4 The Guitar Hero in Classic Rock

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Introduction

As I enter my local Guitar Center (GC), I pass a large picture, featuring Robert Cray, Eric Clapton, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and Jimmie Vaughan, each holding his Fender Stratocaster guitar, and on the verge, it seems, of launching into a blistering blues solo. Further inside the store and stretched across one long wall above racks of electric guitars in many designs and colors, amplifiers of various shapes and sizes, and stacks of hard-shell guitar cases, are enormous images of another collection of iconic guitarists: Randy Rhoads, Miguel Rascón, Joe Satriani, Jimi Hendrix, Brian Setzer, Carlos Santana, and Jimmy Page. As it turns out, this Rochester (New York State) location is not very different from the hundreds of other GC stores that have sprung up across the United States since the mid 1990s. The musicians in these prominent displays are there because the playing of at least one of these guitarists—and probably more than one—is likely well known to GC customers. We represent the musical worlds, these oversized pictures seem to say, that the gear in this shop will help the dedicated guitarist conjure up, and these masters of great and gallant fretboard deeds are your inspiration—they are your guitar heroes.[1]

In the history of rock music, the rise of the guitar hero can be traced to the mid 1960s and tied to the increasingly important role of virtuosic guitar soloing. Masterful soloing was not new in pop and rock before then, however: in the years before rock's emergence around 1955, guitarist Les Paul had made flashy solo playing a key feature of his hits with Mary Ford, including "How High the Moon" (1951) and "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise" (1951).[2] Guitar soloing sometimes played an important role in rock music during its first decade: Danny Cedrone delivered a virtuosic solo on Bill Haley and the Comets' "Rock Around the Clock" (1954), for instance, while Chuck Berry's trademark guitar bursts on hits such as "Roll Over Beethoven" (1956) and "Johnny B. Goode" (1957), though perhaps less virtuosic in a strictly guitar-technical sense, were nevertheless a key element in his style. Instrumental tracks such as Duane Eddy's "Rebel Rouser" (1958), The Ventures' "Walk Don't Run" (1960), The Chantays' "Pipeline" (1962), and Dick Dale's "Misirlou" (1962), in addition to

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a string of UK hits by The Shadows during the early 1960s, showcased the guitar as the main melodic instrument, though mostly without virtuosity or technical flash as a central feature (aside from Dale's furious tremolo picking).[3]

It was this melodic approach to guitar soloing, always subordinate to the sung sections of a song, that served as the basis for George Harrison's solos with The Beatles, as well as Keith Richards' solos with The Rolling Stones in the mid 1960s. Roger McGuinn's electric 12-string solos with The Byrds were also of this melodic variety, with the notable exception of his frantic, John Coltrane-inspired playing on "Eight Miles High" (1966). Jeff Beck's playing with The Yardbirds on hits such as "Heart Full of Soul" (1965) and "Over Under Sideways Down" (1966) anticipates the virtuosic turn that would be central to the emergence of the guitar hero in rock—a rise that can be attributed primarily to Jimi Hendrix and Eric Clapton in the mid to late 1960s. The idea of a guitar solo being an important focus of a recording or performance, rather than a subordinate element of contrast in juxtaposition with sung sections, came into clear focus in a series of albums by The Jimi Hendrix Experience and Cream, released between 1966 and 1968. While there were sung sections that were important on many of these tracks, the solos often were just as crucial and, perhaps in some cases, even more important to the track and its appeal. Frequently on such tracks, the solo's the thing; and the guitarist who makes the solo compelling is the hero.

The Hippie Aesthetic and the Rise of Virtuosity

To get a better sense of the historical conditions in which the idea of the guitar hero developed, it would be useful to consider briefly the broader context of rock history in the second half of the 1960s and into the 1970s. Elsewhere I have argued that rock music from the mid 1960s to the end of the 1970s—or roughly from The Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (1967) to Pink Floyd's *The Wall* (1979)—can be understood according to the "hippie aesthetic."[4] The hippie aesthetic pulls together a number of elements in rock music that can be found—at least in part and sometimes altogether—in most rock music during this period. These elements fall into five general categories and help organize the ways in which rock musicians became increasingly ambitious about their music, in some cases building on practices that had begun earlier in the 1960s:

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- Lyrics deal with serious themes, not teen life and romance, often as a concept album, with coordinated packaging/album art which is in some cases extended to live performance.
- Musical features often associated with classical music, both avant-garde and common practice, as well as with jazz, are often present.
- There is a new and sometimes pronounced emphasis on instrumental virtuosity, often modeled on classical music and jazz.
- Continued emphasis on technology, including the expansion of multitrack recording and ever more sophisticated synthesizers and signal processing, is common.
- There is a continued development of the idea that the rock musician is an "artist" who must explore new possibilities and push musical boundaries, rather than a "craftsperson" who repeats formulas.

The last of these categories is perhaps the most fundamental to the hippie aesthetic overall. Rock musicians increasingly moved away from the idea of being performers singing short and catchy pop songs to being artists who wrote and arranged their own music, aspiring to play like skilled professionals (and projecting that image to fans) while seeking new sounds, drawing from a wide range of styles, and addressing "serious" issues in the lyrics. This sense of ambition and seriousness of purpose extended to the recording, packaging, and on-stage presentation: an album became a listening experience freely employing any technical advantage the recording studio could provide, the album art was coordinated with the lyrics and/or "vibe" of the music, and live performances employed lights, projections, and even props to heighten the experience of the music. Indeed, it is difficult to find a rock act from these years that does not engage at least two of the categories listed above in a significant way.[5] Consider, for instance, The Who's *Tommy* (1969), Jethro Tull's *Aqualung* (1971), Alice Cooper's *Love It to Death* (1971), *Led Zeppelin IV* (1971), David Bowie's *The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust* (1972), The Allman Brothers' *Eat a Peach* (1972), Elton John's *Goodbye Yellow Brick Road* (1973), Genesis' *The Lamb Lies Down on Broadway* (1974), Queen's *A Night at the Opera* (1975), Eagles' *Hotel California* (1976), and Billy Joel's *The Stranger* (1977)—a diverse range of landmark albums that each engage various elements of the hippie aesthetic in significant ways.

