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Why Does It Have To Be So Loud? A Social History Of The Electric Guitar

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Why Does It Have To Be So Loud? A Social History Of The Electric Guitar

by

Thomas Dunne

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts History, Hunter College The City University of New York

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In the summer of 2017, I taught a Project-Based Learning course on the blues and the electric guitar at the Harlem Children’s Zone in New York City. The course curriculum included learning about the electric guitar, the blues, and rock ‘n’ roll. I had the kids write blues songs, and showed them my Gibson Les Paul electric guitar and let them play it. We also learned about some of the most celebrated guitarists who played this type of music, of which the children had little to no knowledge. Still, I thought they might have heard of Jimi Hendrix when I had them watch a documentary about the legend one day.

I was wrong. None of the students had any idea who Hendrix was, and not five minutes into the film, one particularly restless sixth grader aired his unsolicited opinion on the subject. “Who is this guy? He sucks! Nobody cares about him. Why are we watching this? Can’t we do something else?” Mercifully, that student transferred out of the class the next day, but most of the students shared his lack of interest. They enjoyed trying to play my guitar, but for most it was little more than a curious novelty, and they had no real interest in the music I was showing them. They only listened to hip-hop and electronic dance music, two genres that rarely utilize the electric guitar. The electric guitar and guitar-driven music hardly inspired any enthusiasm at all.

But it was not always this way. In the twentieth century, the electric guitar and its greatest players captivated audiences in America and around the globe. Beginning as a practical way to provide more volume to guitar players struggling to be heard, the electric guitar evolved into an instrument with a sound of its own, a sound that would influence and change every form of American music. In the 1950’s, the electric guitar would be the catalyst for a new genre...
that came to be known as rock ‘n’ roll. Rock ‘n’ roll, a derivation of blues music, became a polarizing phenomenon in the mid to late twentieth century. It was the music of choice of the youth of the baby-boomer generation. Its close association with African-American musical forms caused consternation and alarm amongst the parents of rock ‘n’ roll fans and the white establishment generally, who saw rock ‘n’ roll as a dangerous threat to racial segregation and social order. Its loud, aggressive sound also had a polarizing effect. What was fun, thrilling music to the kids was annoying noise to the adults. The electric guitar and its greatest rock players were responsible for the noise.

The history and influence of the electric guitar and the men who achieved the greatest fame and recognition playing it are the subjects of this thesis. I will discuss the history of the electric guitar and argue that it achieved a special status in American culture that no other instrument could match. Its profound effect on most genres of American music and its close association with the baby-boomer generation and rock ‘n’ roll transformed it into an iconic symbol of American culture. I will further argue that the greatest lead guitarists playing rock ‘n’ roll achieved a special status that even their most accomplished peers in the genres of jazz, blues, and country could not attain. They took on an aura that one associates with fictional superheroes with special powers. They were not simply great rock guitar players. Instead, the terms “guitar hero” and “guitar god” came to be applied to them, and I will discuss why this was so.

In the first chapter, I will discuss how and why the electric guitar came into being and explain what an electric guitar is. We will see that the electric guitar’s original raison d’etre was
to provide more volume for guitarists who could not be heard while playing in western swing, Hawaiian, and big band jazz groups, which were popular in the 1920’s and 30’s, when the earliest incarnations of the electric guitar first appeared. We will also see that there is not one type of electric guitar; they can vary depending on the solidity of the guitar, and the electronics contained within the guitar also play a crucial role in distinguishing an electric guitar from an acoustic.

In the second chapter, I will discuss how the electric guitar influenced and changed most forms of American music in the twentieth century. It is a remarkably versatile instrument, and is used in most music genres. I will also discuss how the electric guitar provided the volume that players were looking for, and profoundly altered the role of the guitarist in a band. Guitarists were no longer relegated to playing only rhythm; they could play solos like the other instrumentalists. Guitarists playing these solos came to be known as “lead” guitarists. This crucial development had a profound effect on American music, as most genres came to feature brilliant lead guitar players.

