

5 They Don't Make 'Em Like They Used To: Electric Guitar Design 1950–2022

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Introduction

Guitar shop showrooms are museums of design. As visitors walk by rows of instruments sitting on stands or hanging on walls, they encounter a tactile history of popular music spanning from the mid twentieth century to the present day. Often, these historical experiences are deliberately curated—prescribed by corporate merchandising plans that sort certain displays according to brand (e.g. Fender), time period (e.g. vintage), or genre (e.g. metal guitars). Within this ecosystem, certain designs are considered more valuable than others. On a typical Fender wall, American Original Stratocasters—instruments that faithfully emulate 1950s or 1960s designs—occupy impressive, top-shelf spaces with price tags that soar above the budget Squier instruments toward the bottom. Similarly, companies strategically choose designs for entry-level instruments that appeal to young musicians according to the prevailing music preferences of the year. In short, the electric guitar has an elastic history that is continuously iterated and reinforced through marketplace value. This should not be surprising, as it has always been a mass-produced instrument. Design changes are responsive to consumer demand, and those who attune to the instrument's history often frame its story as a celebration of market ingenuity.

The precarious capitalism of the musical instrument market has steered manufacturers toward design decisions that maintain a meticulous balance between forward-thinking engineering and nostalgic reverence for legacy products. On the one hand, manufacturers are expected to innovate and create instruments that can potentially break through staid markets. On the other hand, these same companies continuously risk alienating a large part of their audience, whose attraction to the electric guitar is based on the widespread opinion that classic designs need no improvement. Often, the industrial success of a new guitar design hinges upon the question of how much innovation is acceptable to guitar buyers.

In this chapter, I will review a few key moments in twentieth- and twenty-first-century electric guitar design that demonstrate these tensions.

I will begin by investigating the enduring legacy of mid twentieth-century guitar models such as the Gibson Les Paul and the Fender Stratocaster. These instruments—among others perfected in the 1950s and 1960s—have been key anchor points for electric guitar design since their introduction. Next, I will review various attempts by electric guitar manufacturers in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to capitalize on trends in musical style (e.g. heavy metal) and technology (e.g. digital sound processing) in order to breathe new life into their product lines. Finally, I will assess the state of electric guitar design in the present day, arguing that many of the most successful models appeal to guitar buyers by deftly balancing historical consciousness with technological innovation.

Mid Century Guitars of the Future

In the mid twentieth century, the electric guitar was the instrument of the future. Its design was imbued with a celebratory spirit of the instrument's inventiveness. While instrument electrification dates back to the 1920s, the first commercially successful solid-body electric guitar is generally considered to be the Rickenbacker Model A-22 Electro Hawaiian Guitar, nicknamed the “Frying Pan,” produced between 1932 and 1939. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, luthiers at Rickenbacker, Fender, and Epiphone experimented with different electric guitar designs that were primarily marketed for jazz musicians. As a result, most of these instruments resembled the popular acoustic archtops used in the swing era but with the addition of either a piezo-electric or single-coil magnetic pickup.

The early 1950s was a prolific period of innovation in electric guitar production. Although many luthiers and inventors contributed to the development of the solid-body electric guitar, the first hits were undoubtedly the Fender Telecaster and the Gibson Les Paul.¹ Released in 1951 and 1952 respectively, these instruments proved to the industry that solid-body electric guitars were a profitable alternative to the electrified hollow-body models that dominated catalogs in the previous decade. Both instruments also represented radical shifts in style. With their curvaceous bodies and modular parts, the guitars visually rejected consumer expectations of what a guitar should look like. While it was not until the rock 'n' roll craze of the mid to late 1950s that these instruments would come to dominate the industry, they quickly became popular among seasoned players and inspired a series of further innovations in guitar style among manufacturers.

The solid-body electric guitar soon became an important staple of musical instrument manufacturers' catalogs. Instruments such as the

Gretsch Duo Jet, the Fender Stratocaster, and the Gibson Flying V came to market, boasting their unique innovations and radical styles. The rapidity with which these new designs proliferated in the 1950s can be compared to another product that experienced a similar level of growth during the mid-century: the automobile. It is true, of course, that the surge in popularity in the automobile industry is partially due to factors well outside the electric guitar industry's purview. Suburbanization and the growth of the US highway system greatly affected the needs and desires of the American middle class. However, there are both stylistic and ideological similarities between car and guitar design during this era that have had lasting effects on both markets.

