

### 3 The Electric Guitar's "Golden Age"

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#### Introduction

Three guitars released within a three-year period from 1951 to 1954 signal something of a "golden age" in guitar historiography: the Fender Telecaster (1951), Gibson Les Paul (1952), and Fender Stratocaster (1954). As Matt Brounley explores in Chapter 5, these three guitars continue to provide a template for contemporary electric guitar designs up to the present day. Their influence has been all the more pronounced because their production coincided with a period of major transformation in US popular music that culminated in the emergence of rock 'n' roll. Musical and technological innovation effectively intersected during these years and created the conditions for the electric guitar to emerge as the dominant musical instrument of the rock era. Consequently, these three guitars and their makers stand at the center of many accounts of the electric guitar's evolution and impact, up to Ian Port's valuable 2019 dual portrait of Leo Fender and Les Paul.<sup>1</sup>

In this chapter, I want to take a longer and broader view of this golden age of electric guitar design, which in conventional terms runs from the advent of the earliest Fender solid body electrics in 1948/49 to the release of the most coveted Gibson Les Paul Sunburst models between 1958 and 1960. As essential as these foundational electric guitar models of the 1950s have become, their significance cannot be understood apart from the efforts to "electrify" the guitar that preceded them. I do not aim to retell the story of the electric guitar's invention, covered so well in the preceding chapter by Matthew Hill. Instead, this chapter begins with the early 1930s moment when the electric guitar is already "invented," for all intents and purposes, but when its impact was only starting to be felt. The 1936 release of the Gibson ES-150 marked a critical turning point, when the momentum of electric guitar production began to shift from "Hawaiian" model guitars, designed to be played with a steel bar run along the strings—which included the famed Rickenbacker "Frying Pan" model—to "Spanish"-style guitars built to be played in the more conventional manner, with the fingers of the guitarist fretting the individual notes and chords. This change prefigured the broader incorporation of the electric guitar into jazz and other popular styles, where it assumed significantly greater

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visibility than it had before. Further efforts to refine and reconfigure the instrument came to concentrate on the drive to create a solid body, Spanish-style instrument—to be distinguished from the solid body Hawaiian guitar models that already existed. In the interplay between “Hawaiian” and “Spanish” electric guitar designs lies the cultural background to the emergence of the modern solid body electric, realized in the fabled 1950s models produced by Fender and Gibson.

While the advent of the solid body electric guitar was undoubtedly a milestone in the history of the instrument, it is a mistake to assume that the design subsumed all others. After all, Scotty Moore and Chuck Berry are just two pioneering musicians who continued to favor hollow-bodied instruments long after the solid body became available. The continued evolution of the hollow body electric guitar is an oft-overlooked aspect of the 1950s that sheds light on the multidimensional character of the instrument and the adaptability of guitar manufacturers. Similarly, while the enduring influence of Fender and Gibson is undeniable, several other guitar companies contributed to the spread and proliferation of the electric guitar and produced instruments that were comparably prized, or more affordable and easier to obtain, including Gretsch, Harmony, and Kay. The electric guitar's golden age was defined as much by an expanding production and distribution network as it was by the growing hegemony of a select number of manufacturers, and low-budget instruments—many purchased through mail order catalogs—played a role in this era's burgeoning guitar culture that is too often ignored or discounted. What follows, then, is a sort of alternate history of the era often seen as a sort of high point in the evolution of the electric guitar. By downplaying the centrality of the “classics,” I seek to cut through the mythology that so often informs consideration of this period, and to put the solid body Spanish electric in its proper context as just one piece of a larger series of developments through which the electric guitar rose to prominence.

### **EH or ES?**

When the Ro-Pat-In guitar company—soon to be renamed Rickenbacker—issued its first electric guitars in 1932, it offered both Hawaiian and Spanish model guitars. Yet only the company's Hawaiian model—officially called the Electro Hawaiian guitar, but retrospectively dubbed the Frying Pan for its unusual shape—has been flagged as the first commercially produced electric guitar of note. The earliest Electro Spanish electric guitar has been rendered little more than a footnote in most available histories of the instrument, and the same can be said for other early Spanish-style electric guitars issued in

generally very small quantities by companies such as Vivi-Tone and Dobro.<sup>2</sup> At its inception, the electric guitar gained most ready acceptance in its guise as a Hawaiian-style instrument, designed to accommodate a playing style where the guitar was laid horizontally in the lap of the musician and played with the use of a metal bar that would slide up and down the fretted strings—otherwise known as “steel guitar.” Why was the Hawaiian electric guitar so prevalent in this early phase? And when did the Spanish electric guitar gain more currency?