I will also discuss the prime movers behind the development of the electric guitar and the culture of tinkering from which they came. Inveterate tinkerers like Les Paul and Leo Fender were inspired by the advent of electronics and the rise of radio. They would disassemble and reassemble radios and other electronic devices, and would later apply their tinkering knowledge, interest, and skill to the construction and development of the electric guitar.

This chapter will also discuss how the electric guitar was the essential instrument behind the rise of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950’s, and how it became a polarizing symbol of the youth culture
that embraced this new genre. Over time, it became an icon of American culture, as it transcended its original purpose of merely producing musical sound. The sleek beauty, futuristic design, and otherworldly, modern sound of the solid-body electric guitar came to represent the time in which it originated. It also became a unifying symbol of the youth culture of the sixties and seventies, and an object of derision to those who despised the culture that embraced it.

In the third chapter, I will discuss and explore why the greatest rock players of the sixties and seventies came to be called “guitar heroes” and “gods.” The refinement and improvements in amplification in the 1960’s allowed guitarists to play at tremendous volume. Those who could harness that volume and create amazing sounds while demonstrating remarkable skill as lead guitarists came to be venerated, even worshipped. The excellent music they produced, their appearance, their skills, and the widespread praise and attention they received all contributed to a special status in American culture, which was unparalleled. I will discuss the lives and careers of the three of the foremost guitar gods. As we shall see, with great adulation also came turmoil, and even death.

Instantly recognizable in both appearance and sound, the electric guitar has become a permanent fixture in American life. The finest and most sought-after models are still being played today with the same design that was perfected sixty to seventy years ago. And while the influence and use of the electric guitar is not as prevalent in popular music as it used to be, it remains a cherished icon. The market for vintage electric guitars originally built in the 1950’s demonstrates this. Gibson Les Paul guitars built in the late fifties in excellent condition regularly sell for hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the electric guitar is one of the most recognizable
artifacts of American culture in the twentieth century. Perhaps one day the electric guitar will regain its prominence in popular music, as well.
CHAPTER 1

THE INSTRUMENT
Dockery Plantation, a 10,000 acre sawmill and cotton plantation in the heart of the Mississippi Delta,\(^1\) is generally considered the birthplace of Delta blues, a type of blues music that emerged in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It was home, at various times, to some of the most popular and seminal bluesmen in American history, including Son House, Robert Johnson, Charley Patton, Howlin’ Wolf, and Pops Staples. Apart from working the fields, these men all performed as singers and guitarists in the 1920’s and 30’s at various gatherings throughout the plantation, within a culture where musical performance was encouraged. Concerts were organized and even hosted at times by plantation owner Will Dockery, who was known for treating his tenants fairly.\(^2\)

These performances could last all night, and were loud and raucous affairs. Charley Patton (1891?-1934) was one of the most popular performers, and was always in demand. His niece, Bessie Turner, described a typical picnic at which Charley would perform:

He [Dockery] liked for all his folks to be nice, lively, have parties. He’d give free picnics and things like that and got Uncle Charley to play. Had a platform built for them to dance on the Fourth of July. The dance started about one o’clock and ended up the next morning. Start on the Fourth and end up on the fifth, dancing out there, right at that grove….That’s where Uncle Charley have made many a tune….That’s where the parties used to be. All through the year they have parties. Mr. Dockery put on big barbecues, and Uncle Charley used to play…They had a group, some blowing a little old horn (i. e., kazoo) and Uncle Charley picking guitar and one

\(^1\) The Mississippi Delta is an area between the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers in the Northwest region of Mississippi. Mississippi Delta Blues music, or “Delta blues,” is an early and popular form of rural blues that greatly influenced the modern, urban blues of the later twentieth century.


playing the accordion, Willie Brown and him picking guitar. Mr. Homer Lewis, he played the accordion.\(^3\)

These must have been challenging performances for a guitarist playing an unamplified acoustic guitar. It was difficult to be heard, or even noticed. Particularly in the evening, by which time much beer and “moonshine” had been drunk and the dancing was frenetic, an acoustic guitarist and singer would have to hit his guitar strings hard and sing quite loud to be heard, especially if the guitarist was sharing the stage with fellow musicians playing kazoos and accordions.