Of these five dimensions of the hippie aesthetic, the increased emphasis on virtuosity is most important to the rise of the guitar hero. The rise of virtuosity, however, was not limited to guitar playing. Drummers, bassists, and keyboard players all aspired to greater technical mastery of their instruments and display of this mastery in performance. Drum sets expanded to include not only more drums but also all manner of percussion, bells, gongs, and even tympani (the drum solo became an almost

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required part of the live show). Keyboard rigs tended to include multiple keyboards, stacked and arranged in such a way as to allow the keyboardist to play two at a time and quickly switch among various keyboards such as organ, piano, synthesizer, Mellotron, and more. Bassists might add bass pedals on the floor and often played parts as intricate as those of the guitarists. The rise of the guitar hero thus occurred within a broader musical environment in which all band members—and their fans—were increasingly taking the musicianship seriously.

Clapton, Hendrix, and the Rise of the Guitar Hero

Eric Clapton had made his first mark in the rock world in London. Playing with The Yardbirds, he was known for his commitment to traditional electric blues, a style in which featured soloing is common. In 1963, The Beatles' UK success opened up new opportunities for British bands in Britain, and then for British bands in the US in 1964. Like The Rolling Stones, The Yardbirds had started out as an electric blues band in the style of Alexis Korner's Blues Inc. Nevertheless, the possibility of commercial success in this new market found The Yardbirds in the recording studio in early 1965, recording a pop song by songwriter Graham Gouldman. "For Your Love" was not a blues number, and to make matters worse from Clapton's perspective, he was not allowed to perform on the entire single, but only in the middle section (the main section instead featured harpsichord). Clapton quit the band soon after this session to devote himself to blues, walking away from what would become a hit record and joining John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers, who were, by comparison, more a respected act than a commercial success. In the context of the emerging hippie aesthetic, Clapton's rejection of the prospect of pop-star fame—a rejection for now, anyway—and his overt commitment to his blues playing confirmed a musical seriousness of purpose (as perceived by other musicians and by fans in the UK) that was a crucial early step in the emergence of the guitar hero. As it turned out, Clapton's time with the Bluesbreakers would be off and on, and by the second half of 1966, he had teamed up with bassist/vocalist Jack Bruce and drummer Ginger Baker to form Cream; the trio's debut album, *Fresh Cream*, was released in December 1966.[6]

At about the same time as Cream was forming in London, Animals' bassist Chas Chandler heard Jimi Hendrix perform in New York's Café Wha? Shifting to the role of manager, Chandler convinced Hendrix to relocate to London, where with bassist Noel Redding and drummer Mitch Mitchell, The Jimi Hendrix Experience was formed. The new Chandler-managed trio released its first album, *Are You Experienced?*, in May 1967.

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Hendrix's playing was not only virtuosic but full of show business flamboyance: Hendrix would play guitar behind his head, with his teeth, and sometimes rub himself up against his tall Marshall amplifier in sexual ways. He would, on occasion, smash his guitar (as The Who's Pete Townshend had done) and light his guitar on fire.[7] Hendrix, however, initially needed some convincing about the move to London and asked Chandler if he could introduce him to Eric Clapton, whose playing he admired. Clapton and Hendrix first met in London during October 1966 and remained good friends going forward, sometimes visiting clubs and sitting in with other artists together.[8]

Over the next two years, and with a strong dose of friendly competition, Cream and the Experience released a series of albums in alternation that progressively raised the bar for guitar virtuosity and established the idea of the guitar hero in rock (see Table 4.1).[9] To briefly survey this development, consider Cream's version of Willie Dixon's "Spoonful" from their debut album. The track is about six and a half minutes in length, with a minute and a half (2:20–3:52) devoted to Clapton's solo. The track "Are You Experienced" from the first Hendrix album clocks in at four minutes, with slightly over a minute (1:40–2:42) devoted to the (backward-tape) guitar solo. In both cases, the solos are a principal feature of the track, showcasing the skill and creativity of each guitarist.[10] Moving forward to 1968, Cream's live version of "Spoonful" appears on *Wheels of Fire*, running to more than sixteen minutes; Clapton's solo begins at about the three-minute mark and extends mostly unbroken for more than ten minutes until the return of the sung section of the track at 13:32. Hendrix's "Voodoo Chile" on *Electric Ladyland* extends to almost fifteen minutes, with extended guitar solos prominently featured along with an organ solo by guest Steve Winwood, drum soloing from Mitchell, and Hendrix's own vocals.[11] Though recorded in the studio, it captures the spontaneous feel of a live performance and offers a useful comparison to