To begin to answer the first question, it is worth noting that George Beauchamp, whose electric guitar designs had the most enduring impact among the instrument’s first founders, was a dedicated Hawaiian guitar enthusiast. By the mid 1920s, Beauchamp was an established vaudeville performer particularly known for his talent on the steel guitar, and photos from this period show him holding his instrument across his lap in the “Hawaiian” fashion and wearing a lei.<sup>3</sup> In this, he was far from alone. Interest in Hawaiian steel guitar began to grow in the first decade of the twentieth century, spurred by the move to San Francisco of the style’s primary innovator, indigenous Hawaiian musician Joseph Kekuku. West Coast guitar makers quickly took note of Kekuku’s rising stature as he entered the professional vaudeville circuit. Steel guitar historian John Troutman describes the efforts of luthier Chris Knutsen, who learned from Kekuku and other players of the era that they required

greater volume to compete with the violins, flutes, ‘ukuleles, and standard guitars that characterized Hawaiian string bands of the time. As well, the steel or wire strings that Kekuku and the other early steel guitarists required could bow or damage the necks of the standard Spanish acoustic guitars that they modified when specially built steel guitars were unavailable to them.<sup>4</sup>

By the mid 1910s, the priorities of steel guitarists had already begun to give rise to a distinct class of instruments. Not only did these instruments use wire strings, but they would be built with higher action—with the strings at more of a distance from the fretboard—to allow for smoother motion of the steel bar. The imperatives behind steel guitar construction continued to exert a pronounced effect on guitar builders in the ensuing decades, in conjunction with widening popular interest in Hawaiian musical styles. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the ubiquity of Hawaiian music, and steel guitar playing especially, on the West Coast throughout these years was a major reason why Southern California became a sort of ground zero for the electric guitar’s successful invention.

Many of the earliest guitar manufacturers to produce electric instruments, including Ro-Pat-In, were relatively new enterprises seeking to make a mark through design innovation. Hawaiian guitars not only

appealed to musicians drawn to the popular style of playing but had the aura of a design with less history or tradition attached. The promotional copy for the Frying Pan announced, "Peculiar looking because no resonating body is needed."<sup>5</sup> Made from aluminum rather than traditional wood, the Frying Pan drew attention to its own modernity, even apart from its capacity for amplification. As guitar historians Brad Tolinski and Alan di Perna observed, "This was a completely new breed of instrument—clearly and unapologetically an industrial product rather than a finely crafted artifact."<sup>6</sup> By comparison, the Electro Spanish electric model resembled the more standard unamplified guitar designs of the day. This was one of the most salient ways in which the difference between "Hawaiian" and "Spanish" guitars operated during the early 1930s. A "Spanish" guitar was seen to be directly connected to the longer history of the instrument and more established styles of musicianship, whereas a "Hawaiian" guitar offered more room for instrument makers—and players—to experiment and take liberties.

Unsurprisingly, given these trends, when the Gibson company entered the fold of electric guitar production, its first product was an electric Hawaiian guitar. The Gibson EH-150, first produced in 1935, emerged through the combined input of company employee Walter Fuller and professional guitarist Alvino Rey.<sup>7</sup> An electric Spanish guitar, the ES-150, followed shortly thereafter, developed in 1936 and entering wider production the next year. Following suit from Ro-Pat-In's template, the Gibson EH-150 was a distinctively shaped solid body instrument, markedly different from conventional guitars of the era. The ES-150 Spanish model, by contrast, was essentially a refashioned version of an already existing Gibson acoustic instrument, the L-50, a budget-priced archtop guitar to which the company affixed the same sort of pickup developed for use on the electric Hawaiian.

In this case, however, the ES-150 was the greater innovation. A comparatively more venerable instrument manufacturer than its competitors, Gibson brought to the electric guitar an established reputation for high quality, and its acoustic archtop guitars became the industry standard during the 1920s. To successfully "amplify" one of these already popular models was a major step forward in the marketing of the electric guitar as a technology that appeared accessible to working guitarists. As I have written elsewhere, the ES-150 combined "the modernism of the new sound technology with a neoclassical design that signified craftsmanship and respectability."<sup>8</sup> Upon its release, the electric Spanish guitar began to assume greater prominence.