But Charley Patton was up to the task. He was the first bluesman to achieve fame, and he was a highly respected singer and guitarist. He was also an animated performer, and while his musicianship was genuine and would be demonstrated on subsequent recordings, Patton understood his audience and did not eschew showmanship. He had a remarkably powerful voice, reputed to be audible from 500 yards away.\(^4\) But Patton wouldn’t just sing; he would moan, laugh, and shout. He played the guitar behind his back, between his legs, and sometimes beat it without playing it at all, as if it were a drum. He jumped up and down, and generally did anything to keep his audience’s attention.\(^5\)

Patton’s protégé Howlin’ Wolf, who lived at Dockery’s Plantation as a youth and would go on to become one of the most successful Chicago Blues singers of all time, said of Patton,

\(^5\) Gioia, 51.
“He was a real showman. When he played his guitar, he would turn it over backwards and forwards, and throw it around over his shoulders and between his legs, throw it up in the sky.”

Charley Patton clearly commanded attention. But as Robert Johnson’s biographer Elijah Wald points out, as a live performer, Patton contrasted greatly with the artist we hear on his recordings. One difference was that he would not play only blues as he would do on record. In order to please a fickle and diverse audience, early country and folk music, gospel, pop tunes, and ballads filled out his repertoire. Also, his reputation as a subtle and sophisticated guitarist was established from his records, not his live performances, where he was regarded as more of a dazzling and exuberant showman, what contemporary Son House called Patton’s “clowning.”

At a “juke joint” on a Saturday night, Patton would focus more on being heard than on nuance and finesse. He would not sing dynamically with soulful depth. He would shout loud enough to be heard from the back of the room. He would play his guitar loudly, hitting the strings sharply and aggressively, not just to command attention, but also to keep it.

What Patton was offering was not just showmanship. He was trying to compete with the volume level of the rooms he was playing in. While musicians hope the audience can hear them, they need to hear themselves while performing, to have a chance of knowing how well they are playing. As the Beatles found out decades later while hopelessly trying to perform at Shea Stadium with underpowered equipment, before tens of thousands of screaming girls, as a

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7 Gioia, 51
8 Juke joints were houses and buildings that served as social clubs and concert venues for local rural workers to drink, dance, and listen to music.
musician, it is hard to tell how well you are playing when you cannot hear what you are doing. Patton, too, likely experienced that sensation.

Surely the dance halls, juke joints, house parties, and other venues Patton found himself in were hardly quiet places in which a guitarist could demonstrate nuanced subtlety or expect reverent and hushed attention. Rowdy patrons ready to blow off steam in the precious free time they had surely presented an interesting challenge to a performer playing an unamplified steel-string guitar. Playing the guitar intentionally loud at the expense of dynamic musicianship was Patton’s way of compensating for the inability of the instrument to be heard. And playing the guitar behind his back and between his legs allowed Patton to present a visually striking way of holding his audience’s attention, which relied on no sound at all. It was all a good show, but Patton’s methods were also a way to compensate for the fact that his guitar just was not loud enough. This problem would be magnified if Patton had to play accompanied by an accordion or a kazoo. His niece’s account of a Dockery barbecue at which Patton is playing in a group setting is unusual, though. Patton, like most delta blues singers who played an acoustic guitar, mainly performed alone.