Some comparisons between guitar and automobile design are quite direct. Fender's custom colors are based on Dupont's Duco automotive lacquer line, which furnished many prominent American automobile manufacturers.² For instance, the now classic Fender color "Lake Placid Blue" can be found on early 1950s Cadillacs, while "Fiesta Red" is most often associated with mid-century Fords. These colors are still used in Fender's modern instruments. In the 1960s, Fender released instruments named after popular automobile models such as the Jaguar and the Mustang, furthering the consumer's psychological connection. Gibson's 1963 offset body model, the Firebird, was designed by former Chrysler designer Ray Dietrich. The instrument was initially named after the Pontiac Thunderbird.³ In 1967, Pontiac renamed their Thunderbirds as Firebirds, and both products are frequently linked in terms of their shared name and radical concept.

Another design comparison between mid-century guitars and cars can be found in the ideological underpinnings of 1950s and 1960s American consumerism. Sociologist David Gartman has written extensively on the history of Americans' social obsession with car culture. He connects the dazzling designs of mid-century concept cars—dubbed "dream machines"—with Cold War-era social anxieties, positing that the automobile industry's reliance on evocations of military and aerospace technology offered consumers a sense of comfort in the wake of global ideological struggle. Gartman writes, "American leaders ensured people that superior missiles would guarantee the triumph of Americanism against communism, and the visual crossbreeding of this technology with consumer goods ensured them that their private lives were similarly superior."⁴

The Fender Stratocaster is a particularly salient example of the electric guitar's connection to space-age futurism and military technology. Debuting in 1954, the Stratocaster looked remarkably different from nearly every other solid-body guitar on the market. According to Leo Fender, the instrument's design choices were in response to interviews with many

California musicians who complained about wielding bulky electric instruments such as Gibson's popular ES series. The Stratocaster's small, curvaceous, double-winged body evokes a sense of aerodynamism and control. Even the instrument's name seems to have been deliberately chosen to evoke a stratospheric, jet-setting futurism. During the 1950s, the instrument was more commonly marketed according to its performance and harmonic richness, but by the 1960s and 1970s, advertisements for the Stratocaster and its related little brother, the Jaguar, celebrated them as the "world's favorite space machines."⁵ Other companies followed the Stratocaster's lead by directly connecting their instruments' design to aerospace technology. The Airline DLX and the Gretsch Duo Jet feature sleek bodies and rivet-like features that conjure images of fighter jets. In 1958, Gibson's Flying V model was first produced and advertised in the company's catalog as the "design of the future" and was frequently pictured in advertisements soaring through the clouds.⁶

Within this framework, electric guitar manufacturers' push to continuously produce new solid-body designs speaks to larger trends of mid-century American consumerism that valued radical innovation as a representative trait of capitalist supremacy. The continuous stream of new guitar models that were more and more removed from the hollow-body instruments of the previous generation solidified the instrument's place as a symbol of American ingenuity and progress.

There is a more generous interpretation of the electric guitar's mid-century design that celebrates the newfound power of the middle class in mid-century American capitalism, rather than focusing on consumers' deep-seated anxieties. André Millard hails the instrument as emblematic of the "mass-market, middle-class values" of the mid twentieth century.⁷ He describes the electric guitar as a democratic instrument, claiming that its accessibility and association with popular music directly represented the shift in economic power toward the middle class.⁸ Similar to automobiles, economic liberalization enabled manufacturers to price dream instruments within reach of middle-class musicians.

Price consciousness has been a core priority of electric guitar marketing since mass-produced instruments were introduced to the market in the late 1930s. For instance, Gibson's "Electric Spanish" line of guitars—which are still very popular today—highlight their within-reach pricing as part of each model's name. The ES-150, for instance, originally sold for about \$150 when it was released in 1936.⁹ This price, which included an amplifier and an instrument cable, was still a tidy sum for most musicians—roughly double what an acoustic Martin guitar would have cost in the same year. However, it was comparatively priced to brass instruments of the same period, with which it was initially competing. As the market grew,

manufacturers often created different models specifically to reach consumers looking for an instrument at a lower price point. The Fender Musicmaster (released in 1956) and the Gibson Les Paul Jr. (released in 1954) were introduced as less expensive alternatives to the Stratocaster and the Les Paul. Importantly, most design elements stayed the same with the cheaper models, especially in terms of body shape and headstock style. In short, the electric guitar has always been an instrument whose design history is directly tied to mass-market pressures of conspicuous consumption.