The change was not immediate. Based on a small clutch of articles that appeared in the leading US music magazines, *DownBeat* and *Metronome*,

the electric guitar remained strongly identified with the Hawaiian guitar throughout most of the 1930s. Jack Miller, a white guitarist widely reputed to have been one of the first musicians to perform in public and on record with an electric instrument, penned two brief articles for *DownBeat* in May and July 1936, in which he foregrounds his experience as an amplified steel guitar player.<sup>9</sup> Rival publication *Metronome* offered readers of its November 1936 issue the declaration, “The electric Hawaiian, or steel, guitar is now a standard instrument in our most popular dance orchestras. It’s new, it’s modern, it’s *electric*! That prefix, electric, has captured the interest and imagination of every radio listener.”<sup>10</sup> The following summer, the publication featured steel guitarist Anthony Rocco making the case for the greater incorporation of steel guitar into the era’s dance bands.<sup>11</sup>

Yet advertisements from these publications also show the growing prominence of the electric Spanish instrument. When electric guitar ads first started to appear in *DownBeat* in 1935–36, they were almost exclusively for Hawaiian guitars. By the fall of 1937, however, Gibson was joined by two other companies—Vega and National Dobro—in advertising Hawaiian and Spanish electric guitars side by side, and giving them relatively equal billing. These incremental steps in the wider promotion of the electric Spanish guitar set the stage for the instrument’s embrace at decade’s end, indicated by the rise of African American jazz guitarist Charlie Christian. Upon joining bandleader Benny Goodman’s sextet in 1939, Christian became so much associated with his use of the Gibson ES-150 that the guitar’s distinctive bar-shaped pickup became known as the “Charlie Christian pickup.”<sup>12</sup> When Gibson chose to feature Christian and fellow Goodman guitarist Arnold Covey in a large February 1940 display ad in *DownBeat* trumpeting the features of its “new Gibson electric Spanish guitar,” the instrument was clearly gaining stature as a representative *electric* guitar, no longer in the shadow of its Hawaiian counterpart.<sup>13</sup>

## Solid

A year later, in 1941, guitarist and inventor Les Paul completed work on his solid body electric prototype, “the Log.” One of the most storied non-production electric instruments ever made, the Log derived its name from its unusual construction. Working in the factory of the Epiphone guitar company, Paul fashioned the instrument out of a solid 4" × 4" piece of pine wood, to which he added “wings” that were carved from the body of an Epiphone archtop guitar to standardize its appearance.<sup>14</sup> Explaining his motivation for pursuing a solid body instrument in a column for *Guitar*

*Player* magazine, Paul recalled: "The whole concept of making a solid body instrument goes back into the middle Thirties and early Forties when I built several solid body instruments, which proved you could get this great sustaining tone. You also could get rid of the resonant peaks that would make one note louder than another."<sup>15</sup> Paul was driven by the desire for a sort of purity and uniformity of tone that was not available on the hollow body electric guitars of the time, and that suited the nimble and precise musicianship that he displayed as a leading jazz guitar soloist of the late 1930s and early 1940s.<sup>16</sup>

The idea for a solid body electric guitar had been circulating for as long as the electric guitar had been around. Ro-Pat-In's Frying Pan was a solid body instrument, and so too were some of the other Hawaiian electric guitars produced during the 1930s. A solid body Spanish electric was slower to materialize, however. Several factors inhibited the development of such instruments. As noted above, Spanish electric guitars remained more beholden to their acoustic counterparts in the early history of the instrument; and indeed, one of the selling points of the Gibson ES-150 and other available models was that the hollow body meant they could be played unamplified as well as plugged in. A solid body guitar would also necessarily be heavier, and for guitars that were not meant to be played flat on a player's lap or accompanying stand but were held upright and often strapped over a guitarist's shoulder, the extra weight could produce strain and would require adjustment. Despite these impediments, Les Paul noticed a basic tension as he grew more familiar with his electric instrument. He recounted in a 1977 interview, "Early on, I figured out that when you've got the top [of the guitar] vibrating and a string vibrating, one of them has got to stop, and it can't be the string, because that's making the sound."<sup>17</sup> The Log was the result of his pursuits, but just one of a series of such efforts that he crafted or commissioned from the late 1930s onward.

Others working in the world of guitar construction were applying similar principles. In 1943, Leo Fender, at the time operating a radio repair service in Fullerton, California, colluded with more seasoned guitar tinkerer Doc Kaufmann to build a small and unusually shaped instrument. The guitar was created mainly as a vehicle to test a new pickup design that Fender had devised. Its miniature, unornamented body had the appearance of a Hawaiian steel guitar, but it was, in fact, a Spanish-style electric, and not incidentally, it was a solid body instrument.<sup>18</sup> It would be more than five years before Fender would dedicate himself in a more concerted manner to the production of a solid body Spanish electric guitar, but many of the ideas that would inform his later efforts were already in place in this early prototype. Then there was a third Southern California-based craftsman, Paul Bigsby, who followed instructions provided to him by esteemed country

guitarist Merle Travis to assemble a fully realized solid body Spanish electric guitar in 1948.<sup>19</sup> The Travis-Bigsby guitar, as it has been called, may have been the most compelling proof of concept yet that a solid body Spanish electric was a viable property. It had the shape of a standard guitar, not requiring wings or other add-ons to normalize its appearance. Travis quickly began to feature the guitar in his performances, treating it as a favored instrument. Yet Bigsby showed no inclination to convert his design into something suitable for mass production. That step would be left to Fender.