But as the twentieth century progressed, and musical tastes evolved, musicians playing together in groups became increasingly common. Hawaiian, big band jazz, and western swing music all came into vogue in America in the 1920’s and 30’s. All these styles were presented in a big band setting, and guitarists were routinely employed in these groups. Big band Hawaiian music became so popular that venues such as the Hawaiian Room in the Hotel Lexington in New York City opened in the 1930’s, where Hawaiian music was played exclusively for large
audiences.\textsuperscript{10} But the insufficient volume produced by their instruments created an existential problem for guitarists playing in a big band. The collective noise of the brass and reed instruments easily drowned out an acoustic guitarist, already competing with the drums on stage for volume.\textsuperscript{11}

In big bands, several musicians were divided into sections of wind instruments, string, and rhythm. The guitarist was usually in the rhythm section, where he would be expected to play only chords, in keeping with the rhythm and harmony of the song. With the cacophony of loud horns and drums, the acoustic guitar could not compete in terms of volume. A guitarist playing single notes, as is done for solo or lead guitar playing, would not be loud enough. Or, if the band was not too loud, the size of the hall was often a problem. If it was very large, unamplified guitars have a limited range. Even a guitarist playing only rhythm, banging out chords as loud as he could, would not be heard amongst the clamor surrounding him.\textsuperscript{12} To compensate, some players resorted to playing banjo, which was at least louder than a guitar. But a banjo’s timbre differed from that of a guitar. It was not the same instrument.\textsuperscript{13} What was really needed was a new instrument that could be heard. What was needed was an electric guitar.

The invention of the electric guitar was thus based on a very practical premise: The guitarist playing in a band simply needed more volume to be adequately heard. But the earliest


progenitors of the electric guitar could hardly have realized that they had not only created a means by which guitarists could finally be heard, but they had also created a fundamentally new instrument. As progress on the instrument developed, the sound coming from the electric guitar was not simply that of an acoustic guitar played more loudly. Instead, the sound was unique, requiring new skill-sets for the instrument to reach its full potential. But as players developed new skills specific to the electric guitar, they realized how adaptable and diverse in its application this new instrument was.

The electric guitar is a remarkably versatile instrument. It is commonly used in every type of musical genre apart from classical music. This versatility springs from the fact that there is not one single type of electric guitar. There are various kinds, and amongst different brands there is considerable variation as well. Over time, these various types were used in the particular genres for which they were best suited. This gave the electric guitar its versatility. From quiet jazz combos to the loudest rock bands, the electric guitarist became a cherished asset rather than an afterthought. In this chapter, I will discuss the various types of electric guitars. But first let us try to define what an electric guitar is.

Acoustic guitars and electric guitars certainly look different. They both have six strings and a neck, but they are strikingly different in appearance. A crucial difference is the presence of a soundhole. A soundhole is the hole in the middle of an acoustic guitar, which is hollow. As the strings are played, the vibrations of the strings create sound that emanates from the hollow body of the guitar through the soundhole. The acoustic guitar is dependent upon this soundhole to create sound. The volume of the acoustic guitar can actually be augmented
through artificial means, but the tone is unaltered, and is not reliant upon electronic enhancement to produce sound.

An electric guitar does not have the acoustic guitar’s soundhole, which it relies on to create sound. The strings of an unplugged electric will not be silent when played, but the sound produced is nothing like that of an electric guitar when it is played through an amplifier. An amplifier is an electronic device that, in combination with one or more speakers, increases the power of the electric signal coming from a guitar or other instrument. Amplifiers are an essential component to playing an electric guitar.

Also essential, at least in terms of parsing the differences between an acoustic and electric guitar, is another electronic device known as a pickup. Along with the amplifier, the pickup provides the volume that Charley Patton and others were looking for decades ago. But the pickup also helped to make the electric guitar a unique instrument with its own unique sound.

More so than any other component or mechanism on an electric guitar, the pickup is what separates an electric guitar from a merely amplified acoustic. The earliest pickups were indeed applied to traditional acoustic guitars and there are still pickups available that can be used with acoustic guitars, though such pickups only amplify their volume. The acoustic can thus be played louder through an amplifier, but its tone and sound are largely unaltered. But it was the combination of pickups specifically intended to be used on a closed-top guitar without a soundhole that made an electric guitar “electric,” rather than merely an “amplified acoustic” guitar. Not only was it louder, but the timbre was actually changed, as the electric guitar
depended on the pickup for its sound and tone, rather than merely gaining an increase in volume through its application. As such, the electric guitar was effectively “born” with the addition of a pickup to a guitar that was specifically designed to use one.14