Guitar manufacturers' fervor for releasing splashy new models began to quell as the industry grew. In essence, the creative dust from the electric guitar's initial explosion into the marketplace began to settle as manufacturers turned their competitive attention to global expansion and overall profitability. At the same time, a wave of corporate consolidation and mergers heightened the economic stakes of design innovation. In the 1970s and 1980s, both Fender and Gibson were notably acquired by CBS and Norlin, respectively. Later, they would embark on a slew of their own acquisitions. Fender now owns Jackson, Charvel, Gretsch, Squier, and EVH. Not to be outdone, Gibson acquired Epiphone, Mesa Boogie, Tobias, and Steinberger. Both companies' design strategies became stratified toward niche markets through their subsidiaries.

The electric guitar industry has never fully set aside the spirit of mid-century capitalist potential. As we will see, guitar manufacturers still consistently draw upon the legacy of their early-generation models. In fact, mid-century guitar designs have become so firmly entrenched in the social landscape of guitar culture that makers have often struggled to break out of their long shadow. To continue to grow their marketplace, guitar designers are in constant conversation with the past.

Design Monopoly

Since the mid-century boom of solid-body electric guitar design, three body shapes have dominated the industry: the Fender Telecaster, the Fender Stratocaster, and the Gibson Les Paul. Design historian Paul Atkinson calls these three body types "the Holy Trinity," saying that "almost every guitar manufacturer of any scale has derivative versions of one or more of these three basic guitar shapes in its catalogue."¹⁰ Indeed, while browsing a musical instrument shop, there are a striking amount of guitars that either pay homage to or look like outright copies of these three shapes, all of which have remained fundamentally unchanged since they were brought to market in the early 1950s. The ubiquity of these body

shapes in any guitar shop calls attention to any guitar that is not a Telecaster, Stratocaster, or Les Paul as distinctly different.

In particular, the Les Paul remains a profound design touchstone for rock music in terms of style and affect, even as the instrument nears its seventieth birthday. One contemporary example where this is made especially clear can be found in the architectural design of the “Guitar Hotel,” a 140,000-square-foot resort in Seminole, Florida. Completed in 2019, the property’s main building is 450 feet tall and built in the shape of the Les Paul’s signature body design.¹¹ Spotlights stream from the building’s roof, creating the illusion of strings that puncture the sky. Entering the hotel is akin to entering the temple of rock itself, embodied by the majestic Gibson Les Paul.

The Les Paul body design is such a powerful reference point for the guitar market that it has instigated landmark legal battles in US trademark, patent, and copyright law. In 1977, Gibson’s parent company Norlin initiated legal action against the US distributors of Ibanez guitars for patent infringement, arguing specifically that Ibanez’s headstocks bore too strong a resemblance to the Les Paul. This case was settled out of court for an undisclosed amount, but it began a series of legal actions that Gibson continues to take in fierce protection of their guitar’s design as proprietary intellectual property.¹²

Perhaps the most dramatic exchange involving Gibson’s attempt to maintain sole rights to the Les Paul’s body shape came in 1997 when Gibson filed charges against Maryland-based manufacturer Paul Reed Smith. In comparison to earlier action, Gibson was asserting that the entire design of the body infringed upon a 1987 trademark image that roughly depicts a single-cut guitar body. The dramatic appeals process of this case demonstrates the extent to which the Les Paul shape has influenced the guitar market on the whole. At first, the case fell in Gibson’s favor, and PRS was ordered to immediately cease producing guitars that bore a resemblance to the Les Paul. Later, the United States Court of Federal Appeals Sixth Circuit found that Gibson’s trademark could not sufficiently cover the instrument itself. Gibson had argued in their previous case that “On a distant stage, a smoky bar, wannabe musicians see their heroes playing a guitar that they want.” The appellate court dissented, stating that “If a budding musician sees an individual he or she admires playing a PRS guitar, but believes it to be a Gibson guitar, the logical result would be that the budding musician would go out and purchase a Gibson guitar. Gibson is helped, rather than harmed, by any such confusion.”¹³

Gibson’s attempt and failure to legally protect their Les Paul design reveals two important priorities among guitar manufacturers. First, the design of the guitar itself is considered to be of utmost value. Gibson’s

complaint was focused more on protecting the recognizability of the instrument's shape than any infringements on proprietary individual components or construction techniques. Second, their litigious protection of the Les Paul shape shows that even forty years after its release, the Les Paul was still an indispensable cornerstone of their business. Over its history, Gibson had done little to alter its original design. The Les Paul had been perfected and was synonymous with the business's reputation.

What are electric guitar designers to do in an industrial ecosystem where it is so widely accepted that the instrument was perfected years ago? This is a question that has consistently troubled producers who struggle to grow. It is not a question unique to the guitar industry—manufacturers of mattresses or coffee machines are constantly striving to convince consumers that their products' new features are worthy of discarding perfectly workable older models. However, the electric guitar industry has been met with an interesting amount of discord when it attempts to introduce new designs or features. It is perhaps for this reason that the "holy trinity" remains as sacrosanct as ever in the twenty-first century.