Table 4.1 *The six albums that defined the guitar hero in rock*

	Band	Album
1	Cream	*Fresh Cream* released in December 1966 (recorded in July–November 1966)
2	The Jimi Hendrix Experience	*Are You Experienced?* released in May 1967 (recorded in October 1966–April 1967)
3	Cream	*Disraeli Gears* released in November 1967 (recorded in May 1967)
4	The Jimi Hendrix Experience	*Axis: Bold As Love* released in December 1967 (recorded in May–June, October 1967)
5	Cream	*Wheels of Fire* released in June 1968 (recorded in 1967–1968)
6	The Jimi Hendrix Experience	*Electric Ladyland* released in October 1968 (recorded in July, December 1967, January, April–August 1968)

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Cream's live "Spoonful." In these two tracks released on the third album from each band (in the six-album sequence shown in Table 4.1), this marked expansion of the featured solo indicates a clear development of the guitar solo as a central element in the rise of the guitar hero. It is important to note as well, however, that extended improvisation on lengthy studio tracks or in live performance was an important element in the hippie aesthetic more generally, though in the case of Clapton and Hendrix, their virtuosity mostly developed out of blues soloing rather than out of classical or jazz influences. Pink Floyd, under the leadership of Syd Barrett in London and the Grateful Dead in San Francisco, for instance, both made extended improvisation central to their live shows. Extended soloing could also be heard on tracks such as The Doors' "Light My Fire" (1967) and, perhaps most notoriously, Iron Butterfly's "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" (1968). Clapton and Hendrix thus did not invent this practice but rather employed it to create extended showcases for their guitar virtuosity.

Guitar Heroes, Classic Rock, and the Guitar Community, 1970–1985

To follow the explosive development of the guitar hero in the 1970s and into the 1980s, it will be useful to briefly specify how the term "guitar hero" will be defined going forward. There are at least three ways in which this term can be used. First, it might refer to a rock performer, often a singer, who plays guitar; Elvis Presley often performed with an acoustic guitar, for instance, though he was never much of a virtuoso—a kind of rock hero with a guitar. A second instance would be a guitarist who is considered a guitar hero by fans, though most of these fans have little basis in playing experience to determine the level of virtuosity in any given player's performance. Pete Townshend or Keith Richards might be thought of as guitar heroes in such a case, though neither would ever make such a claim for himself. The third type is the guitarist who is admired by other guitarists—or other musicians more generally—for their skill and virtuosity: a guitarist's guitarist. It is in this third sense that we will trace the development of the guitar hero in rock into the 1970s and beyond.[12]

Various polls have rated guitarists in music magazines over the years; sometimes these are critics' polls, but often these are readers' polls.[13] The British music magazine *Melody Maker*, for instance, ran annual readers' polls for many years, and the long-running *DownBeat* Readers' Poll (which ranks jazz musicians) became the model for such polls in the US.[14] For the purposes of this chapter, the *Guitar Player (GP)* Readers' Poll provides a useful window into the guitar heroes of the 1970s in the context of a rapidly expanding

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community of serious-minded guitarists. Founded in 1967, *GP* was directed at amateur and professional players with an emphasis on playing techniques, gear, and navigating the music business.[15] Surveying the late 1960s, Brad Tolinski and Alan Di Perna write: “The era also saw the advent of professional guitar journalism, starting with the first issues of *Guitar Player* in 1967. This phenomenon gathered considerable momentum in the seventies, with publications offering detailed articles on guitar equipment and playing techniques, not to mention the first reliable transcriptions of electric guitar rock and other genres.”[16] Providing a glimpse of how securely the hippie aesthetic had taken hold among serious fans of rock music, Steve Lukather writes,

> the only real way to find out *how* anyone did what they did—or got the sounds they got—was through the first real guitar magazine: *Guitar Player*. We all read *GP* cover to cover because it was our only real source. This is where the players talked about their amps, their guitars, the few stomp boxes that existed, and their customized rigs.[17]

Joe Satriani adds, “It was dedicated to exactly what I was interested in. No gossip, just exciting, useful stuff about guitars, gear, artists, their music, and their approach to playing.”[18] *GP* began an annual Readers’ Poll in February 1970, and a survey of the results of these polls reflect the opinions of the *GP* readers, giving us a sense of who the guitar heroes were among aspiring guitarists throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s—the era of classic rock.[19]

From the start, the *GP* polls covered a broad range of guitar styles. In the first two years, there were six categories: Rock, Electric Blues, Country, Jazz, Classical, and Folk. In 1972, four additional categories were added: Best New Artist, Best Guitar LP, Flamenco, and Best Overall. New categories were added as the years went by; the 1985 poll, for instance, included fifteen categories. The *GP* universe of guitar heroes is thus stylistically diverse; to track the rock guitar heroes specifically throughout the 1970s, the categories of Rock, Electric Blues, and Best Overall will be most useful. Considering the previous discussion, it is perhaps no surprise that in 1970 Jimi Hendrix won in the Rock category, while Clapton took that category in the next four years (see Table 4.2). In 1975, Clapton took the Electric Blues category, while Jeff Beck took Rock for two years in a row. Jimmy Page topped the Rock category in 1977 and 1978, while Eddie Van Halen won in 1979 and then each year through 1983. Of the rock guitarists who won Best Overall, Clapton took 1973, Beck took 1976, and Steve Howe won it for five years running beginning in 1977. Before 1981, any guitarist who won five times in the same category was placed in the Gallery of Greats and removed from further competition in that category. Of the guitarists surveyed here, blues guitarist B.B. King, Steve Howe, and Eddie Van

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Table 4.2 *Selected winners in the Guitar Player Readers' Poll, 1970–1985*[20]

