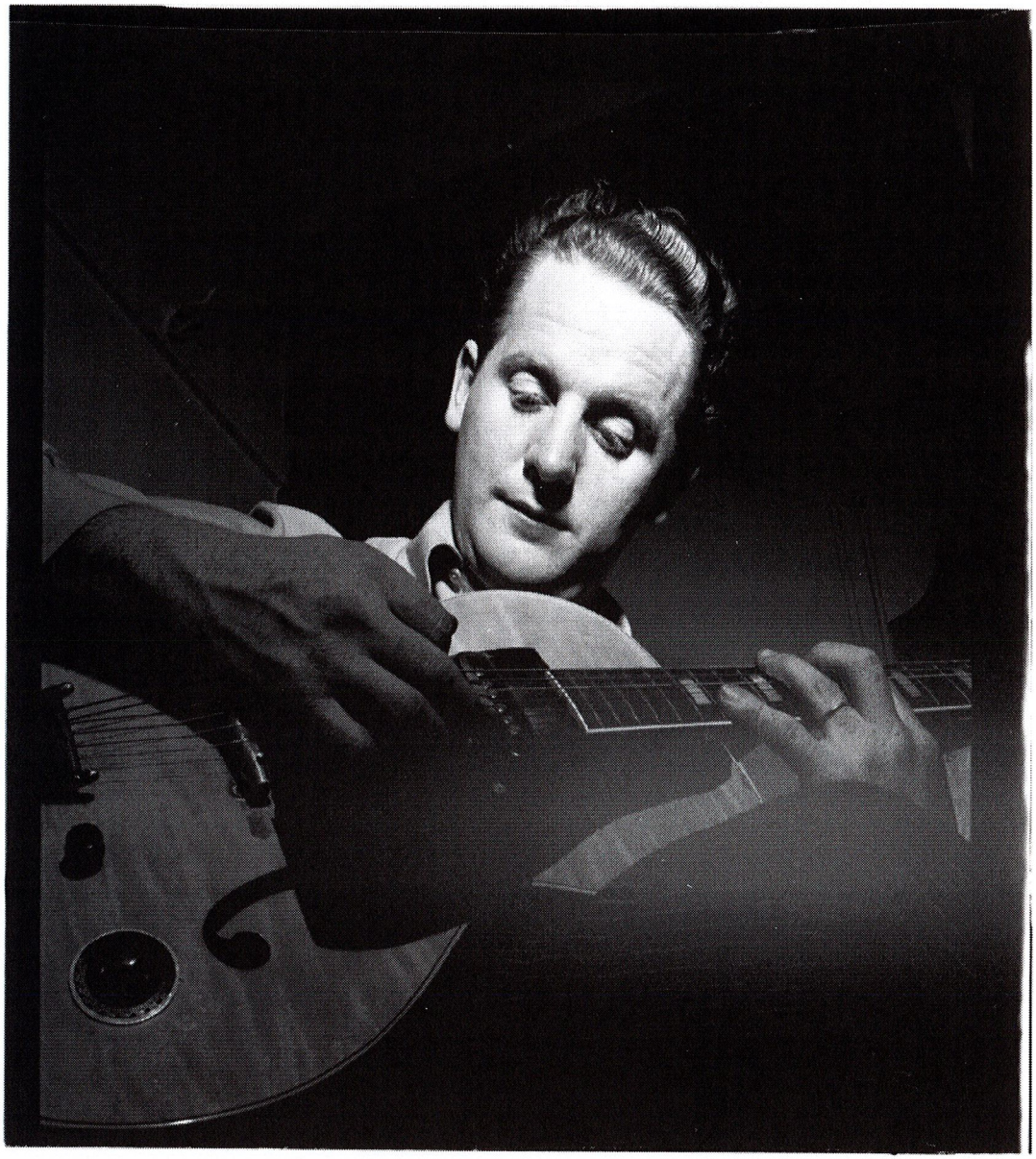
[15] Hartsell, Mark. "The Sound of Genius."
[16] *Biography.com Editors. "Les Paul Biography."*



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N/A. *Les Paul and Mary Ford 1954*. 18 Feb. 2020. *Wikipedia*, 18 Feb. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Les_Paul. Accessed 20 Feb. 2020. Les Paul with wife, Mary Ford

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Biography.com Editors. "Les Paul Biography." *Biography*, A&E Television Networks, 2 Apr. 2014, www.biography.com/musician/les-paul. Accessed 4 Dec. 2019. Les Paul created his first guitar in the early 1940's, in his late 20's. He was born in Wisconsin and he didn't have the best musical talent early on. In the 1930's he performed jazz at night on the south side of Chicago and during the day, he was performing country on CHicago radio stations. This source helped me figure out what he did in his early adult hood.

Hartsell, Mark. "The Sound of Genius." *Library of Congress Magazine*, vol. 8, no. 6, Nov.-Dec. 2019, pp. 18-21. The magazine "*The Sound of Genius*" shows all of Lester Paul's achievements and how he got to them. He had little spurts of genius before he was 15. His first invention was a harmonica holder that later progressed into his greatest invention. This magazine focused on what kind of inventions he made, what kinda music he made later in

life, his married and personal life and other things such as where he lived and how he came to fame.

Jacobson, Bob. *N/A*. Wisconsin HIstorical Society, N/A.

Pareles, Jon. "Les Paul, Guitar Innovator, Dies at 94." *The New York Times* [New York], N/A ed., 13 Aug. 2009, N/A sec., p. N/A. *New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2009/08/14/arts/music/14paul.html. Accessed 11 Dec. 2019.