

Leo Fender

It would be difficult to imagine rock & roll — both its sound and its spirit — without the contributions of Clarence Leo Fender. Jimi Hendrix used a Fender Stratocaster to create his most distortion-drenched masterpieces. Jeff Beck employed a Fender Telecaster to play his jagged, quirky riffs with the Yardbirds. The late Stevie Ray Vaughan spun his muscular blues on a vintage Strat. Following the Rolling Stones' induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, Keith Richards (a Telecaster man) thanked "God, for Leo Fender, who makes these instruments for us to play."

Fender's instruments revolutionized popular music in general and rock & roll in particular. In addition to designing and marketing the Fender Telecaster and Stratocaster guitars in the early Fifties, he literally invented the electric bass with the introduction of the Fender Precision in 1950 and produced some of the world's most sought-after amplifiers. Fender himself didn't particularly care for rock & roll, nor could he play guitar. Yet when he died, on March 21, 1991, guitarists around the world mourned the man who gave them their electric voice.

Leo Fender was a quiet, conservative electronics enthusiast who was happiest in the company of tubes and wires. "He was a down-to-earth kind of guy, and a workaholic," recalls Lloyd Chewning, who worked for Fender for thirty years in various capacities. "He used to come to work dressed like a guy in a filling station. I worked for him for three months before I knew he was my boss."

Leo Fender was born August 10, 1909 near Anaheim, California, not far from the future site of his guitar factory, and established a radio repair business in 1930. Many of his customers were guitarists who brought in their external pickups for repair, which triggered Fender's interest in instrument design and construction.

Guitarists of the 1940s customarily met their amplification needs by attaching pickups to the surface of their hollow-bodied instruments, a practice which often produced as much disruptive feedback as music. Guitar designers, Fender among them, sought to resolve the problem by constructing a solid-bodied guitar. The question of who actually developed the first successful solid-body is still debated. But no one questions the identity of the first man to successfully market the instrument.

"When I brought *my* solid-body to Gibson," Les Paul says, "they laughed at me, calling it a broomstick with a pickup on

it. But Leo had the foresight to see the solid-body's potential, and he jumped at it."

In 1948, the Fender Electric Company began producing the Broadcaster, a solid-bodied electric guitar. Two years later, in a move that reflected the enormous recreation fad then sweeping America, the Broadcaster's name was changed to Telecaster.

The guitar proved to be an immediate success, particularly with country pickers; it remains an essential component of the Nashville sound to this day. And forty years after the first models rolled out of the Fender factory, the Telecaster still looks more or less the same. With its clean lines and uncomplicated electronics, the guitar is a marvel of utilitarian design.

"Fender could look at something and immediately discern the simplest method of doing whatever had to be done," says Les Paul with admiration. "He was a good, honest guy who made a straightforward guitar."

Actually, the Stratocaster, introduced in 1954, was a bit less straightforward than its predecessor. It featured a contoured double cutaway body, three single-coil pickups (rather than two) and a tremolo (string-bending) unit that greatly improved on the existing Bigsby design. The Stratocaster was a hot rod of a guitar; indeed, many players have described its tremendous appeal in automotive terms.

In 1950, Fender's introduction of the Precision bass brought a new sound and a new flexibility to the rhythm section. Now bass players could double as front-line vocalists, and guitarists could double as bass players. In the hands of Duck Dunn and James Jamerson respectively, the Fender Precision powered most of the greatest Stax/Volt and Motown records of the Sixties.

Leo Fender sold his company to CBS in 1965 for \$13 million. After a two-month vacation, he returned to Fender as a consultant. In 1976, he and some long-time associates formed CLF Research, which designed and built guitars and amplifiers for Music Man. In 1980, the restless inventor established the G&L Guitar Company, which counted Carl Perkins among its many satisfied clients.

"He was a multi-millionaire, but he never put on any airs," says Lloyd Chewning, today a plant manager for G&L. "I can still see him coming in with his plastic shirt pocket protector, goggles and sack of tools. He worked until the day before he died."

— Harold Steinblatt

