

**A Conversation with Les Paul**  
**by Bill DeMain (5/2006, Puremusic.com)**

If Les Paul told you that he'd invented the E Major chord, you'd be inclined to believe him. Such are his accomplishments as a creative force over the last eight decades in popular music. He designed the first solid body electric guitar. He invented multi-track recording. He introduced mobile recording, and he built the first home recording studio (with artists from Jo Stafford to Andy Williams coming through, Les's garage was the Abbey Road of its day). Along the way, he racked up over forty Top 40 hits--with his late wife Mary Ford--and traded licks with everyone from Art Tatum to Chet Atkins to Keith Richards.

The former Lester Polfuss of Waukesha, Wisconsin (b. 9 June, 1915) started playing guitar at age 8, and shortly after, did his first electronic experiment, attempting to combine the motor of his mother's Hoover vacuum with the innards of an upright piano. It pointed the direction for a life that would combine flashy fretwork and ingenious inventions in equal measures.

These days, you can find the 90-year old legend holding court every Monday night at the New York City club Iridium. The rest of the time, he's at his suburban New Jersey home, performing major surgery on everything from guitar pick-ups to hearing aids.

**Puremusic:** Who was your first guitar hero?

**Les Paul:** Eddie Lang. I heard him noodling behind Bing Crosby on an early radio broadcast. I realized that there was someone out there who was very advanced. So I bummed a ride in a Model T Ford and got from Waukesha to Milwaukee and went to the music store and ordered some recordings of Eddie's. When I got them, I realized how little I knew. The other one was Segovia. Between those two, I had plenty of work to do (laughs).

**PM:** What was your first guitar?

**LP:** A little Sears & Roebuck acoustic that cost \$2.98. I used that, then progressed to a better instrument, a dobro. The dobro went out the window and I got myself an L-5. So in a very short period of time, I went from the Sears & Roebuck to the Gibson L-5, the best guitar they made at that time.

**PM:** Do you recall the first song you learned to play?

**LP:** "Darktown Strutter's Ball."

**PM:** Did you do a lot of dissecting of other guitarists' solos?

**LP:** I'd play the record over and over. But it wasn't like it is today, where a person has so many resources for learning--books, DVDs, and so on. I couldn't even get a guitar pick in my hometown. So I'd take the last key off the piano. They always knew where I'd played last, because the keys were missing. [laughs]

**PM:** The first time you heard a Django Reinhardt record was a turning point for you.

**LP:** It was surely a step in the right direction. I admired him a lot, and learned that he also was an admirer of Eddie Lang. He learned from the very same records. We were going different directions, but there were similarities.

In 1944, Django came to the Paramount Theater, where I was playing, and the doorman yelled up--I was on the sixth floor--and he said, "There's a fella named Django Reinhardt that would like to come up to your room. Should I send him up?" I said, "Send him up with a case of beer and Jesus Christ and I'll give 'em both an autographed picture." I didn't believe him! In walks Django, and that was the first time we met. He had an interpreter with him. We sat down and we jammed.

Django watched us play that night, and he said, "I want to play electric guitar like you." And he never switched back. He was a wonderful person. We got to be great friends.

**PM:** When you were playing in Chicago in the '30s, did you have any run-ins with mobsters?

**LP:** There sure were a lot of mobsters in the city. [laughs] It was an interesting time. When I went there, I ended up playing for Ralph Capone in his club, the Colosimo. Knowing a lot of the mobsters, when I put a day's work in--let's say I'm working in a radio station--I couldn't wait to get home and hear the news because it was like a soap opera. You knew that Capone just wiped out the South Side. Baby Face Nelson was in a cornfield between Milwaukee and Chicago. And Dillinger was floating around on the north side. We grew up with it. It was always exciting and interesting.

**PM:** When did you get the inventing bug?

**LP:** From the second I got my first guitar, I noticed things that could be improved upon. I corrected the obstacles and made it easier to play. I was the kid who was always taking things apart. I would either have the light socket off, or a switch, or I would be cutting some board down because it resonated at too high a frequency. When I went up the stairs in my house, there was a whole string of boards. I made them like a marimba, so they changed pitch. When mother said, "Time to go to bed, Lester," I would run up the stairs and it would go [sings melody to "Shave and a haircut, two bits"].

**PM:** What led up to the invention of your first solid body, also known as "The Log?"

**LP:** At the barbecue stand where I was playing, someone said, "Your voice is fine, your harmonica is fine, but your guitar's not loud enough." I went home determined to find an answer. First, I took a steel railroad track and strung a string along it. Underneath I put the receiver part of the telephone. I hooked it up to the radio, then I went running to my mother and said, "I found it, I found it!" She said, "That'll be the day you see a cowboy on a horse playing a piece of railroad track." [laughs] So that idea went right out the window. Next I tried a 4 x 4 plank, with a string stretched on it. That was the very first time I ever made a solid body guitar. Everything after was refining it, or making a better block of wood with a string on it.