Individuality and Iconoclasm

There have been various attempts to update electric guitar design in order to incorporate technology that might improve instrument performance. Many of these designs stem from the industry's response to musicians' interest in modifying their personal instruments. Steve Waksman locates a period of intensity surrounding DIY (do-it-yourself) guitar production in Southern California during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Discussing Eddie Van Halen in particular, Waksman contextualizes his reputation for being a master tinkerer within a gendered landscape of consumption. He argues that Van Halen's habit of constructing "Frankenstrats" by assembling guitars from parts pillaged from other instruments reveals "an impulse to position the male self as producer rather than consumer."¹⁴ In doing so, Van Halen acquired a reputation for mastery over the instrument through both his virtuosity as a player and a designer. Van Halen's Frankenstrat remains a touchstone in the history of electric guitar design, inspiring corporate trends that paradoxically capitalize on guitarists' aversion to placid consumption through mechanisms of mass production. This presents an interesting problem: how can a guitar manufacturer sell individuality off the factory line?

Some of the most successful guitar manufacturers of the 1970s and 1980s attended to these niches of individuality by offering designs that

were both endlessly customizable and markedly different from the sea of Gibsons and Fenders that were commonly found on stage. This period of guitar design is inextricably tied to the rise of heavy metal as a popular genre, particularly among rock guitarists who were attuned to innovations in instrumental technique. In regard to the 1980s, Robert Walser writes that guitar magazines saw heavy metal as “the main site of technical innovation and expansion.”¹⁵ It is no surprise that the electric guitar industry followed suit and produced guitars that courted this market of heavy metal aficionados.

New styles by companies such as Jackson, B.C. Rich, and Kramer featured sharper angles, offset body shapes, and bolder headstock designs that became very popular among heavy metal guitarists in the name of creating high-performance machines to match their fast, heavy playing. These guitars also highlighted the iconoclastic identity of heavy metal players for whom existing popular models did not offer enough freedom of expression, both in terms of musical and visual style. Jackson Guitars, for instance, was founded in 1980 when Ozzy Osbourne’s guitarist Randy Rhoads drew his ideal instrument on a napkin.¹⁶ The resulting instrument—dubbed the “Concorde” in reference to the newly christened airliner—was constructed with a hyper-exaggerated offset that arguably promoted Rhoads’ virtuosity by appearing difficult to play. Similarly, Steve Vai’s partnership with Ibanez introduced the JEM series in 1987, which prominently includes an immediately recognizable handhold cutout in the upper bout. To this day, these instruments are often grouped together on guitar shop walls in a bricolage section. They serve as a visual reminder of the iconoclastic flamboyance of heavy metal in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in their defiant juxtaposition to the rather uniform-looking Fender and Gibson areas of the store.

The burgeoning aftermarket industry of electric guitar accessories, such as tremolo systems, pickups, and tools for modifying factory-line guitars, also exploded in the 1980s. Increasingly, design decisions became modular, giving consumers the opportunity to express their individuality through either altering their instruments themselves or choosing from a catalog of guitars assembled from an ever-lengthening list of custom add-ons. No longer would guitarists have to be satisfied with the choices presented to them by the major manufacturers. Even as heavy metal’s baroque style fell out of fashion, electric guitar manufacturers focused on delivering highly customizable instruments to market. However, the undergirding ethos of individualistic design shifted from a performance of virtuosity to a performance of taste and prestige.

In 1987, Fender opened its “custom shop,” a factory dedicated to bespoke instruments by acclaimed luthiers. It was not the first time that Fender had offered custom models—custom specifications and colors

could be ordered since the 1950s—but this outlet greatly expanded customers' ability to control minute production details. When ordering a Fender Custom Shop instrument, the consumer not only has the option to choose the type of tremolo system or pickups they desire, but they are also consulted on intricate details such as nut width, neck profile, and tone wood choices for each part of the instrument. However, the instruments come with staggering price tags, which are often three to four times more than an off-the-shelf Fender. Additionally, Fender offers “master-built” guitars, which are uniquely created by a roster of luthiers such as John English and Dennis Galuszga, who began their careers designing instruments for famous rock musicians. These are by far Fender's most expensive newly built models, costing in the tens of thousands of dollars, but offer a non-fungible prestige of joining the ranks of rock guitar legends.