Year	Rock	Electric blues	Best overall
1970	Jimi Hendrix	B. B. King	
1971	Eric Clapton	B. B. King	
1972	Eric Clapton	B. B. King	Chet Atkins
1973	Eric Clapton	B. B. King	Eric Clapton
1974	Eric Clapton	B. B. King*	John McLaughlin
1975	Jeff Beck	Eric Clapton	John McLaughlin
1976	Jeff Beck	Mike Bloomfield	Jeff Beck
1977	Jimmy Page	Johnny Winter	Steve Howe
1978	Jimmy Page	Johnny Winter	Steve Howe
1979	Eddie Van Halen	Johnny Winter	Steve Howe
1980	Eddie Van Halen	Eric Clapton	Steve Howe
1981	Eddie Van Halen	Eric Clapton*	Steve Howe*
1982	Eddie Van Halen	Eric Clapton	Steve Morse
1983	Eddie Van Halen*	Stevie Ray Vaughan	Steve Morse
1984	Alex Lifeson	Stevie Ray Vaughan	Steve Morse
1985	Yngwie Malmsteen	Stevie Ray Vaughan	Steve Morse

Note: Asterisks indicate players included in the Gallery of the Greats.

Halen earned that distinction (indicated by asterisks in Table 4.2). In 1981, the rules were adjusted such that any guitarist who had won in more than one category in five years was eligible, and Clapton entered the Gallery in 1981 (though he was not removed from any category and went on to win again in Electric Blues the next year).

It is perhaps striking how few names occupy the top spots in these three categories over the GP polls from 1970 to 1985. Excluding B.B. King (blues), Chet Atkins (country), and John McLaughlin (jazz) from Table 4.2, the total number of rock and electric blues guitarists during this sixteen-year period is only twelve. This list of first-place finishers does not include many guitarists who placed in the top several positions in Rock and Best Overall categories; these include George Harrison, Terry Kath, Jerry Garcia, Carlos Santana, Ritchie Blackmore, Dickie Betts, Jan Akkerman, Roy Buchanan, Frank Zappa, Lee Ritenour, Ted Nugent, Randy Rhoads, Rik Emmett, and Gary Moore. Combined with the first-place finishers, the total number of guitarists is still only twenty-six. In the Blues category, those who also placed below first include thirteen additional guitarists (fourteen if B.B. King is included): John Lee Hooker, Freddie King, Albert King, Buddy Guy, Lightnin' Hopkins, Shuggie Otis, John Paul Hammond, John Mayall, Elvin Bishop, Muddy Waters, Bonnie Raitt, George Thorogood, and Billy Gibbons. Over sixteen years of voting in three categories, including some electric blues guitarists who would not have considered themselves rockers, the total number of names is only

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forty. And of those forty, fewer than half placed in the top three slots and recurred regularly from year to year, making the period from 1970 to 1985 relatively stable in terms of guitar heroes.[21] Further, there are many guitarists who do not appear in these forty names: Tony Iommi of Black Sabbath, David Gilmour of Pink Floyd, and Robert Fripp of King Crimson are absent. Robin Trower (1974), Peter Frampton (1976), and Mark Knopfler (1979) each appear once in the New Talent category, while Trower's *Bridge of Sighs* (1974) and Dire Straits' debut album (1979) each win Best Guitar LP.[22]

It is also worth noting that some of the most successful guitarists in these polls were not widely known rock stars by fans in general; this suggests that *GP* readers were privileging technical skill and artistic commitment over commercial success in their voting. While Clapton, Page, and Van Halen were all guitar heroes and rock stars, for instance, Steve Howe and Steve Morse were known mostly to fans of Yes and the Dixie Dregs, respectively. Like Howe, Morse would go on to win the Best Overall category for a fifth consecutive year in 1986, entering the Gallery of Greats. Though Morse would later join Deep Purple in 1994, touring the world and recording several albums with the band over twenty-eight years, original guitarist Ritchie Blackmore is still better known among general Deep Purple fans, perhaps due in large part to the iconic album status of *Machine Head* (1972) and Blackmore's subsequent solo career, and in spite of the high regard in which Morse continues to be held within the rock guitar world. Howe has continued to record and tour with Yes and as a solo artist in the decades since these polls, while Martin has offered two Steve Howe signature models of acoustic guitar and Gibson one electric model.[23] Howe's iconic popularity among guitarists has continued despite his moderate (at best) commercial success since the 1980s.

Also indicative of the distinctive values of the *GP* Readers' Polls was the attention paid to Les Paul. By the time of these polls, Paul held iconic standing within the guitar community. Although his greatest commercial success had been in the 1950s, Paul took first place in the Jazz category in 1972 and won the Pop category two years running in 1978–1979. Paul's success in the late 1970s comes as a result, at least in part, of the 1976 album *Chester and Lester*, recorded with Chet Atkins, who had won the Country category in the first five years of the *GP* Polls and entered the Gallery of Greats. If there was one album recorded during the 1970s that seems to have been meant specifically for the *GP* readership, this was it.[24] All of this reinforces the idea that the guitar-playing community diverged in important ways from the larger rock and pop fan community.[25]

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Low-Profile Masters of Many Styles: The Studio Guitarist as Hero

The idea that the heroes of the guitar-playing community are not always those of the general fan is further reinforced by the rise of interest during the 1970s in the studio guitarist (also referred to as "session guitarist"). Over the last several years, documentary films have focused on the session musicians at Motown (The Funk Brothers) and in Los Angeles (The Wrecking Crew).[26] The Stax studio band (Booker T. and the MGs), based in Memphis, has also become well known. In fact, there were cadres of session musicians in New York, London, and wherever commercial recording was done—musicians who played uncredited on thousands of hit records going back to the decades well before rock and roll. In the second half of the 1970s, *GP* readers became increasingly aware of studio guitarists such as Lee Ritenour and Larry Carlton, both of whom brought a jazz-rock element to recordings by a variety of artists, most especially Steely Dan. The typical studio guitarist was a consummate professional: they could solo and accompany in any style on the spot, they could read music fluently, they could frequently double on other string instruments, and they could dial in the right sound on the guitar, amp, and pedals immediately. In the kind of sessions they played, time was money, and the studio guitarist had to be able to get it right quickly and in as few takes as possible. In terms of the hippie aesthetic, this was the height of professionalism: a stylistically diverse player who could solo with the ease and virtuosity of a jazz musician and read music like a seasoned orchestral player.

