

FOREFATHERS

Wonder as they made their musical declarations of independence with such albums as *What's Going On* and *Talking Book*. He moved Motown to Los Angeles in 1972 and launched Diana Ross's film career with *Lady Sings the Blues*. He established a film and television company, giving his personal imprint to releases like *Berry Gordy's The Last Dragon*. He issued Michael Jackson's early solo hits; brought along a new act called the Commodores, featuring Lionel Richie; and welcomed old allies like the Temptations and the Four Tops back into the fold after periods of separation. In 1983, Berry's prodigious achievements were celebrated in the NBC TV special *Motown 25: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, with standout performances by Michael Jackson, Marvin Gaye and many others.

"Motown is the ultimate myth of black capitalism," said Nelson George in his book *Where Did Our Love Go?*, "one that says to car dealers and bankers and grocery store owners that 'Yes, it can happen. The odds can be beaten.'" The author goes on to list a half dozen of the past decade's most prominent black music executives and producers but concludes that none have "managed to control the range of their activities and be as successful in the pop marketplace as Berry Gordy. It may be that no Black musical entrepreneur ever will." ■

Les Paul

AS AN INFLUENTIAL JAZZ GUITARIST AND BEST-SELLING POP HITMAKER, LES Paul holds a special place in the pantheon of American musical greats. As a prolific inventor responsible for the development of multitrack recording and the solid-body electric guitar, he is part of a homespun tradition of scientific wizards that includes Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Edison.

Les Paul was born Lester William Polfus on June 9th, 1916, in Waukesha, Wisconsin. He built his first crystal radio at age nine, about the same time that he began playing his first Sears Roebuck guitar. At thirteen, Les was not only playing semiprofessionally on local country and western shows but had already constructed his first radio transmitter, his first sound recorder and his first electric guitar, which was amplified with a phonograph needle through the family radio. Les soon acquired his first Gibson guitar and a year later began working with Joe Wolverton in the country and western duo Sunny Joe and Rhubarb Red.

By the time he was seventeen, Paul was leading his own bands on two Chicago radio stations, as C&W bandleader Rhubarb Red on WJJD and as jazzman Les Paul on WIND. When not broadcasting, Les could be found jamming with the likes of Louis Armstrong, Roy Eldridge and Art Tatum. In 1937, the Les Paul Trio hit New York and won a prime spot on WNBC radio.

In 1941, Les Paul built his first solid-body electric guitar: a four-by-four wooden board with a pickup, fretted neck, six strings and a plug. During the next five years Paul worked with Ben Bernie's big band, was drafted and formed an Armed Forces Radio trio, stationed in Hollywood, which backed entertainers like Dinah Shore, Jack Benny and Bing Crosby.

In 1946, Gibson turned down Paul's electric-guitar prototype, and he built a recording studio, with Crosby's encouragement, in the garage of his Los Angeles home. There he began to develop revolutionary engineering techniques like close miking, echo delay and multiple tracking. Kay Starr, Jo Stafford, the Andrews Sisters and W.C. Fields recorded at the studio. In 1948, Les Paul released his first multitrack recordings, "Lover" and "Brazil." It was the birth of the bright, bubbly, somewhat otherworldly "Les Paul sound."

That same year, his progress was disrupted by a near-fatal auto accident in which his right arm and elbow were shattered. Surgeons set the arm at an angle that would still allow him to cradle his guitar, and Les Paul played on to new heights of popular acclaim. In 1949, he married Colleen Summers, a young singer. She changed her name to Mary Ford, and her multitracked vocals over Paul's multiple-

instrumental parts became the duo's formula for a steady stream of hit records: "How High the Moon," "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise" and the 1953 Number One smash "Vaya con Dios." Their TV series, *Les Paul and Mary Ford at Home*, ran for seven years; their endorsement of Rheingold beer was one of the first commercial-product tie-ins by a major pop-music act.

The year 1952 brought the introduction of the eight-track tape recorder, designed by Les Paul and marketed by Ampex, and the debut of the Gibson Les Paul solid-body electric guitar. Les was also responsible for many of the advances and refinements (such as low-impedance pickups) incorporated by Gibson over the next three decades. Eric Clapton, Mike Bloomfield, Duane Allman, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page are just a few of the major guitarists who made a Les Paul Gibson their instrument of choice.

Divorced from Mary Ford in 1964, Paul retired to his home in Mahwah, New Jersey, to pursue a full-time inventing career while keeping careful track of stylistic and technical changes in the music industry. In 1974, he returned to public prominence with a cross-country tour, displaying his guitar virtuosity and electronics techniques. In 1977, he won a Grammy for the album *Chester and Lester*, a masterful collection of pop-jazz guitar duets recorded with his old friend Chet Atkins. Today, Les Paul is still creating in his basement workshop-museum and still performing at top New York jazz clubs, where devotees like George Benson come to sit in with the living legend.

The late Ralph J. Gleason, in praise of Les Paul, wrote that "no one in the history of pop music has had a greater effect on the ultimate pop sound." The man himself is far more modest: "The day that I recognize the fact that I'm not needed or that I can't make somebody happy, then I'm not going to play."

For Les Paul, that day has yet to come. ■



Born June 9th,
1916, Waukesha,
Wisconsin