Despite these eye-popping price tags, the Fender Custom Shop has been a commercial success, with wait-list times extending into years and Fender admitting that the Custom Shop delivers them “incremental higher margin business” as part of their filings for an ultimately failed initial public offering in 2012.¹⁷ Nowadays, nearly every major instrument manufacturer offers some kind of bespoke option. Richard Hoover, president of Santa Cruz Guitar Company, asserts that this is a natural progression in the arc of a serious guitarist, saying, “as players age, they gain appreciation. They hear the sound of a custom instrument . . . they develop a taste for the extraordinary, and nothing is ever the same after that.”¹⁸ According to Kathryn Marie Dudley, the early twenty-first century saw the cash value of vintage and custom guitars skyrocket, outpacing wine and art between 2000 and 2006. Dudley offers that the boom may have been partly “fueled by the spending habits of baby boomers entering their prime earning years.”¹⁹

Custom shop guitars offer consumers the individualistic pride of a tinkerer without having to make personal investments in acquiring woodworking skills or electrical knowledge. However, this typically all happens within the basic framework of historic guitar design. Custom shop guitars rarely offer buyers the option to seriously change the basic specifications of a Les Paul or a Telecaster. This allows the companies to balance their production requirements against consumer demand for personalized instruments. It also maintains the delicate balance between the old and the new that we see so consistently across many guitar manufacturers' design priorities.

There is another dimension to Waksman's discussion of gender and guitar tinkering that is inherent to custom shop instruments. Not only do these guitars perform masculinity by repositioning the consumer as producer, but also by inserting the consumer into the fabric of electric guitar history itself. Custom shop instruments offer buyers the chance to deeply

engage with their preferred brand and become an intimate part of constructing its design history. The continued success of major manufacturers' boutique lines through the present day is a testament to the power of that emotional bond. It is perhaps this yearning to be a part of the storied history of these brands that has presented obstacles to broader design changes.

The Perils of Over-Engineering

In the twenty-first century, the electric guitar industry has had a difficult time convincing buyers that the guitar should be improved. In the 2000s, manufacturers produced instruments that incorporated digital technology to enhance their models. In many examples, they were careful to balance the new with the old. For instance, in 2006, Gibson released the HDX Pro, a Les Paul-type guitar that incorporated a slew of newly engineered features. While the HDX Pro was equipped with “classic Gibson pickups for an incredible, traditional tone,” it also featured an ethernet connection, six individual pickups under the bridge with digitized preamps, and compatibility with music production software.²⁰ Perhaps to temper fears of straying too far from the Les Paul's iconic reputation, the first hundred guitars were personally signed by Les Paul himself, ostensibly bestowing his approval of this new direction. The guitars were only produced for two years before being discontinued.

The HDX Pro was not the only technologically hybridized model to experience market rejection in the early 2000s. The Gibson Firebird X was produced between 2011 and 2013, including a large proprietary digital pedalboard to control its many features. Between 2014 and 2016, Fender built Stratocasters that included “personality cards.” When proprietary chips are inserted into a slot on the back of the instrument, the pickups are automatically rewired to seven different custom settings based on popular modifications. In 2014, Ibanez released the RGKP6, which included a touch-sensitive Korg Kaoss Pad on the front of the body for modulation control. All of these guitars sold, but none of them achieved market permanence. It seems that the strategy of releasing technologically daring products that worked so well for other consumer markets at the time did not resonate particularly well with guitarists.

Perhaps the most infamously unsuccessful attempt to hybridize new technology with the electric guitar came in 2015 with Gibson's launch of the G-Force tuning system. The product is an electronic mechanism that replaced the headstock tuners and automatically tuned the instrument at the touch of a button. All the player had to do was strum the out-of-tune

guitar, and the G-Force tuner would detect which strings needed to be adjusted and turn the pegs. The product was introduced as an add-on item for custom guitars in 2007 but became a standard issue part on nearly all of Gibson's solid-body guitars in 2015.

I worked for a large instrument retailer in 2015 when these guitars hit the shelves. Gibson sent representatives to the store to instruct the staff on the G-Force system's benefits. The tuner worked most of the time, but the visit left the entire staff puzzled. Each Les Paul had a bulky, black box on the back of its headstock. A salesperson named Jon remarked, "How are we supposed to sell these? You have to charge a battery to tune your guitar!" He shrugged his head as he scrutinized the manual, muttering, "They don't make 'em like they used to."

It definitely seemed that most of our customers agreed with Jon. We sold so few 2015 Gibson guitars that, eventually, the same corporate representative returned with boxes filled with regular tuning pegs. As a team, we tore off each G-Force system, threw them in a box, and replaced them with manual tuners. Four years later, I stumbled on that same box gathering dust in a closet, an Icarian reminder of the perils of over-engineering the electric guitar.