GP added a category for studio guitar to the Readers' Poll in 1977; Ritenour won the top spot in that first year and again in 1978, while Larry Carlton took it in 1979. During the next five years, Tommy Tedesco won this category, entering the Gallery of Greats after the fifth win in 1984. Tedesco had introduced a new monthly column in *GP* in January 1977. The first installment of Studio Log recounts a July 21, 1976, session for the television series *Emergency!*. Tedesco reports that he worked 4.5 hours, made $210.13, and played a Yamaha electric, a Danelectro 6-string, and a bass guitar. He includes a page from the actual part he used and provides a narrative of how the session went and some of the issues that arose.[27] Tedesco's column ran until August 1990, totaling well over a hundred installments, and though each column was short, regular readers gained a strong sense of the level of musicianship, professionalism, and flexibility such a job requires. If any category in the Readers' Poll distinguished the *GP* reader from the average fan, it was the Studio category: the overwhelming majority of rock fans had no idea who guitarists such as Tedesco were, while within the guitar community, they were heroes.[28]

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Heavy Metal, Guitar Heroes, and the Hippie Aesthetic

As the 1970s drew to a close, there were some in the guitar-playing community who found *GP*'s mostly serious and earnest approach not to their liking. According to the *Complete History of Guitar World*, New York publisher Stanley Harris realized that there was already

> a California-based journal that reported with dull but authoritative regularity on developments in blues, jazz, country, surf and, after a fashion, rock guitar. The fact that this magazine sounded and often looked like a church bulletin was entirely appropriate for a publication that was perceived by itself and its aging readership as "The Guitar Bible."

Recognizing "a situation ripe for a little competition," Harris decided to publish a guitar magazine for "rock guys who dress in tight black jeans and leather jackets and who care about what's happening in their world."[29] The first issue of *Guitar World* appeared in July 1980, and in spite of any concerns about trousers, the first issue had Johnny Winter on the cover and contained a tribute to Merle Travis along with a feature on jazz fingerstyle playing. That *Guitar World* defined itself in terms of *GP* reinforces the overwhelming role *GP* played in the guitar-playing community. But *Guitar World*'s ability to find its own readership, as well as the fact that a third magazine, *Guitar for the Practicing Musician*, could also compete effectively in the market after its launch in 1982 (on the strength of, in part, excellent transcriptions), indicated that things were changing. *Guitar World* did not begin a readers' poll until 1990, though a comparison of that poll with the *GP* one of the same year shows considerable overlap in winners: despite a broader range of attitudes and emphases among readers of guitar magazines, there was still significant agreement on guitar heroes. All the same, the guitar-playing community that had coalesced around *GP* in the 1970s was dividing in the 1980s, partly along the lines of musical style and partly according to the age of the readership.

In terms of rock history, the end of the 1970s witnessed a significant challenge to the hippie aesthetic in general and to virtuosity specifically: rock, punk, and then new wave rejected most aspects of the hippie aesthetic as bands took a back-to-basics approach, in many cases looking to rock's pre-*Sgt. Pepper* past for inspiration. For punk musicians, Steve Waksman writes, "Three-chord song structures were at the heart of the rock and roll form, so three chords were all that any guitarist should need to put songs together and play in a band."[30] Outside rock, disco challenged every dimension of the hippie aesthetic: it was music not so obviously focused on big ideas and musical skill, and tended to foreground a clear dance beat and strong song hooks. While conceptual elements of the hippie aesthetic would

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return via ambitious music videos by Michael Jackson, Eurythmics, Peter Gabriel, and others in the mid 1980s, and lyrics could still address big ideas —Bruce Springsteen's "Born in the USA" or The Police's "Synchronicity," for instance—the hippie aesthetic had mostly receded in popular music by the early 1980s. One style in which the hippie aesthetic remained strong, however—and in which the guitar hero endured—was heavy metal.

Robert Walser has provided a careful study of heavy metal up to the end of the 1980s; while Walser considers many dimensions of heavy metal music and culture, he devotes considerable attention to guitar virtuosity.[31] Walser sketches a lineage of guitarists beginning with Ritchie Blackmore in the early to mid 1970s, leading to Eddie Van Halen later in the 1970s, Randy Rhoads in the early 1980s, and Yngwie Malmsteen in the mid 1980s. According to Walser, metal guitarists modeled their approach to virtuosity on classical music, and he provides cultural, biographical, and music-analytical discussion to support his case.[32] While Walser does not focus on the issue of the guitar hero per se, nor place strong emphasis on the broader issues of musical style and development occurring outside metal and in rock more generally during the period he considers, his conclusions firmly reinforce the idea that heavy metal extends the hippie aesthetic into the 1980s and beyond. Indeed, by the mid 1980s, the virtuoso guitar solo, and "shredding," came to be strongly associated with heavy metal. Looking back at the *GP* Readers' Poll winners in Table 4.2 and thinking in terms of guitar heroes in the hive mind of the guitar community, Eddie Van Halen wins the Rock category five years in a row (1979–1983), and Yngwie Malmsteen wins it in 1985 (also taking Best Album for *Rising Force*), continuing to place in subsequent years. Ritchie Blackmore and Randy Rhoads are also among the twenty-six rock players who finish in the top spots during that 1970–1985 stretch. As Metallica's success unfolds in the second half of the 1980s and into the 1990s, Kirk Hammett wins in the Metal category in 1989 and 1991–1994, earning him a place in the Gallery of Greats. In the Rock category, Steve Vai (1986–1988, 1990, 1995) and Joe Satriani (1989, 1992–1994, 1996) alternate wins and enter the Gallery of Greats. All of these guitarists extend the lineage traced by Walser, further solidifying the place of the metal guitarist within the pantheon of guitar heroes.[33]