**PM:** How was the reaction when you brought "The Log" onstage?

**LP:** I took it to a tavern in Queens, and people looked at me like I was nuts. So I added wings, fastening two sides on it so that it looked like a guitar. Then they applauded. I realized that many people hear with their eyes.

**PM:** What did Gibson say when you brought it to them?

**LP:** They didn't say it to my face, but later, the chairman of the board told me, "Les, for ten years, we laughed at you, and we called you 'the guy with the broomstick with the pick-ups.' We jokingly thought what a weird idea it was. None of us realized how serious it was."

**PM:** When Gibson came back to you in the early '50s, did they present you with the Les Paul shape?

**LP:** We all faced the fact that the dense wood would be too heavy and we had to lighten it up. There's no sense in making a large guitar when you don't need one. As for the shape, I had presented this flat-surfaced guitar to Mr. Berlin, chairman of the board at Gibson. He said, "Do you like violins?" I said, "I love them." We went back to his vault and looked at the Stradivariuses and all the fine violins. He said, "We could make a beautiful arch-top guitar." I said, "That would be great." And right there we decided to make the shape of the guitar like we did.

The next thing that came along was how beautiful you could make it and what a great friend it could be. Instead of a railroad track, we had this beautiful piece of wood. It turned out to be beyond anybody's dream.

**PM:** As a player, you've always been known for having a lively stage presence.

**LP:** Starting out as a country player and growing up playing to an audience, I learned to give the people what they want. Stan Kenton and I used to have conversations where he would say, "I'm going to educate the public to good music. That's my goal in life." It was the opposite of my goal. My goal is not to teach anybody anything. Mine is to give them what they wish to hear, and something they can understand without having a book and or having to study picking technique. They paid to get in. Give 'em their money's worth.

**PM:** But certainly you had a lot of technique that musicians could appreciate.

**LP:** Sure. You don't want to be held back because of a lack of technique. Technique is practice. But technique is not where it's at. Where it's really at is what you do with what you got. The key to it is to say something with your instrument, so it's like a conversation. You're getting a message across. If the fellow you're speaking to is very intelligent, you can get more technical. But if he's not particularly intellectual, you try to talk to him on his terms.

**PM:** Your solo on Bing Crosby's "It's Been a Long, Long Time" is wonderfully expressive. How did you develop your phrasing?

**LP:** There was a typical case of you don't have to play a lot of notes, you just have to play the *right* notes. And that tells the whole story. When we got done playing the number, Bing was the first man to ever kiss me. [laughs] He came over and said, "Great!" All I was really doing was replacing Eddie Lang, who was my mentor. Bing was a sucker for guitar, and that particular song was one that didn't need a lot of technique to say what it should say.

[There's an audio clip of "It's Been a Long, Long Time" on the Listen page, in a selection of clips of Les Paul recordings from several eras.]

**PM:** Bing gave you the first Ampex tape recorder in 1949. How soon after did you think of putting an extra recording head on it?

**LP:** I would say ten minutes. [laughs] I was busy recording with the recording lathes, with the discs. While I was doing that, I was thinking about how to modify the Ampex. I took a paper and a pencil and wrote down my ideas. The next day, Mary and I were on our way to Chicago. I told her that we didn't have to come back to L.A. to do our radio shows anymore. We could do them in garages, motel rooms, filling stations--we could make them anyplace with my new invention. I showed her the tape machine. She was very doubtful about the whole idea. When we got to Chicago, I hooked up the extra head, and as a test, recorded Mary's voice, then my guitar. They were both on there. I said, "By God, it works!" Mary and I were dancing around the room. We went to work that night the two happiest people in the world.

**PM:** Back in L.A., you built the first home studio.

**LP:** I built it in the garage in my backyard and put the word out that I would record anybody--for free. [laughs] I wanted to learn all the tricks of recording. So I'd have a little jazz trio come over. They'd play and I'd concentrate on the fidelity and getting the acoustics just right. I'd take carpet out, slant the walls, change the room materials, experiment with mic placement--all the technical things.

**PM:** Your first big breakthrough in multi-track recording was your own record "Lover."

**LP:** I just locked myself out there in that garage and said, "I'm going to make a sound where people will be able to tell me from everybody else. Something new, something fresh." I used slap-back echo and reverb, I sped up tracks--all the things I had at my command. I went in with that idea, and lo and behold, when I found it, I was very excited. After I made "Lover," we were at a garage party with Artie Shaw and the actor Laurence Tierney. They were smoking pot, and they had a record changer there, and I slipped my record in amongst theirs. When mine came up, Artie said, "What in the world is that?!" The others flipped out, and Mary said, "That's Les!"