The solid body Spanish electric guitar, then, was like the electric guitar itself not the invention of a single individual but an idea that was realized over time, with multiple contributors playing a role. Paul, Fender, and Bigsby (and the many other players like Merle Travis whose suggestions helped inform their efforts) were all motivated by a common insight: the vibrations of the guitar's body that made an unamplified guitar sound pleasing could be a detriment to the sound of an electric guitar. Minimizing or eliminating those vibrations would significantly decrease the likelihood of disruptive feedback from the guitar's amplifier, create a more even and balanced tone across the full range of the instrument, and offer the player greater sustain of the individual notes played. The sensibility here mirrors what Kyle Devine describes in Chapter 6 as "signal thinking," a term he adapts from historian of science Emily Thompson. Writing about the modern era of acoustic research, Thompson observed: "When electroacoustic instruments like microphones and loudspeakers moved out of the laboratory and into the world, this new way of thinking migrated with them, and the result was that sounds were reconceived as signals."<sup>20</sup> George Beauchamp worked according to similar principles when assembling the Frying Pan years earlier, but finding the right balance of features that would make a conventionally designed solid body instrument functional, practical, and desirable to players required considerable trial and error. Throughout the 1940s, the idea for a solid body electric gestated and provided the basis for a series of critical experiments that pushed the concept forward. In the 1950s, these pursuits came to fruition.

### **Advancing the Hollow Body**

Scotty Moore, the guitarist who accompanied Elvis Presley throughout the first several years of his recording and performing career, developed a signature style that revolved around clean, finger-picked lines that blurred the distinction between rhythm and lead guitar. Like many of the white Southern musicians that contributed to the early years of rock 'n' roll, Moore was steeped in the influence of country music and, as

a guitarist, was especially attentive to the innovations of Chet Atkins, whose own finger-picking guitar style provided a powerful and versatile template. Before he joined forces with Presley, Moore was an early adopter of the Fender Telecaster, obtaining a model in 1952, just a year after it was first made available.<sup>21</sup> However, he found it unsatisfactory, less for its sound than for its size and comfort. Interviewed by British journalists John Tobler and Stuart Grundy in 1983, Moore recounted:

When I came out of the service, I bought one of those Fenders, a Telecaster or a Stratocaster or something, but I couldn't hold on to the thing with its little slim body . . . So I got a Gibson [a gold ES-295] and that was the one I used on the first things we cut, and then I went on to the L5, and I had a blonde one of those, and from there, I went to a blonde Gibson Super 400.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, Moore—one of the unquestioned architects of early rock 'n' roll guitar style—expressly rejected the new solid body electrics and favored hollow body guitars for the duration of his career.

Moore's preferences were far from isolated. Tempting as it is to judge that the solid body Spanish electric was integral to the rise of rock 'n' roll given the synchronicity of its emergence, it would take more than a decade for the Telecaster, Stratocaster, and Les Paul guitars to become the dominant instruments of choice among rock guitarists. Certainly, there were some crucial rock 'n' rollers who took to the new instruments quickly. Buddy Holly has been famously identified with the Fender Stratocaster, and Carl Perkins used a Gibson Les Paul when he made his breakthrough recordings for Sun Records, including "Blue Suede Shoes." Yet even Perkins soon changed his allegiance from the Les Paul to a Gibson hollow body, the ES-5 Switchmaster, a higher end instrument that cost nearly \$200 more than the company's solid body model.<sup>23</sup> While the solid body unquestionably made a difference to the longer term evolution of rock guitar playing, the electric guitar as such was the bigger factor in the emergence of rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, and hollow-bodied instruments remained common among its dominant practitioners.

