

# American MASTERS

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WNET NEW YORK

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## press information



**PBS**

AMERICAN MASTERS  
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Biography

### *AMERICAN MASTERS Les Paul: Chasing Sound*

#### **LES PAUL**

*Artist, Inventor*

The name Les Paul is synonymous with the electric guitar. As a player, inventor and recording artist, Paul has been an innovator from the early years of his life. Born Lester William Polfus in 1915 in Waukesha, Wisconsin, he built his first crystal radio at age nine – which was about the time he first picked up a guitar. By age 13 he was performing semi-professionally as a country-music guitarist and working diligently on sound-related inventions. In 1941, Paul built his first solid-body electric guitar and continued to make refinements to his prototype throughout the decade. He also worked on refining the technology of sound, developing revolutionary engineering techniques such as close miking, echo delay and multitracking. All the while he busied himself as a bandleader who could play both jazz and country music.

His career as a musician nearly came to an end in 1948, when a near-fatal car accident shattered his right arm and elbow. However, he instructed the surgeons to set his arm at an angle that would allow him to cradle and pick the guitar. Paul subsequently made his mark as a jazz-pop musician extraordinaire, recording as a duo with his wife, singer Colleen Summers (a.k.a. Mary Ford). Their biggest hits included “How High the Moon” (1951) and “Vaya Con Dios” (1953), both reaching No. 1. The recordings of Les Paul and Mary Ford are noteworthy for Paul’s pioneering use of overdubbing – i.e., layering guitar and vocal parts one atop another, a technique also referred to as multitracking or “sound on sound” recording. The results were bright, bubbly and a little otherworldly – just what you might expect from an inventor with an ear for the future.

In 1952, Les Paul introduced the first eight-track tape recorder (designed by Paul and marketed by Ampex) and, more significantly for the future of rock and roll, launched the solid-body electric guitar that bears his name. Built and marketed by Gibson, with continuous advances and refinements from Paul in such areas as low-impedance pickup technology, the Les Paul guitar became a staple instrument for discerning rock guitarists. This list of musicians associated with the Gibson Les Paul includes Jeff Beck, Eric Clapton, Jimmy Page, Duane Allman, and Mike Bloomfield.

Over the ensuing decades, Paul has remained active, cutting a Grammy-winning album of instrumental duets with Chet Atkins, *Chester and Lester*, in 1977; performing regularly at the Iridium Jazz Club in New York City; and indulging his inventor’s curiosity at home in Mahwah, New Jersey.

In 2001, he received a Grammy Award for his technical achievements and in 2005 he was

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inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame. The same year, in celebration of Paul's 90th birthday, Capitol Records released a newly recorded rock album, *Les Paul & Friends*, in which he jammed with the likes of Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, Keith Richards, and Buddy Guy. The album was awarded two Grammys – for Best Pop Instrumental Performance and for Best Rock Instrumental Performance.

*Biography courtesy the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum, Inc.*

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