The Guitar Hero Today

This survey of the guitar hero in classic rock has relied heavily on the *GP* readers' polls, and secondarily on columns that appeared in that magazine. Other ways of tracing the development of the guitar hero empirically are

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certainly possible. Even staying within the guitar community and not extending to the larger community of fans in general, one could track the guitarists that appear on guitar magazine covers or who are featured in articles. This certainly produces a much larger pool of players; after all, no guitar magazine could afford to run features on only a couple of dozen guitarists over the course of decades.[34] One might also track transcriptions once they begin to appear in greater numbers in the 1980s, since these would provide a sense of which solos readers might most admire. Moving outside the guitar-playing community, one might consult polls that have appeared in music magazines in general, even including both readers' polls and critics' polls. In fact, a recent study compiles data from top ten lists of greatest guitarists drawn from the internet; the authors used the search term "best guitarists in the world" in a Google search (conducted in Australia in 2019) and then took the first ten lists that came up.[35] This methodology produced some familiar magazine websites—*Guitar World* and *Rolling Stone*, for instance—but also sites that might be less familiar to guitarists or even music fans. The authors took only the top ten names in each list and then combined the results, providing an overall ranking. While one might arrive at different results doing a search on a different term, at a different time, or from a different place, the results of this approach nonetheless contain some familiar names: the top four places go to Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton, and Eddie Van Halen, and then to Robert Johnson, B.B. King, Stevie Ray Vaughan, Chuck Berry, Keith Richards, and David Gilmour.

In the abstract for this meta-analysis of guitar heroes, the authors summarize the results: "Findings indicate an Anglo-American male dominance at the top of the global guitar industry, a mono-genre focus in the discourse, and an aging demographic of the guitar hero."[36] The first two of these findings, male dominance and focus on rock and blues, are partly consistent with the *GP* polls we have considered here: although those polls were clearly male-dominated, they did range across styles, even if Best Overall tended to go to rockers. The third of these findings is revealing: consider that the last *GP* Readers' Poll (1996) appeared in the February 1997 issue, more than twenty years before this meta-analysis was conducted. In this twenty-seventh annual *GP* poll, Eric Clapton won the Best Overall category (Eddie Van Halen took third). In fact, Clapton had won in that category the previous year (1995), as well as in the Blues category. But he was not the only oldster to make a triumphant return: Jimmy Page tied Joe Satriani to top the Rock category. And if we consider those pictures from GC in this light, they certainly represent an "aging demographic"; only Miguel Rascón is not a boomer.[37] Writing in 2003, Waksman observed that "rock guitar has assumed an almost 'traditionalist' aura for many audiences and musicians, encased in a nostalgia for

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past forms that in previous eras was reserved for more folk-based styles of expression."[38] The guitar hero developed in the era of classic rock along with the hippie aesthetic and the expanding communities of aspiring guitarists. To walk into a guitar store today is to step into a tradition that—perhaps proudly—goes back several decades. And while young players still take lessons at local music stores, guitar instruction has spread to the internet. In the years since YouTube's debut in 2005, for instance, guitarists have been able to access free video lessons from their phones, tablets, or laptops. Many of these instructional videos are aimed at beginners and players of modest skill (and sometimes the instructors are also of modest skill). But many YouTube videos are also meant for accomplished guitarists, featuring experienced players teaching complicated parts, riffs, solos, and more, and across a wide range of styles. It seems the path to guitar virtuosity, at least in some ways, has never been more widely available and accessible. We could be heroes . . .