Chuck Berry was another case in point. Berry was not an absolutist about the solid body vs hollow body divide, and he was known to play a Gibson Les Paul at times during the mid to late 1950s. His overarching preference, though, was for hollow body instruments, and the bulk of his signature recordings, starting with his breakthrough 1955 single, "Maybellene," were made using a Gibson ES-350 T. Discussing his guitar preferences in a 1988 interview, Berry noted:

My big Gretsch [hollow body] was heavy, so I like the hollowbody Gibsons. The lighter the better. Otherwise, doesn't matter. I don't notice the difference, unless it's got extra reach up the neck, like on a Fender. Range is important,



getting up the neck. I've always liked a Fender, but I've never bought one because they don't do much in hollowbodies.<sup>24</sup>

The Gibson ES-350 T was adapted from an earlier Gibson hollow body, the ES-350, that had been the first of Gibson's electric guitars to feature a cutaway when it was produced in 1947.<sup>25</sup> The cutaway allowed precisely the sort of reach up the neck that Berry favored so strongly when interviewed forty years later. Issued in 1955, the ES-350 T would have just been released at the time that Berry purchased his and began to record with it. It was distinguished from its predecessor by its thinner body and a more slender neck with a shorter scale length, which would have made it both lighter and better suited to the sort of rapidly played patterns for which Berry became known.<sup>26</sup> One of Berry's ES-350 T guitars would eventually be obtained by the US National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2011, confirming its identification with the guitarist and its status as a key symbol of Black musical creativity.<sup>27</sup>

Outside rock 'n' roll proper, another of the era's most influential players demonstrated a parallel commitment to hollow body instruments. Blues artist B.B. King's attachment to his electric guitar became the stuff of legend. As recounted in his autobiography, King first began to call his guitar Lucille after rescuing it from a fire in a bar where he played, which was caused by two men fighting over a woman who bore the same name. That first guitar was not even a proper electric guitar but a Gibson L-30 hollow body archtop model to which King had added a pickup. Lucille, however, was no single guitar but rather a name that King gave to the ideal relationship that he had with his instrument. He explained:

I liked seeing my guitar as a lady. I liked seeing her as someone worth fighting or even dying for. I liked giving her a name and attitude all her own. Truth is, from the time I put a wire string on a broom handle till today, I've turned to Lucille – and there have been seventeen different Lucilles – for comfort and relief.<sup>28</sup>

Among the assortment of guitars that King relied upon was a Fender Telecaster, which he played for a time in the early 1950s, and a Gibson ES-5, the same mid 1950s hollow body guitar that came to be favored by Carl Perkins. The guitar with which he would most be identified, though, was the Gibson ES-355, which upon its release in 1958 became one of the first of the "semi-hollow body" electrics produced by the company.

As the term would suggest, a semi-hollow body guitar is something of a hybrid instrument. The Gibson ES-355 was a deluxe offshoot of another model introduced the same year, the ES-335. Both guitars were devised by Gibson company head Ted McCarty, whose idea was to produce an instrument that could split the difference between the hollow body guitar's

tonal warmth and the solid body's sharpness. Said McCarty: "we needed something for the player who wanted the body reverberation of an acoustic and more highs than, say, an L-5 but not as much treble as a solidbody. The 335 was an in-between deal."<sup>29</sup> Distinguished visually by its double cut-away design—a first for a hollow body electric—the true secret to the ES-335 and ES-355 was the solid block of wood that ran through the guitar's interior mid-section, which significantly diminished the body's reverberation and created a tone more akin to a solid body. Another innovation incorporated onto these Gibson models was the humbucking pickup that had been designed by engineer Seth Lover. Seeking to reduce the unwanted electronic hum that existing pickup designs routinely generated, Lover produced a pickup with two sets of magnetic coils rather than the standard single coil.<sup>30</sup> By mitigating the stray noises that an electric guitar and amplifier were likely to emit, the humbucker helped to further split the difference between hollow body and solid body guitars, since the hollow bodies had always been more subject to feedback and other forms of sonic interference.

Humbucking pickups were also a feature on another of the era's signature hollow body electric guitars, the Gretsch Chet Atkins model. At the time of its 1955 release, Gretsch was a wide-ranging instrument manufacturer whose guitars did not have the prestige associated with the likes of Gibson. Pursuing a relationship with country music star Atkins was rather explicitly an effort by the company to emulate the success that Gibson had with the Les Paul; and while Atkins did not have Paul's star power at the time, he enjoyed a significant reputation among musicians and country music enthusiasts. The hollow body Gretsch bearing Atkins' name was produced with considerable input from the guitarist, although the ornate and rather kitschy "Western" touches—including a large branded "G" on the instrument's lower bout—were solely the work of the Gretsch design team.<sup>31</sup> However, Atkins was dissatisfied with a key feature of the earliest models, the DeArmond pickups, which did not have the requisite clarity and dynamic range to showcase his dexterous finger-style technique. Atkins turned to a Nashville associate, Ray Butts, an expert in electronics who had previously built an amplifier for the guitarist. Butts proceeded to design a humbucking pickup in parallel to the work that Seth Lover did at Gibson, noting of his collaboration with Atkins:

Primarily what he wanted was a proper balance between the bass and the treble and midrange, for that thumb effect he used . . . My idea from the beginning was to build a humbucking pickup. I knew about the concept from working with transformers, and Ampex used the humbucking principle in the pickups of their recording heads. It wasn't a new idea, and it's a very simple principle.<sup>32</sup>

Once it was completed, Gretsch became convinced that the new pickup design was an improvement over the ones they had been using. The company christened the new device the Filter Tron, in a characteristic bit of flamboyant branding, and it became a regular feature on the Chet Atkins model and several other Gretsch electric guitars by 1958.

