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Les Paul & Mary Ford
A 1950s Musical Bridge

By David Frew
May 2023



Les Paul and Mary Ford

It would have been impossible to live through the 1950s without being inundated by the music of guitar player/musical innovator Les Paul and his wife Mary Ford. Their music was beyond popular. It was ubiquitous, defining a genre. Paul was one part guitarist, another part innovator. His music was enhanced by innovative multitrack overdubs; a sound that he continually worked on in his own recording studio. Even though he was an incredibly talented guitarist, he faced continuous skepticism from critics who argued that the sounds he produced were more engineered than instrumental virtuosity.

Born near Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1915, Paul shortened his name from Polsfuss, a change that he hoped would enhance his career. Trapped between country-western music, which he began playing, and jazz that he learned while living in Chicago, his early career suffered from confusion. He was able to make more money playing country-western music, but he preferred the complexity and creativity of jazz. As a country-western artist, he used the name Rhubarb Red. When he was learning jazz, Paul was heavily influenced by European jazz masters Django Reinhardt and Stephan Grappelli, one of the first groups to feature the guitar prominently.

From very early in his career Paul was focused on multitrack recording, which allowed him to add his own accompaniments, including musical counterpoint and ornamentation to the melody leads that he began with. Les Paul's career was altered forever when Gene Autry introduced him to Colleen Summers, a country-western backup singer for popular cowboy star Jimmy Wakely. Paul took Colleen into his studio and changed the sound of her voice, using a recording technique that he called close milking, in which the microphone was held within a few inches of the singer's mouth. That technique lowered the tone of the voice as it created a soft, relaxed sound. Paul knew that Colleen's enhanced voice would be more appealing to radio audiences. He also realized that if they were to become a duet her name should be changed so that it was short, like his. Through a process of elimination, the couple eventually selected the name "Mary Ford." Les Paul and Mary Ford were married in 1949.

The "magic" of their sound literally "lit up" the sound waves during the early 1950s when they had an astonishing 28 hits between 1949 and 1958. During that period, they had 16 top 10 popular hits, including an astonishing five "top 10 hits" within a one-year period. Their "How High the Moon" was the number-one song for nine weeks and "Vaya Con Dios," recorded a few months later, was number-one for 11 weeks. During the early 1950s, Les Paul and Mary Ford recorded more hits than Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, and The Andrews Sisters combined. Paul engineered almost all the duo's hits in the garage studio at his home. In addition to multitracking his own guitar sounds, he did the same with Mary Ford's vocals, allowing her to harmonize with herself. To further enhance their fame, they produced their own television and radio programs during the 1950s.

Paul's dedication to electronics caused him to wonder about the focus on instrumental craftsmanship. He became convinced that solid body guitars would become the future of music. He built several himself and tried to convince Gibson, the maker of most of his personal instruments, to dedicate time and engineering to a new company model. At first Gibson resisted, but when the Fender Company in California introduced a line of solid body guitars that became popular, they changed their mind. Eventually they worked with Les Paul to produce and market the flagship "Les Paul" model.



The 1950s/1960s era Gibson Les Paul solid body guitar is now a classic.

There was an acrimonious divorce in 1964 after Mary Ford grew tired of travel and performing. After the separation, Les Paul went into semi-retirement, avoiding travel. From 1965 on he focused entirely on jazz and on the enhancement of his home studio in New Jersey.

Paul had suffered a devastating arm injury during a car crash in the early 1950s. A Los Angeles orthopedic surgeon set his broken elbow at an angle that would allow him to continue to play the guitar. While he was able to play effectively after the accident, severe arthritis in his right arm limited his abilities toward the end of a career that continued into his 90s.

He adapted, however, and continued to perform every Monday night at Manhattan's Iridium Jazz Club, until his death in 2009. Mary Ford preceded her husband in death in 1977.



Les Paul performing a year before his passing

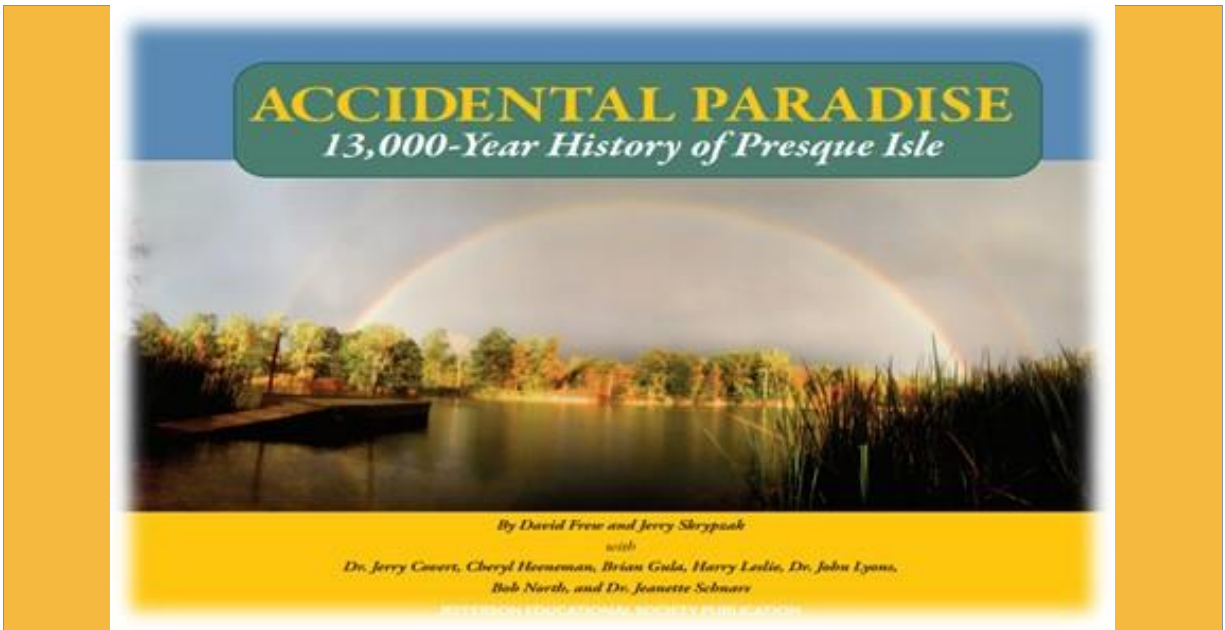
Testimonials and awards accompanied the last decades of Les Paul's life, as he made several new albums, recording with other legendary guitarists such as Chet Atkins. He was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1988, President George W. Bush presented him with the Medal of Arts in 2007, and he was added to the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2005 for the solid body electric guitar and added to the Jazz Hall of Fame in 1990.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Historian and author David Frew, Ph.D., is a Scholar-in-Residence at the JES. An emeritus professor at Gannon University, he held a variety of administrative positions during a 33-year career. He is also emeritus director of the Erie County Historical Society/Hagen History Center and is president of his own management consulting business. Frew has written or co-written 35 books and more than 100 articles, cases, and papers.



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