But oddly enough, the very first person to hear it was W.C. Fields. He came to my garage to make a comedy record. When I played it for him, he said "My boy, you sound like an octopus." [laughs]

**PM:** Are you currently working on any new inventions?

I've had quite a bit of ear damage over the years, and have to wear hearing aids. Of course, I'm around people, from Walter Cronkite to Bill Clinton to my barber, and they're all complaining about the same thing. That the damned hearing aid--which is a million times better than what Edison had--is still not perfect. So I've gotten into modifying it, and we're now coming out with a Les Paul hearing aid. What I like about it is that a Stradivarius sounds like a Stradivarius and a kazoo sounds like a kazoo. If I can contribute just one more thing in this world before I go, it's going to be with hearing, and help the many people that have that curse.

**PM:** Having played music your whole life, what would you say is the most difficult aspect of your job?

**LP:** I've talked to some of the greatest players on earth. I've asked them "What's the toughest thing for you in music?" and I get the same answer. It's to play slow, or to play with feeling. That's hard to do. Count Basie, the longer he was alive, the less notes he could play, because of his illness. The less notes he played, the more he thought about playing the right note. The last time he performed, at the Grammy Awards, I was there. He was in a wheelchair, and we helped him up onto the ramp and got him to the piano. He put his left hand up, and he counted the band off, and they're playing like crazy. All of a sudden they break, and he hits one note. And I thought, "God almighty, that's the best note I ever heard" [laughs]

**PM:** What contemporary guitarists do you admire?

**LP:** There are so many great players, and I surely wouldn't want to leave one out. But there are certain ones that I admire greatly. Jeff Beck is excellent. Tommy Emmanuel is great. I can listen to Segovia and get knocked out. I can listen to Jimi Hendrix and get knocked out. It's a very wide span.

**PM:** You were apparently one of the first to discover Hendrix. Is that true?

**LP:** In 1965, I was on my way to New York with a Simon and Garfunkel master that I had to return to Columbia. We were driving down Rt. 46, my son and I, and I stopped at this saloon where I sometimes performed. I needed to talk to the manager for a minute. It was the afternoon, and there was a guy on the stage, all by himself, left-handed, playing the hell out of his guitar. Real raunchy. I got back in the car and said to my son, "There's a crazy guy in there playing guitar. He's real good." I said, "We'll stop on the way back so you can hear him." When we got back, I asked the bartender, "Where is the crazy guy with the guitar?" The bartender said, "He was too loud. We threw him out." I said, "What's his name?" The bartender didn't know. He wasn't using the name Jimi Hendrix. It was Maurice James. So I told my manager about it. At the time, I was thinking of getting into management and quitting playing. I had a whole bunch of acts lined up--José Feliciano, Willie Nelson, the Young Rascals. I said, "I'd like to find this guy and manage him. He's really got potential." My manager hunted everywhere. A year passed and he came to me and said, "You know that left-handed guitar player you were talking about? He died in a fire, smoking a cigarette." I thought, "Well, that ends that."

About a year later, London Records asked me to come out of retirement and make one more album. I said, "Okay. Find me some of the guys who are playing today, so I can hear what's going on." Walt McGuire with London brought over ten albums and threw them on the carpet, and said, "Here are some of the best guitarists." One of them, the picture, as soon as I saw it, I said, "There's my guitar player!" He didn't die in a fire. So later, when Jimi came to the states, he bought Electric Ladyland Studios, and that's when he would call me on the phone, and say, "How do you get this sound? How do you do this with the tape recorder?" He'd have a lot of technical questions. So we got to talk a lot on the phone. But I never met him.

**PM:** You've been playing a weekly gig in New York since the mid-1980s. What do you enjoy most about that?

**LP:** First of all, I enjoy the group I have. They're excellent. Then it's about making the people in the audience leave the club happy, and give them more than they came in to hear. If I can do that, it's great therapy for me, because what would I do other than get out of bed and go to the bathroom? I meet the people, talk to the people, and it's a great chance to stay active and make new friends. Also, it makes me continue to learn. We bring up a lot of guests from the audience. Someone comes up, whether he's six years old or whether he's in his prime, and our job is to make him a star. Our job is to make sure that we're the frame around the picture. All we want to do is help this fellow the best we can. If they're good, that's a privilege. We learn from them. It's great for me. It's something that's more important than taking a pill.

**PM:** You've had some problems in recent years with arthritis. How are you doing?

**LP:** I've had to learn to play without all my fingers. It's a challenge. But I tell you, there's hardly a thing, except for chords, that I can't do. If it's single string stuff, I've found a way

of getting around it, whether I hammer or slide or pull-off. Two years ago, I couldn't play an octave. Now, it's duck soup. It's amazing what you can do if you're determined.

**PM:** You're a very inspiring fellow, Les.

**LP:** Thank you. I think it's the right way to go. Wait, I shouldn't put it that way. [laughs]  
The right way to *think*.