Solid body instruments may have been the state of the art as the 1950s dawned. The foregoing examples attest to the fact that the hollow body electric guitar hardly remained a static presence throughout the decade, though. Some guitarists may well have favored the hollow body because of its comparatively longer history, its association with key influences of the recent past, or because it continued to allow them some of the benefits of an acoustic instrument and electric instrument combined. Others preferred the sound over that offered by the solid body or, as we see in the case of Scotty Moore, the fuller body shape, which gave them something more substantial to hold. Whatever the motivations, the hollow body electric was not a simple index of “tradition” when opposed to the solid body’s “modernity.” It was subject to design advances that were stimulated in part by the more competitive market for electric guitars that grew throughout the decade, and in part by the continuing impulse to refine and improve electric guitar design for its own sake. The advent of the semi-hollow body and the humbucker pickup, meanwhile, suggest that improved tone remained an overarching factor that pushed design innovations forward. In the evolution of the hollow body electric, and the electric guitar more generally during the 1950s, we can see exemplified the maxim put forth by musicologists Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark, that “tone is the desirable fetish that pop musicians pursue relentlessly, just because . . . it can never really be captured, can never be reduced to the immutable qualities of a single, inanimate object.”<sup>33</sup>

### **The Cheaper the Axe**

One trend remained in place throughout the 1950s: the most high-end hollow body instruments were, as a rule, more expensive than top-of-the-line solid body electrics. A 1955 price guide shows that Fender charged \$189.50 for its Telecaster and \$249.50 for the newer Stratocaster equipped with a tremolo bar.<sup>34</sup> That same year, Gibson offered its standard Les Paul solid body electric for \$235, and a premium Les Paul Custom for \$360. Among the company’s hollow body electrics, on the other hand, several models were priced above \$400, with higher prices for guitars with a “natural” finish, including the Switchmaster at \$475, the Byrdland at \$565, the L-5 at \$590, and the S-400 at \$675.<sup>35</sup> None of these guitars were

especially cheap. Even the Telecaster would have been a bit of a stretch for many guitar consumers, and its seemingly modest price converts to nearly \$2,000 in current dollar value.<sup>36</sup> The hollow body electrics, then, were true luxury instruments that were valued for their high level of craftsmanship and association with established players.

Gibson did offer some cheaper electric models, with a budget Les Paul Junior costing \$110 and a hollow body ES-125 priced at \$135. Yet Gibson, Fender, and other leading "name brand" guitar manufacturers did not aim to offer instruments at the lowest possible price point. They pursued a balance between cost and quality that would allow them to maintain a reputation for well-built instruments. For the parent shopping for a young child just learning to play, the teenager whose earnings were limited, or for the more economically disenfranchised portions of the population, purchasing an electric guitar would have remained out of reach if these instruments were their only options. Most likely, these consumers would have turned to the guitars offered through mail order catalogs and department stores that were marketed not for professional musicians but to beginners and those who had less money or motivation to invest. The manufacturers of these instruments were less well known and, indeed, often remained anonymous to consumers, but without them, the electric guitar market would not have grown as it did. Fender and Gibson made the electric guitar into a widely coveted item, but the less prestigious and more affordable brands established the instrument as a household object.

Sears, Roebuck and Company played a crucial role in making musical instruments, including the electric guitar, into mass market commodities. The Chicago-based mail order retail company offered musical instruments in its catalog as early as 1894, and made a major move into the guitar market with the purchase of the Harmony Company in 1916.<sup>37</sup> Formed in 1892, Harmony had grown by the 1910s to become one of the largest producers of string instruments in the US, and its share of the guitar market would grow through its association with Sears, at one point producing more than half the total number of guitars made in the US.<sup>38</sup> Upon purchasing the company, Sears began selling Harmony guitars under its own Supertone brand, a name it retained until the 1930s when it shifted to Silvertone. Giving the appearance that its instruments were a singular brand, the Silvertone name was applied to guitars made by several different manufacturers over the years; and in fact, the first Sears Silvertone electric guitars were made not by Harmony but by the National/Valco company in the early 1940s.<sup>39</sup> By that time, Sears had sold its interest in Harmony but would continue to rely on the company's instruments, while also sourcing an increased amount of its Silvertone stock from another Chicago-based

guitar manufacturer, Kay. In the 1950s, the newly formed Danelectro company also began supplying Sears with electric instruments for its Silvertone line, and these four manufacturers together generated the varied selection of acoustic and electric instruments offered by the retailer throughout the decade.