Notes

1. For an account of the nationwide rise of Guitar Center, Sam Ash, and Mars music stores in the 1990s, see "The Big Box Comes to Music," Forbes (March 9, 1998), www.forbes.com/forbes/1998/0309/6105198a.html?sh=4437cd533628 (accessed June 30, 2023). As of current writing, Guitar Center has 304 locations across the United States.
2. For a fuller discussion of Paul's career and music, see Steve Waksman's "Pure Tones and Solid Bodies: Les Paul's New Sound," in *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1999), pp. 36–74.
3. Steve Waksman provides a more detailed survey of guitarists of this era in his "The Turn to Noise: Rock Guitar from the 1950s to the 1970s," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Guitar*, edited by Victor Anand Coehlo (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 109–121.
4. See my college textbook *What's That Sound? An Introduction to Rock and Its History* (W.W. Norton and Co., 2006), pp. 306–307 especially for the use of the hippie aesthetic, to pull together a wide range of styles during the 1966–1980 period. I explore this idea in greater detail in my "The Hippie Aesthetic: Cultural Positioning and Musical Ambition in Early Progressive Rock," in *Composition and Experimentation in British Rock 1966–1976*, special issue of *Philomusica Online* (2007), reprinted in *The Ashgate Library of Essays on Popular Music: Rock*, edited by Mark Spicer (Ashgate, 2012), pp. 65–75. The following discussion summarizes these sources.
5. At this same time, ambitious rock music was separating itself from hook-oriented pop, causing what I have termed an AM-FM split in the United States. Songs on the AM band tended to emphasize singles that overwhelmingly relied on vocals, catchy melodies, and infectious lyrics. Music on the FM dial became increasingly album-oriented, with individual tracks of often longer length and with more focus on instrumental playing. Generally, AM singles appealed to pre-teens and younger teenagers while FM tracks appealed to older teenagers and college-aged listeners. See my *What's That Sound?*, pp. 295–298.
6. For accounts of Clapton's career during these years, see Eric Clapton, *Clapton: The Autobiography* (Broadway Books, 2007) and Paul Scott, *Motherless Child: The Definitive Biography of Eric Clapton* (Headline, 2015).
7. For accounts of Hendrix's career during these years, see Charles R. Cross, *Room Full of Mirrors: A Biography of Jimi Hendrix* (Hyperion, 2005) and John McDermott with Eddie Kramer, *Hendrix: Setting the Record Straight* (Warner Books, 1992).
8. Both Cross and McDermott relate the story of Hendrix's desire to meet Clapton; see Cross, *Room Full of Mirrors*, p. 152, and McDermott, *Hendrix*, p. 12. Clapton's sanguine account of the first meeting with Hendrix in his autobiography differs somewhat in tone from the one provided

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by Scott, who reports that Clapton was markedly panicked by Hendrix's playing. Scott quotes Clapton: "He got up and played two songs and I knew it was all over in terms of guitar heroes." Clapton himself admits, though in less dynamic terms : "I remember thinking here was a force to be reckoned with. It scared me, because he was clearly going to be a big star." See Clapton, *The Autobiography*, p. 80, and Scott, *Motherless Child*, pp. 80–81.

9. For precise dates for the recording of individual tracks, see Marc Roberty, *Eric Clapton: The Complete Recording Sessions, 1963–1992* (St. Martin's Press, 1993) and John McDermott with Billy Cox and Eddie Kramer, *Jimi Hendrix Sessions: The Complete Studio Recording Sessions, 1963–1970* (Little, Brown and Company, 1995).
10. The tracks included in the UK and US versions of these debut albums differ, as the British labels mostly did not include any songs released as singles on albums, while American labels tended to include singles on albums. CD and digital versions of these albums in the years since include all songs from both US and UK editions.
11. In addition to Winwood's guest appearance on this track, Jack Cassady of Jefferson Airplane stands in for Noel Redding on bass.
12. Dean Alger offers a fourth sense of the term, which he argues "refers to a genuinely *virtuoso* guitarist who had very wide impact, and impact that *lasted*" (emphasis in original). See his *The Original Guitar Hero: and the Power of Music: The Legendary Lonnie Johnson, Music, and Civil Rights* (University of North Texas Press, 2014), p. 337. Alger offers this definition in the course of defending his claim for Johnson's standing as the original guitar hero against a claim in support of Nick Lucas for that distinction made in correspondence with Jas Obrecht. The emphasis on historical impact, while useful to Alger in this context, is not particularly useful for our purposes here.
13. *Rolling Stone* magazine often offers critics' polls, which might seem to be more objective, while readers' polls solicit votes from readers and could thus be considered—at least to some degree—popularity contests.
14. The first *DownBeat* Readers' Poll appeared in 1936 and remains active. Results for the 1938–1970 period can be found at https://rateyourmusic.com/list/Maccycor/down-beat-readers-poll-results-1938-1970 (accessed June 30, 2023).
15. In founding a magazine specifically for a guitar community, original *Guitar Player* publisher Bud Eastman was (perhaps unknowingly) following a practice that had been established in the United States by *Guitar Review* in late 1946, a periodical published by the Society of the Classic Guitar in New York. The original guitar magazine may be *The Giulianiad*, published in London and running from 1833 to 1835. See Thomas F. Heck, *Mauro Giuliani: Virtuoso Guitarist and Composer* (Editions Orphée, 1995), pp. 133–138.
16. Brad Tolinski and Alan di Perna, *Play It Loud: An Epic History of the Style, Sound, & Revolution of the Electric Guitar* (Doubleday, 2016), pp. 233–234.
17. Steve Lukather, "Foreword," in *Guitar Player Presents Guitar Heroes of the 1970s*, edited by Michael Molenda (Backbeat Books, 2011), p. viii.
18. Joe Satriani, "Foreword," in *Guitar Player: The Inside Story of the First Two Decades of the Most Successful Guitar Magazine Ever*, edited by Jim Crockett and Dara Crockett (Backbeat Books, 2015), p. ix.
19. Jim Crockett joined the editorial staff at *GP* in 1970 and led the magazine in various capacities for almost twenty years. For his account of *GP*'s approach and history, see his "The Glory Years" in Crockett and Crockett, *Guitar Player*, pp. 1–10. It is perhaps particularly noteworthy that *GP* would accept no nonmusic advertising (p. 4).
20. For the full chart listing all winners in all categories during the 1970–1985 period, see *Guitar Player* 19/12 (December 1985), pp. 56–57.
21. John Tobler 's *Guitar Heroes* (St. Martin's Press, 1978) provides an interesting contemporaneous comparison. Tobler includes thirty-two guitarists, divided up into three categories: pioneers, superstars, and specialists. His collection overlaps somewhat with the *GP* polls, but also includes many guitarists not included in the forty names cited here.
22. It is also worth noting that among these more than forty guitarists from the 1970–1985 polls, Bonnie Raitt is the only woman, though she did place in four consecutive polls (1977–1980). Raitt would go on to take first place for five consecutive years in the Slide category (1990–1994), entering the Gallery of Greats. In addition, Liona Boyd placed in the Classical category for five years (1980–1984) and took first in 1985–1988; after placing in the top three in 1989–1992, she finally notched her fifth win and a spot in the Gallery of Greats in 1993. That year Sharon