A pickup transmits sound from a guitar string, first through a cable attached to the guitar, then to an amplifier which transmits the sound through a speaker. It is typically a rectangular or tubular-shaped magnetic device that is situated right below the guitar strings. When one or more strings are plucked, the vibrations are picked up by magnetic poles in the pickup, which generate minute electrical currents that are then amplified and transformed back into sound waves.16 Remarkably, depending on the type of pickup used, this straightforward process can produce very different sounds, both in terms of timbre and overall quality. The Gibson humbucker pickup, for example, delivers a warm, thick tone, ideally suited for electric blues music, while the single-coil pickups found on Fender electric guitars have a brighter, thinner tone, well-suited for country and surf music. The type of electric guitar and the type of pickup greatly determines the sound that is produced.

15 A “humbucker” pickup. Originally produced by Gibson, humbuckers “buck the hum”, which is unwanted sound produced by electromagnetic interference. Not only did humbuckers eliminate this sound, they more importantly produced a thick, rich tone, especially when played at loud volume. This revolutionary tone became a hallmark of Gibson electric guitars in particular and the electric guitar in general.
16 Millard, 47-8.
I will now examine specific models of the electric guitar in chronological order, from the late 1920’s to the late 1950’s. We will see that electric guitars vary in terms of their degree of solidity. Some are hollow, some are completely solid, and some are partially solid, or semi-hollow. They are almost always constructed of wood (though one prominent early model was made of aluminum, as we shall see). While the earliest examples are not generally played today except as curiosities, many of the later models I will discuss are still very much in use by professionals and amateurs. The first electric guitar to be commercially available was the “Stromberg Electro,” a guitar with a single pickup that appeared in 1928. It was manufactured by the Stromberg-Voisinet Company in Chicago.

The Stromberg Electro is an example of what is known as a hollow-body electric guitar. A hollow-body electric is the type of guitar that is closest in design to an acoustic guitar. It is in fact sometimes referred to as a semi-acoustic guitar. It generally retains the basic shape of a

traditional acoustic or classical guitar, with the exception that no round soundhole is present. Rather, two f-shaped holes are located on either side of the strings, instead of below them. The guitar itself is still hollow, and thus still has some of the resonant qualities of an acoustic guitar. But the lack of a round soundhole creates differences in tone, which are apparent even when the hollow-body guitar is played unplugged. The f-holes cannot truly replicate the tone of a soundhole; a pickup may be applied to an acoustic guitar and played through an amplifier, but the instrument was not conceived to have these electronic aids, and is not reliant on them to make its intended sound. Indeed, pickups placed across the soundhole can have a detrimental effect on tone. Some modern acoustic guitars are sold with a pickup, but it is placed within the body of the guitar rather than across the soundhole, in order not to undermine the tone. The tone of a true hollow-body electric guitar, on the other hand, is reliant upon pickups and amplifiers to achieve its intended sound.

A 2008 *Vintage Guitar* magazine article describes the Stromberg as “the first commercially manufactured electric guitar.” The article draws on an October 20, 1928, *Music Trades* article which, in effect, announced the birth of the electric guitar. It describes a guitar that has an “electro-magnetic pickup,” which “is built within the instrument and attached to its sounding board.” It goes on to describe the pickup’s function: “The electro-magnetic pickup operates to convert the mechanical vibrations of a bridge or soundboard to electrical impulses. These impulses, in turn, are amplified, thereby increasing the tone of the instrument as many

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times as desired.”¹⁹ We can see clear evidence of the electric guitar’s original purpose—“increasing the tone” undoubtedly means increasing the volume—which guitarists needed in order to compete with the loud instruments with which they shared the stage in American bands at the time. And it elucidates the pickup’s design and its importance to the electric guitar’s sound. The f-holes, as can be seen in the photograph, indicate its hollow-bodied design, but no soundhole is present, as is the case with a true acoustic guitar.