Like Harmony, Kay was already a company with a long history by the time it began its association with Sears. In fact, under its previous incarnation as the Stromberg-Voisinet Company, it had advertised what many consider to be the first commercially produced amplified guitar in 1928, discussed by Matthew Hill in the preceding chapter. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Stromberg-Voisinet—which changed its name to Kay sometime between 1931 and 1934, according to guitar historian Michael Wright—provided guitars for Sears competitor Montgomery Ward and other retailers.<sup>40</sup> After its early and somewhat stunted entrance into the electric guitar market, it began offering electric instruments more routinely starting in 1936, the same year that the Gibson ES-150 was first produced. The association between Kay and Sears began in 1940, and for the next two decades, the company's guitars were a major component of the Silvertone brand. Meanwhile, Kay continued to develop instruments under its own brand name as well, producing its first solid body electric guitar in 1952 along with the popular Kay "Thin Twin" electric guitar that became associated with prominent electric blues singer and guitarist Jimmy Reed.<sup>41</sup> More than a low-budget guitar manufacturer, Kay showed the diversification that had entered electric guitar production by the 1950s, with prices that, at the low end, were often less than half that of the more prestigious manufacturers but with "quality" instruments that occupied the same price range as the Telecaster or Les Paul.

Leafing through the pages of a Kay guitar catalog from the mid 1950s reveals something of this diversification, but it is more instructive to compare Kay's own dedicated product line with that offered by Sears during the same period. For 1956, Kay produced a rather compact eight-page catalog, featuring on the cover its K172S "Pro" guitar, a single cut-away hollow body electric archtop priced at \$200.<sup>42</sup> Most electric guitars in the catalog are priced between \$100 and \$200, including the Thin Twin at \$175 and the K142 solid body electric at \$125. However, Kay also offered much cheaper options for both hollow body and solid body instruments, with the K130 archtop costing just \$57.50, and K136 solid body only \$12 more.

By comparison, for its 1956 Spring–Summer catalog, Sears devoted three pages to its Silvertone guitar line and another to amplifiers, out of a total of nearly 1,400 catalog pages in total.<sup>43</sup> Only one page is dedicated to electric guitars, but it includes eight different electric Spanish models and

two Hawaiian models—a ratio that represents the changing face of the electric guitar since the 1930s. The cheapest of the electric Spanish models, a single pickup hollow body, costs only \$24.95, while the company offers a solid body electric for just \$39.95, or \$59.95 for a two-pickup option. Prices graduate accordingly throughout the eight models, with the high point reserved for the “Professional Dual-Pickup Cutaway Electric Guitar,” a hollow body instrument costing \$137.50. With its Silvertone line, then, Sears dramatically undercut the existing electric guitar market, even relative to the instruments produced by its own suppliers. Just as importantly, we see through the Silvertone line how innovations in electric guitar design were translated into terms that were accessible and affordable to the nonspecialist player, thus expanding the instrument’s reach.

### Ascension

One could well observe that the true “golden age,” or peak of the electric guitar’s commercial and cultural impact, was the 1960s and not the period before. Certainly, in terms of sales, the boom of the 1950s was substantially outpaced by the spike in sales that occurred after The Beatles arrived in the US. As noted above, the Telecaster, Stratocaster, and Les Paul found much wider acceptance in the 1960s as they became the guitars of choice for such players as Eric Clapton, Michael Bloomfield, Keith Richards, Jeff Beck, and Jimi Hendrix, among others. The era’s surge of “garage bands” also indicated the spread of amateur guitarists who sought to emulate the leading bands of the day and who sometimes became regular gigging and recording musicians in their own right.

In real and tangible ways, the ascent of the electric guitar in the 1960s was built on the developments of the preceding decades. It took nearly two decades from the time of its initial production as a regular consumer item for the electric guitar to take its modern shape. The shift from Hawaiian to Spanish electrics was the first necessary precondition for the instrument to move more to the center of American musical life. Even by the late 1940s, that shift was still not fully resolved, as can be gleaned from the fact that Leo Fender focused almost exclusively on producing steel guitars until he turned his attention to the solid body Spanish electric in 1949.<sup>44</sup> This instrument marked another significant advance and, as much as anything, consolidated the notion that the Spanish electric guitar would be *the* electric guitar for the majority of the instrument’s players. Throughout the 1950s, guitar manufacturers continued to set new standards for the instrument regarding solid body and hollow body instruments alike, and both types of the electric guitar were central to the musical innovations

that altered existing genres such as blues and country music, and helped give rise to the emerging form of rock 'n' roll. The expansion of the electric guitar market, meanwhile, also meant the proliferation of instruments across different price points and of variable quality, but that nonetheless made it a more accessible item with a wider reach. Certain products of this era—the Stratocaster, the Les Paul—have been elevated to the status of canonic objects, but they are just the residue of these broader processes that made the electric guitar into an engine of musical transformation.