Due to dismal sales of their 2015 instruments, Gibson's credit rating was sharply downgraded.²¹ It would be erroneous to suggest that the G-Force tuner fiasco was the sole catalyst to Gibson's business troubles, as the international credit agency Moody's also cited Gibson's massive debt and frequent senior leadership changes. Still, the risk they took in revamping their core product line dealt a severe blow. It was a move they never fully recovered from, and the company ultimately declared bankruptcy in 2018. In public statements released after their bankruptcy, Gibson's new CEO, J.C. Curleigh, stated that the company would focus on building quality instruments rather than exploring new directions, explicitly promising that the company would "return to its historic roots."²² In the words of my coworker Jon, Curleigh committed to "making 'em like they used to."

Not all attempts to bring new electric guitar designs to market have been so contentious. Two bright spots in the electric guitar industry's mission to generate consumer excitement through new designs have come in the popularity of signature artist models and rereleases of classic guitars. Connections between specific instruments and the artists who use them have been exploited by the industry since the electric guitar was introduced. For instance, Gretsch completely relied on their relationship with the artist Chet Atkins to facilitate their entry into the guitar space. According to Waksman, Atkins' reputation for "intense engagement with the guitar as a musical instrument and a technological device" inculcated

a sense of respect and quality within the guitar Gretsch sold under his name.²³ Artists continue to lend credibility to manufacturers through exclusive endorsements and partnerships in guitar design. For instance, Paul Reed Smith features the Santana line and the John Mayer line, while Fender produces guitars bearing the names of Eric Clapton and Stevie Ray Vaughan. These are mutually beneficial partnerships in terms of legacy preservation. Because the history of artist partnerships includes venerable names such as Atkins and Les Paul, sponsorship canonizes musicians within a small club of legendary instrumentalists whose legacies are not only inscribed on records but also on guitar headstocks.

Artist signature models can sometimes be a vessel for design improvements that might otherwise commercially fail in standard issue models. For instance, Fender's popular Eric Clapton series has a number of design differences from other Stratocasters. It features noiseless pickups, Clapton's signature on the headstock, and an overpowered tone control circuit that are rarely found on other Fender offerings. The fact that "Slowhand" himself uses this equipment engenders trust among consumers, and the Eric Clapton Stratocaster has been produced every year with frequent design changes since its introduction in 1988.

Other artist signature models have managed to successfully introduce alternatives to the standard body designs that dominate the market. Gretsch's Malcolm Young Signature guitar includes gaping holes in the body where pickups usually reside. Ernie Ball Music Man's St. Vincent series has a long and thin body shape that bears little resemblance to legacy models. All of these guitars continue to sell very well. Due to the massive popularity of their namesakes, these designs have largely avoided the death by obscurity that beset so many other experimental models. However, they are limited editions that only sprinkle guitar shop walls that are otherwise filled with tried-and-true designs.

Arguably the most successful trend in the contemporary electric guitar market is the reissuing of classic models across all price points. These guitars are often heralded for their meticulous attention to detail. There are some designs—such as can be found in Gibson's Custom Shop catalog—that are based on "laser-scanned dimensions" of historic guitars and use "chemically-recreated plastics" to match the exact type of nitrocellulose lacquer found on mid-century instruments.²⁴ Reissues are popular at lower price points as well. For instance, Fender's Squier Classic Vibe series includes budget Stratocaster designs that mimic the minute alterations the model experienced through the decades. For around \$450, buyers can choose between the Classic Vibe '50s or the Classic Vibe '60s, which each feature slightly different headstocks and color options according to the specifications of the instruments sold in each respective decade.

Gibson, Gretsch, and Rickenbacker have similar product lines, all of which frame guitar store walls as an uneven chronology of design.

Even when an instrument is not a reissue, many manufacturers draw upon the currency that vintage designs continue to hold. The 2022 Gibson SG Standard boasts a 1960s slim taper neck, referencing the specific neck profile Gibson used on all instruments in the 1960s. There is no doubt that in future years, the company will swap out features on their flagship lines with other historically informed specifications, promising years of new products that are assembled by recreating one or more parts of older guitars. In short, historical consciousness is not only ever-present in the production of nostalgic value, it is also ingrained into the vocabulary for discussing electric guitars in general.