The Stromberg-Electro was not a success. It was a heavy, cumbersome instrument, and despite the Music Trades article’s claim that it could “increase the tone as many times as desired,” it was simply underpowered, which made it difficult to hear amid the clamor that was to be found in the bands of the 1920’s and 30’s. But it was not merely an amplified acoustic. It demonstrated that it was possible to make a true hollow-bodied electric guitar that relied on pickups and amplification, not soundholes, to produce sound.

Stromberg eventually evolved into the Kay musical company, which became a successful purveyor of lower-priced budget guitars. But other companies were right on their heels in the quest for a commercially viable electric instrument. The Vega Company from Boston was known for making banjos when it tried to make an electric banjo in 1929.²⁰ Issued near the start of the Great Depression, the electric banjo was not a success, but eventually the company began to manufacture electric string instruments of all sorts, including an electric mandolin and even an electric violin, all produced by 1937.²¹ An electric guitar was released in 1936, and in 1937, Vega

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²⁰ Carter and Gruhn, 6.
announced an “electric footpedal, a volume control for electric guitars.”\textsuperscript{22} This was quite remarkable, as footpedals, tone-altering devices that are connected to the guitar with a cable and activated by foot, would not be in use until the late 1960’s.

Soon after the Stromberg Electro, a more successful and much different electric guitar appeared in 1931, which became known as the “Frying Pan” guitar. It was produced by what was to become known as the Rickenbacker Company, and it was an electrified example of what is known as a lap-steel guitar.

The lap steel guitar had originated in Hawaii in the nineteenth century. It is similar in shape to other types of acoustic guitars, but the method of playing is different. It is placed flat in front of the player, perpendicular to his body, rather than parallel. And rather than fretting a note on the fingerboard with his fingers, the player will take a metal or glass bar or tube, known as a “slide,” and gently glide the slide across the strings to create a pleasing “slurring” sound. This technique can also be played in the conventional position of holding the guitar parallel to the body, and has been, to great effect--many blues and rock guitarists became great “slide” players.\textsuperscript{23} But the lap steel guitar is played in the lap. Following is a photograph of a lap steel player:

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{lap_steel_player.jpg}
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid, 353.
\textsuperscript{23} Robert Johnson, Elmore James, and Duane Allman are always mentioned when discussing the great slide players of conventional acoustic and electric guitars. These players would hold and play the guitar in the conventional manner—with the guitar parallel to the player’s body, but would use a slide on a string just as a steel guitar player would. This technique is still employed today by rock and blues guitarists, but to a much lesser degree, particularly with regards to rock music.
As Hawaiian music, western swing, and country music became popular in the first half of the twentieth century, lap steel guitarists faced the same existential problem that players of conventional guitars faced. Players of lap steel guitars often found themselves without sufficient volume to be heard amongst their bandmates. Hawaiian and western swing steel players thus created a market for an electric version of this variant of the guitar, which was popular in the 1920’s and 30’s.

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24 Kaki King playing a lap steel: [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Kaki_King.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/7/75/Kaki_King.jpg)
To fill the void, the Ro-Pat-In Company in 1931 released the A-22 “Frying Pan” Hawaiian Steel guitar. It was called the “Frying Pan” because of its shape: it had a long neck with a small, banjo-shaped body that resembled a pan. Ro-Pat-In would evolve into the Rickenbacker International Corporation, the very same company that made semi-hollow electrics for the Beatles. Before that, though, they made an odd lap-steel guitar that was the first solid-body electric guitar.

The A-22 was unique. It had a solid cast-aluminum body lacking any soundholes cavities. It also contained an external pickup, the first of its kind, though it was a crude horseshoe-magnet design, unlike later pickups. The guitar’s distinct shape, with its round body, differed

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from standard lap steel guitars, and it was radically different from conventional guitars, as well. The frying pan guitar was the first electric guitar to be produced in substantial numbers. The A-22 frying pan was moderately successful, but it is seen now as more a curiosity and a relic. But it was groundbreaking in that it introduced the concept of solid-body electric guitar design.

