

Personal Take II: Ulrich Teuffel

The Intentional Guitar

Until the middle of the last century, the guitar was still an instrument that evolved in the flow of the craft tradition, although it was already partly manufactured industrially.

The emergence of radio and amplification technology in the 1930s created a demand for instruments to be made accessible to this new technology. But guitars were not built for that. The hollow sound body of stringed instruments caused significant problems, with disturbing feedback.

The simple solution of building a guitar with a solid, non-hollow sound body was an abstraction that was unheard of, even unthinkable. It took someone who was not traditionally influenced to achieve this. Leo Fender was an amp builder who thought in terms of production categories, and with his first mass-produced Esquire guitar in 1950, he created the archetype of the industrial electric guitar. Free of traditional ballast, a brand new instrument had been created. Its idea was: form follows production. A short time later, Leo Fender created an equally radical counterpart from the double bass, the Precision Bass. And so a visual ensemble was born: the string quartet of a new era.

The new instruments and the amplifiers made possible timbres and playing techniques that were not even envisaged when they were built. These were discovered only through curious misuse of the signal chain of guitar and amplifier. The initial rejection of the new electric guitars intensified the urge for new expressive possibilities and polarization. The canon of rock music that has emerged to this day cannot be transposed back to the pre-electric era without loss. Anyone who has ever endured an unplugged concert understands what I mean.

As little as electric guitars were taken seriously in their formative years, the rejection has since given way to an iconic reverence. This reverence, however, grew not from the original product but from the practice of performance. The pop music canon is not connected with written notation of the works as in the pre-medial epoch of classical music, but with performance practice, which was and is consumed worldwide through the media, thus also preserved and available at any time. The canon is colossal. And in the middle of it stands the image of the electric guitar.

If the beginning of the industrial electric guitar continued to bring forth a variety of forms and concepts, most of which were oriented toward the pioneer guitars of the early phase, this variety faded with the first great wave of recollection in pop. The pioneer models stand out from this early period. In the meantime, they are often seen as works of a higher order and thus experience a process of “Stradivarization” similar to the violin—it is the hallucination of equivalent thinking.

Stradivarius violins and early electric guitars: they are emblems of a golden age. But the industrial origin of the electric guitar does not allow for a descent from a transcendent higher order. As an aside, we know from recent studies, especially the double-blind study by Claudia Fritz at Sorbonne University in 2012,¹ that the descent from a higher order is not tenable for Stradivari violins either. The market nevertheless confirms that these instruments are all exceptional. But the market also confirmed a pair of Levi jeans from 1880 that sold for \$76,000 in 2022.

And here we get closer to the point: the early artifacts of an era imagine for us the upheavals at whose beginning they stood. In the case of the violin, the transition of high culture music from that of clerical and aristocratic society to civil society. In the case of Levi’s, the transformation of blue-collar to white-collar society. In the case of the electric guitar, the transformation of the musician to the immortal media product.

If the figure of the violin was preserved unchanged for centuries as the form of a divine order, this is no longer possible with the electric guitar. The violin had not yet been copyrighted. Trademark law, however, became an important demarcation factor for the larger manufacturers in the case of the electric guitar. Finally, the commonality of all electric guitars is that they represent different identities—figuratively, not sonically.

From the perspective of a guitar maker, this is a great challenge. Often trained in the faithful construction of historical stringed and plucked instruments, one engages in a practice of reenactment. In a nutshell, the process of building is a performance, the result of which is an instrument. This process is free from the burden of innovative re-creation, and therein lies a great peace and power in the construction of violins.

In the world of electric guitars, this safe space does not exist, and guitar builders today are faced with the task of developing their own product identity. This is a long and arduous process because what we perceive as electric guitars are actually multiples that are flanked by trademark law. A guitar maker who is not really aware of this will build instruments that are as close as possible to the multiple originals, but just sufficiently different in trademark details; or, in other words, he offers fake Rolex watches with a six-pointed crown on the dial.

So, if you set out to develop an independent guitar portfolio, my experience is: the most important guitar models are the ones you don't build. There are people who have never forgiven the Ramones' "Pet Sematary."

Until the early 1990s, innovation was still accepted in the guitar market. After that, the metal scene was the only biotope where the electric guitar could still evolve. With the advent of social media, the biodiversity has now recovered significantly: individuality is now a resource to create value.

Today, a young generation of guitar makers is showing that there is, after all, more to this instrument than we previously saw. The leitmotif of this generation is the identity of the guitar. Their instruments are often polarizing, and many of them pick up where rock and pop stood in 1950. To me, they are like the craft beers of microbreweries. They'll only occupy a small market volume, but they're pushing the big companies ahead of them. And they seem to have staying power.

Notes

1. In this study, contemporary violins were compared with old Italian violins. The violins were played by internationally renowned soloists in front of experienced listeners in a concert hall with and without orchestra. The soloists wore opaque glasses and did not know which instrument they were playing. The experienced listeners sat behind a curtain in the concert hall and also did not know which violin was being played. Soloist and listeners judged the instruments in this double-blind study. The results showed no preference for historical Stradivarius and Guarneri violins over modern violins. In fact, the majority of the experienced listeners preferred the modern violins. Fritz Claudia, Joseph Curtin, Jacques Poitevineau, and Fan-Chia Tao, "Listener Evaluations of New and Old Italian Violins," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 2017, pp. 5395–5400. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1619443114>.