Conclusion: The Continuous Rebirth of the Electric Guitar

When walking through a guitar shop, the plethora of instruments that offer an authentic vintage experience belies a fundamental tenet in electric guitar design: you must balance the new with the old. I argue that this sentiment exceeds vintage fetishization or elegiac associations between electric guitars and a golden age of music that has long passed. True, some writers have analyzed declining guitar sales within the context of a popularity battle among young musicians. In June 2017, *The Washington Post* published an article entitled “Why My Guitar Gently Weeps: The Slow, Secret Death of the Electric Six-String Guitar and Why it Matters.”²⁵ In the article, music writer Geoff Edgers describes the electric guitar industry as plagued by unsustainable growth and lowered demand, pinning most of the blame on the perceived lack of interest among the children of baby boomer rock fans. Responding to venerable Nashville guitar shop owner George Gruhn, Edgers writes:

When he opened his store 46 years ago, everyone wanted to be a guitar god, inspired by the men who roamed the concert stage, including Clapton, Jeff Beck, Jimi Hendrix, Carlos Santana, and Jimmy Page. Now those boomers are retiring, downsizing and adjusting to fixed incomes. They’re looking to shed, not add to, their collections, and the younger generation isn’t stepping in to replace them.²⁶

Edgers goes on to quote many famous ambassadors to the baby boomer rock tradition—from Gruhn to Paul McCartney—who bemoan the loss of the male guitar hero icon and link it to falling sales. “Now it’s more electronic music. Kids listen differently,” he quotes McCartney saying. “They don’t have guitar heroes like you and I did.”

Such eulogies of the electric guitar equate declining sales and corporate insecurity to a loss of the musical values represented by the baby boomer era “guitar hero” figure. Industrial statistics tell a different story. *Guitar World* published a summary of a 2017 study by IBISWorld that the guitar industry has actually “posted a 1.4% annual growth rate from 2012–2017—is expected to continue to grow until at least 2022.”²⁷ The National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) boasts similarly optimistic outlooks, admitting that the growth is not as expansive as in prior eras but still sustainable.²⁸ As of 2019, they report that the “fretted instrument” market rose by 5.57% and that it was the fourth-fastest growth category in the industry behind “‘effects,’ ‘electronic player pianos,’ and ‘other electronic products.’”²⁹ The “death of the electric guitar” has become a convenient rallying cry for musical instrument company executives seeking to deflect the blame for their companies’ declining sales away from overexpansion or misguided strategic focuses.

By critically examining the state of the musical instrument industry and its design trends, we see not a death but a persistent *rebirth* of the electric guitar. Manufacturers have found a relatively safe refuge in relying on their historical catalogs to deliver sales. Artist signature models and new inventions generate some excitement, but, in terms of industrial success, they still pale in comparison to guitars based on the iconic designs of the mid twentieth century.

Why does this work? What are the reasons that guitarist consumers return time and time again to revamped older models instead of embracing new designs? As I have stated, perhaps it is the prevailing notion that the electric guitar was perfected long ago. Perhaps it is the vestige of the electric guitar’s symbolization of Western capitalist supremacy and middle-class values. Perhaps Edgers or Dudley are correct—the end-users are simply aging and want to spend money on the guitars of their youth. Whatever the case may be, the electric guitar continues to move forward by looking backward, constantly reiterating its history and arguing for relevance.

I will conclude by discussing one of Fender’s newest product releases: the Parallel Universe series, which debuted at the NAMM show in 2017. Instruments in this line, such as the Strat-Tele Hybrid or the Jaguar Strat, combine key features of classic Fender models into a single piece. For instance, the Whiteguard Strat boasts the body of a Stratocaster, with the pickups and headstock of a 1951 Nocaster. According to Fender, the Parallel Universe line “celebrates the modular nature of Fender guitars, splicing together DNA from various Fender models to create off-the-wall hybrids.”³⁰

The Parallel Universe series wonderfully encapsulates the tensions between old and new designs that I have outlined in this chapter. With

images of time travel and futuristic genetics, Fender simultaneously positions itself as embodying both the sober historian and the radical vanguard. With these instrumental hybrids, guitarists are encouraged to relive the excitement of the electric guitar's future from the perspective of a historical moment when its future seemed exciting. Put another way, the Parallel Universe constructs a sense of futuristic design by borrowing upon the potentiality electric guitar design once held but no longer seems to possess. In this way, Fender has developed a creative tactic that allows them to completely revamp their guitar designs without losing the classic brand image that has guaranteed their profitability for years.

