

American MASTERS

thirteen
WNET NEW YORK

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press information



AMERICAN MASTERS
is produced for PBS
by Thirteen/WNET
New York

AMERICAN MASTERS PROFILES PHENOMENAL GUITARIST AND INNOVATOR LES PAUL, THE THOMAS EDISON OF 20TH-CENTURY POPULAR MUSIC, WHEN ***LES PAUL: CHASING SOUND*** PREMIERES JULY 11 ON PBS

Program Features 92-Year-Old Living Legend In His Own Words, Accompanied By Classic Recordings, Archival And Present-Day Performance Footage, Home Movies And More

Interviews With Jeff Beck, Tony Bennett, Ahmet Ertegun, B.B. King, Steve Miller, Bucky Pizzarelli, Bonnie Raitt, Phil Ramone, Kay Starr, And Others

Among inductees of the National Inventors Hall of Fame, his name comes alphabetically after Louis Pasteur. In the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, it follows Parliament-Funkadelic. This singular distinction belongs to Les Paul, whose insatiable curiosity and experiments gave us *the* musical instrument of the modern era – the solid-body electric guitar – and the predominant studio recording technique – multi-tracking. Audacious and indefatigable at every turn of his career – from small-town Waukesha to Harlem music haunts to Hollywood studios – Paul, at age 92, still holds court every Monday night at the Iridium Jazz Club in New York City. *AMERICAN MASTERS* explores the revolutionary results of his drive to create sounds that had “never been heard on earth” when ***Les Paul: Chasing Sound*** premieres Wednesday, July 11 at 9 p.m. (ET) on PBS (check local listings).

“It would be difficult to overstate Les Paul’s influence on popular music in the twentieth century,” says Susan Lacy, creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*, a five-time winner of the Emmy Award for Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series and recent recipient of its eighth Peabody Award. “He pioneered the electric guitar and revolutionized our concept of what recorded music could be. Ironically, his inventions ushered in rock ’n’ roll and pushed him out of the

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spotlight – but not for long. You just can't keep Les Paul down.”

Les Paul: Chasing Sound is a co-production of John Paulson Productions, Thirteen/WNET New York and Icon Television Music. It is directed and produced by John Paulson, written and produced by James Arntz. Executive producers are Susan Lacy and Glenn Aveni.

Filmmaker Paulson says of Paul, “His journey has mirrored the evolution of popular music for practically a century. We've been able to illustrate that journey with amazing archival television clips, radio broadcasts, and interviews with the legend himself.”

The documentary forgoes a narrator so that Paul's life story comes across by way of his own anecdotes. The story begins in Waukesha, Wisconsin, where he was born Lester Polfuss in 1915, and winds through musical meccas of the 20th century. In Chicago during the Depression, he acquired his jazz chops and jammed with piano titan Art Tatum and trumpeter Louis Armstrong. Hitting New York in 1937, his trio wowed Fred Waring and radio audiences coast to coast. And in Hollywood in 1942, he landed one of the most high-profile jobs a guitarist could have – backing Bing Crosby. “It's one of the most perfectly produced records in the history of popular music,” says critic Gary Giddins of “It's Been A Long, Long Time,” Crosby's post-World War II ballad, “and one of the most famous guitar solos.”

But even more than Paul's knack for the right riff, his desire to achieve new sounds would drive his career. After experiments as a child in amplifying his guitar's strings with telephone parts and a phonograph needle, then a railroad track, he eventually arrived at his solid-body prototype: six strings and a pick-up mounted on a four-by-four, with detachable curved sides to make it look more like a standard guitar. After his “broomstick with a pick-up” finally attracted the interest of the Gibson company, the instrument reached its apotheosis with the late-1950s Gibson Les Paul “sunburst” red-orange models. In the hands of such legends as Chuck Berry, Jimmy Page, Pete Townshend, Eric Clapton and Keith Richards, it became rock 'n' roll's most

iconic and enduring instrument.

Les Paul: Chasing Sound also details Paul's invention of sound-on-sound recording, or "overdubbing," as revolutionary a development as the solid-body electric guitar. By adding an additional record head to his first tape machine, Paul was able to record himself playing, then go back and dub a second track over the first, ad infinitum. He and his wife, Mary Ford, created the first landmark of this technique with their iridescent "How High The Moon," a 10-guitar, 12-voice overdub and a blockbuster hit that influenced a generation.

Paul and Ford – better known as simply Les 'n Mary – achieved huge success together in the 1950s, selling 20 million records, including "Tiger Rag," "Vaya Con Dios," "Mockingbird Hill," and "I'm Sitting On Top of the World." Among the archival clips in **Les Paul: Chasing Sound** is footage of the two at home where they recorded many of these hits on machines Paul built himself. "It's a dream to find a partner like I found," says Paul, reminiscing. Though they eventually separated, and she died in 1977, Paul and Ford are united forever with their shared star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

Not long after Paul gave his guitar to rock 'n' roll, the new music's explosive power made his own efforts seem quaint, and he faded from the spotlight. In 1976, however, he triumphantly returned, winning a Grammy Award for Best Country Instrumental Performance for *Chester & Lester*, a duet album with fellow guitar virtuoso Chet Atkins. In 2005, two more Grammys followed for both Best Rock and Best Pop Instrumental Performance.

Today, as he packs his bag for the Iridium each Monday night, Les Paul includes hearing aids along with guitar picks. But he's still got perfect pitch – and the insatiable desire for the perfect sound.

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Glenn Aveni. Susan Lacy is creator and executive producer of *AMERICAN MASTERS*.

To take *AMERICAN MASTERS* beyond the television broadcast and further explore the themes, stories, and personalities of masters past and present, the companion Web site (www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters), created by Thirteen/WNET New York, offers interviews, essays, photographs, outtakes, and other resources.

AMERICAN MASTERS is produced for PBS by Thirteen/WNET New York. This acclaimed series, now celebrating its 21st season, has become a cultural legacy in its own right. The *AMERICAN MASTERS* film library is one of the most highly honored in television history with profiles of more than 140 artistic giants. In addition to eight Peabodys, an Oscar, a duPont-Columbia and two Grammys, *AMERICAN MASTERS* has won 17 Emmys, including Outstanding Primetime Non-Fiction Series for 1999, 2000, 2001, 2003, and 2004.

AMERICAN MASTERS is made possible by the support of the National Endowment for the Arts and by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. Additional funding for *AMERICAN MASTERS* is provided by Rosalind P. Walter, The Blanche & Irving Laurie Foundation, Jack Rudin, The Marilyn M. Simpson Charitable Lead Trusts, The André and Elizabeth Kertész Foundation, and public television viewers. More information about *AMERICAN MASTERS* can be found at: www.thirteen.org.

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Thirteen/WNET New York is one of the key program providers for public television, bringing such acclaimed series as *Nature*, *Great Performances*, *American Masters*, *Charlie Rose*, *Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly*, *Wide Angle*, *Secrets of the Dead*, *NOW With David Brancaccio*, and *Cyberchase* - as well as the work of Bill Moyers - to audiences nationwide. As the flagship public broadcaster in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut metro area, Thirteen reaches millions of viewers each week, airing the best of American public television along with its own local productions such as The Ethnic Heritage Specials, The Thirteen Walking Tours, *New York Voices*, and *Reel New York*. Thirteen extends the impact of its television productions through educational and community outreach projects - including the Celebration of Teaching and Learning - as well as Web sites and other digital media platforms. More information can be found at: www.thirteen.org.

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