## Notes

1. Ian Port, *The Birth of Loud: Leo Fender, Les Paul, and the Guitar-Pioneering Rivalry That Shaped Rock 'n' Roll* (Scribner, 2019).
2. On these early electric guitar models by Rickenbacker, Dobro, and Vivi-Tone, see Steve Waksman, "Making the Guitar Electric: Early Electric Guitar History," *Musique-Images-Instruments* 17 (2018): 134–141. For more information about the Ro-Pat-In Spanish electric guitar, see Lynn Wheelwright, "Ro-Pat-In Electric Spanish," *Vintage Guitar*, July 2008. Available at [www.vintageguitar.com/3588/ro-pat-in-electric-spanish](http://www.vintageguitar.com/3588/ro-pat-in-electric-spanish) (accessed December 23, 2022).
3. Bob Brozman, *The History and Artistry of National Resonator Instruments* (Centerstream Publishing, 1998), pp. 18–19.
4. John Troutman, *Kika Kila: How the Hawaiian Steel Guitar Changed the Sound of Modern Music* (University of North Carolina Press, 2016), p. 78.
5. Catalog listing for Rickenbacker Electro Hawaiian Guitar, circa early 1930s. Archived on the official Rickenbacker company website, available at [www.rickenbacker.com/catalog\\_booklet.asp?pages=2&catalog=31](http://www.rickenbacker.com/catalog_booklet.asp?pages=2&catalog=31) (accessed December 27, 2022). According to the information on the website, the brochure in question is from 1931, but it is more likely from 1934 or thereabouts. Thanks to Matthew Hill for helping to clarify the date.
6. Brad Tolinski and Alan di Perna, *Play It Loud: An Epic History of the Style, Sound, & Revolution of Electric Guitar* (Doubleday, 2016), p. 20.
7. A.R. Duchossoir, *Gibson Electrics: The Classic Years* (Hal Leonard, 1994), pp. 13–15.
8. Steve Waksman, *Instruments of Desire: The Electric Guitar and the Shaping of Musical Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 20.
9. Jack Miller, "The First to Play Electric Guitar," *Down Beat* 3/5 (May 1936), p. 9; Miller, "Amplifying Gives Guitar New Place in Orchestra," *Down Beat* 3/7 (July 1936), p. 9.
10. Paul Trueman, "What It Takes to Play the Electric Guitar," *Metronome* 52/11 (November 1936), p. 55.
11. Anthony Rocco, "A Steel Guitar Section for Bands," *Metronome* 53/7 (July 1937), p. 33.
12. Tom Wheeler, *American Guitars: An Illustrated History* (HarperPerennial, 1992), pp. 131–132.
13. Advertisement for Gibson guitars, *Down Beat* 7/3 (February 1, 1940), p. 11.
14. On the creation of the Log, see Robb Lawrence, *The Early Years of the Les Paul Legacy, 1915–1963* (Hal Leonard, 2008), p. 15; Mary Shaughnessy, *Les Paul: An American Original* (William Morrow & Company, 1993), pp. 96–97; Wheeler, *American Guitars*, p. 155.
15. Les Paul, "Pro's Reply," *Guitar Player* 5/2 (March 1971), p. 9.
16. For discussion of Paul's pursuit of tonal purity, see Waksman, *Instruments of Desire*, pp. 43–45.
17. Jon Sievert, "Les Paul," *Guitar Player* 11/12 (December 1977), p. 50.
18. Richard Smith, *Fender: The Sound Heard 'Round the World* (Hal Leonard, 2009), p. 18.
19. On the Bigsby-Travis solid body, see Andy Babiuik, *The Story of Paul Bigsby: Father of the Modern Electric Solidbody Guitar* (FG Publishing, 2008), pp. 41–55; Wheeler, *American Guitars*, pp. 9–12; Smith, *Fender*, pp. 95–97.
20. Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (MIT Press, 2002), p. 3.
21. James Roy, "1952 Fender Telecaster," Scotty Moore: The Official Website. Available at [www.scottymoore.net/52Tele.html](http://www.scottymoore.net/52Tele.html) (accessed January 2, 2023).

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