The Parallel Universe series is not the first Fender product line that has tried to thread the needle of guitarists' fickle design preferences by invoking the future-past appeal of time travel. The Fender Custom Shop series, dubbed "Time Machine," has been in production since 1999. These guitars come in a variety of finishes based on the level of wear that the design entails. A N.O.S. (New Old Stock) guitar has no wear, promising an instrument that "hasn't aged at all—as if you went back in time and bought it."³¹ A Heavy Relic instrument is covered in nicks, belt-rash, and even simulated cigarette burns to create an instrument that is "designed to evoke decades of the most punishing play and touring."³²

Both the Parallel Universe and Time Machine series guitars simultaneously highlight modern innovation and reverence for past designs. In the case of the Parallel Universe series, this is achieved through a postmodern bricolage that constructs a historical imaginary of past innovations.³³ With the Time Machine series, customers are invited to embark on a futuristic trip to the past, where affective history is available for purchase. Both demonstrate the important fulcrum on which guitar design choices have had to balance for some time: paradoxically convincing their buyers that electric guitars are both past their prime and have a future.

Notes

1. The guitar that would become the Telecaster was first released by Fender in 1950 as the Broadcaster. Due to legal battles with Gretsch over their drum line of the same name, Fender renamed the instrument the Telecaster in 1952. Guitars sold in 1951 were scrubbed of the Broadcaster logos and are now popularly called Nocasters. The fundamental design of the instrument remained the same during this period.
2. Tom Wheeler, *The Stratocaster Chronicles: Celebrating 50 Years of the Fender Strat* (Hal Leonard, 2004), p. 101.
3. In the same year, Gibson also released an electric bass named the Thunderbird.
4. David Gartman, *Auto-Opium: A Social History of American Automobile Design* (Routledge, 1994), p. 186.
5. Vintage Guitar and Bass Advertisements Collection. Available at www.vintageguitarandbass.com/adDetails/43 (accessed March 4, 2023).
6. Gibson 1958 catalog. Available at www.vintageguitarandbass.com/gibson/catalogues/1958_36.php (accessed October 14, 2022).

7. André Millard, *The Electric Guitar: A History of an American Icon* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), p. 3.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Brad Tolinski and Alan di Perna, *Play It Loud: An Epic History of the Style, Sound, & Revolution of the Electric Guitar* (Penguin Random House, 2017), p. 40.
10. Paul Atkinson, *Amplified: A Design History of the Electric Guitar* (Reaktion Books, 2021), p. 63.
11. Although Hard Rock's Guitar Hotel clearly apes a Les Paul-style guitar design, the corporation has been careful to mention in the press that "it's meant to be generic and not necessarily the Gibson Les Paul made famous by Page and others." It has not been reported whether Hard Rock Hotel and Casinos have paid to license the shape, but these statements suggest that they are following the precedent established by other litigation that Gibson has brought to imitators, to carefully skirt the question of direct appropriation of the design.
12. *Gibson Guitar Corp v. Paul Reed Smith Guitars LP*, 423 F.3D 539 (6th Circuit, 2005). Available at <https://casetext.com/case/gibson-guitars-corp-v-paul-reed-smith-guitars> (accessed October 14, 2022).
13. *Ibid.*
14. Steve Waksman, "California Noise: Tinkering with Hardcore and Heavy Metal in Southern California," *Social Studies of Science* 34/5 (2004): 697.
15. Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Wesleyan University Press, 1993), p. 90.
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18. "Demand Up for Boutique and Custom Guitars," NAMM. Available at www.namm.org/news/press-releases/demand-boutique-and-custom-guitars (accessed July 27, 2022).
19. Kathryn Marie Dudley, *Guitar Makers: The Endurance of Artisanal Values in North America* (University of Chicago Press, 2014), p. xii.
20. Mick Taylor and Trev Curwen, "Gibson HD.6X-Pro Digital Guitar Review," MusicRadar (2008). Available at www.musicradar.com/reviews/guitars/gibson-hd-6x-pro-digital-guitar-26570 (accessed April 15, 2023).
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27. Jackson Maxwell, "Guitar Industry is Growing, Study Finds," *Guitar World* (2018). Available at www.guitarworld.com/news/guitar-industry-is-growing-study-finds (accessed October 14, 2022).
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29. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
30. Mike Duffy, "Out of This World: Check Out Fender's Parallel Universe Collection," Fender.com (2020). Available at www.fender.com/articles/gear/closeup-check-out-fenders-new-parallel-universe-collection (accessed October 14, 2022).
31. Fender.com, "Fender Custom Shop Series Time Machine." Available at www.fendercustomshop.com/series/time-machine (accessed October 14, 2022).
32. *Ibid.*
33. Tangentially, there is a Fender Custom Shop model that is actually called the "postmodern" strat.

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