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Isbin placed in the Classical category, placing again in 1994–1995 before taking the top spot in 1996. Maybelle Carter was awarded the Lifetime Achievement Award in 1986, which also put her in the Gallery of Greats. See the discussion later in this chapter, however, regarding male dominance in guitar polls. See also Chapter 12 by Sue Foley and Chapter 13 by Mashadi Matabane, where the challenges faced by women guitarists in gaining recognition for their efforts are addressed in detail.

23. Steve Waksman writes that "an endorsement deal brings not only added income, but certification that one has earned the reputation and the notoriety to serve as an example to others. Perhaps the ultimate prestige in this regard is the 'signature' guitar." See Waksman, "Into the Arena: Edward Van Halen and the Cultural Contradictions of the Guitar Hero," in *Guitar Cultures*, edited by Andy Bennett and Kevin Dawe (Berg, 2001), p. 125.
24. A second instance would be a double album released by *GP* in 1977 that featured tracks by a collection of mostly jazz guitarists who would have been very familiar to its readers (B.B. King, Joe Pass, Barney Kessel, Lee Ritenour, and others). See Various Artists, *Guitar Player* (MCA Records MCA2-6002, 1977).
25. It may also be worth noting that the *GP* readership differed somewhat from the editors of *GP* itself. While a fuller consideration of this is beyond the scope of this chapter, one could easily track the various ways in which the editors began to insert their own tastes into the poll each year. Features were added such as listing recommended recordings and conferring lifetime achievement awards.
26. See *Standing in the Shadows of Motown*, directed by Paul Justman (Artisan Entertainment, 2002) and *The Wrecking Crew*, directed by Danny Tedesco (Magnolia Pictures, 2015).
27. Tommy Tedesco, "Studio Log," *Guitar Player* 11/1 (January 1977), p. 89. The editorial blurb introducing the first column begins: "Though the name Tommy Tedesco may not be a household term to the average record buyer, it means much more than that to virtually every record-producer and arranger in Los Angeles. Since 1956 Tommy has been in the center of the L.A. studio clan," and goes on to promise "an inside look at the world of the select circle of that specialized professional known as 'the session man'" (p. 89).
28. In the issue containing the first Studio Log, other columns by Stanley Clarke (bass), Howard Roberts (jazz), Stefan Grossman (acoustic), Jerry Hahn (jazz), Bob Baxter (easy guitar), Jimmy Stewart (jazz), Rusty Young (steel guitar), and Larry Coryell (jazz) appear. Instructional content went back to the earliest days of *GP*, and these columns further reinforce the fact that this was a magazine for aspiring, serious-minded guitarists.
29. *The Complete History of Guitar World: 30 Years of Music, Magic & Six-String Mayhem*, edited by Jeff Kitts (Backbeat Books, 2010), p. xiii.
30. Steve Waksman, "Contesting Virtuosity: Rock Guitar Since 1976," in Coehlo, Cambridge Companion to the Guitar, p. 122. See also my "Pangs of History in Late 1970s Rock," in *Analyzing Popular Music*, edited by Allan Moore (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 173–195.
31. See Robert Walser, "Eruptions: Heavy Metal Appropriations of Classical Music Virtuosity," in *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Wesleyan University Press, 1993), pp. 57–107. See also Waksman, "Into the Arena."
32. Walser provides detailed musical analysis and transcriptions of the following guitar solos: Blackmore, "Highway Star" (1972); Van Halen, "Eruption" (1978); Rhodes, "Mr Crowley" (1981) and "Suicide Solution" (1981); and Malmsteen, "Black Star" (1988).
33. Waksman provides a more general survey that extends Walser's model to include Steve Vai, Joe Satriani, Vernon Reid, and Jennifer Batten, among others. See Waksman, "Contesting Virtuosity," pp. 124–129.
34. See, for instance, *100 Guitar Heroes*, edited by Chris Douse (Future Publishing, 2009) and Rusty Cutchin, Hugh Fielder, Mike Gent, Michael Mueller and Dave Simons, *The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Guitar Heroes* (Flame Tree Publishing, 2008), which provides entries for 181 guitarists. See also Molenda, *Guitar Heroes*, which lists forty players from the 1970s, and its companion volume, *Guitar Player Presents 50 Unsung Heroes of the Guitar*, edited by Michael Molenda (Back Beat, 2011), which brings the total to ninety. By 1987, *GP* had featured "1500 artists and key industry personnel." See Crockett and Crockett, "The Glory Years," p. 9.
35. Daniel Lee, Bill Baker, and Nick Haywood, "The Best Guitar Player in the World: A Meta-Analysis of Top-Tens," online publication, www.researchgate.net/publication/331062351_

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36. Lee et al., "The Best Guitar Player," p. 2.
37. For a more detailed consideration of the role of the guitar in baby-boomer culture, see John Ryan and Richard A. Peterson, "The Guitar as Artifact and Icon: Identity Formation in the Babyboom Generation," in Bennett and Dawe, Guitar Cultures, pp. 177–134.
38. Waksman, "Contesting Virtuosity," p. 131.

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