The solid-body electric guitar is an instrument with an entirely solid body, usually solid wood. It is completely unlike a traditional acoustic, hollow-body, or semi-hollow electric guitar. The solid-body electric is what most people think of when asked to describe an electric guitar. More so than any other type of electric guitar, it took on an iconic status in American culture, as its greatest practitioners in rock became not just masters of the instrument, but guitar “gods” or “heroes.” Among the solid-body’s advantages is the elimination of the unwanted squealing and feedback that is a common problem with hollow and even semi-hollow electric guitars when played at the very high volume often utilized in rock music. A fine solid-body, however, usually sounds better the louder it is turned up; even a semi-hollow that is not feeding back cannot match the tones capable of an electric guitar played loud.

The solid-body guitar represents the furthest break from acoustic guitar design. It has no soundholes or f-holes and is completely reliant on electronic aids to produce its intended sound. Among the earliest electric guitars were attempts at solid-body design, such as the Rickenbacker A-22 we just examined. Another was a solid-body invented by Lloyd Loar, former engineer for the Gibson Guitar Corporation.

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Though it would become one of the two most prominent and successful producers of the electric guitar, the Gibson Guitar Corporation had little interest in electric guitars at the outset. That is because unlike its eventual arch-rival, Fender Musical Instruments, Gibson was an established company with a singular reputation for making fine acoustic instruments. A woodworking son of an Englishman named Orville Gibson founded the company in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1902. From the outset, Gibson instruments were elegant in design, reflecting Orville’s neo-classical approach. He was innovative in that he believed that unstressed wood resulted in superior tone; thus, rather than bending flat strips of wood to fit the designs of instruments with their curves and contours, he would cut the wood to shape from solid boards. His instruments were decorated with intricate inlays of ebony, abalone, and mother-of-pearl, and had sculpted scrolls and points.\(^{27}\) This refined, classical aesthetic would endure, and can be seen in Gibson’s electric guitars, up to the present day.

But Gibson’s acceptance of the electric guitar was not immediate. Lloyd Loar had been Gibson’s most prominent engineer in the 1920’s. Among his innovations were the f-hole soundholes and a bridge with adjustable intonation.\(^{28}\) Described by Gibson historian A.R. Duchossoir as a “multi-talented personality,” Loar not only designed such classic Gibson instruments as the L-5, but was also a musician, composer, teacher, mandolin performer, physics engineer, and researcher.\(^{29}\) Loar designed “experimental electrics” during his time with

\(^{27}\) Wheeler, 94-95.
\(^{28}\) Wheeler, 100. A bridge a device on the body of the guitar to which the strings are attached.
\(^{29}\) Duchossoir, 9.
the company, and came to believe that “the only way to produce instruments with tonal consistency was to electrify them.”

Gibson was not receptive to this assertion, however, so Loar formed his own company in Michigan called Vivi-Tone in 1933. At this time, Loar designed and constructed an electric guitar made out of solid wood, probably the first wooden solid-body electric guitar ever manufactured, although never produced in significant numbers.

Loar’s solid-body was the first of its kind, though it bore little resemblance to the iconic solid-body guitars produced by Gibson and Fender. It was called the Vivi-Tone Electric Lute-Body Tenor Guitar, and it first appeared in 1933. It is a four-string guitar and it is called a “tenor” guitar because it is meant to be tuned in the same fashion as a tenor banjo, which was often used in order to obtain more volume within the context of a big band.

The guitar had an interesting teardrop shape with f-holes that were painted on. It was also a very thin guitar, quite unlike the boxy and cumbersome hollow-body acoustics that were

30 Ibid., 9
common at the time. Even with this very early electric guitar, we can hear an instrument that is
taking on its own sound: it does not sound like a louder version of an acoustic guitar. The sound
is rather pedestrian, however, when compared to later sold-body instruments. Loar’s company
did not last long, and the Vivi-Tone Electric Lute-Body Tenor Guitar was neither produced nor
sold in large numbers. A far more successful electric guitar was the hollow-bodied Gibson ES-

![Gibson ES-150](https://www.wikiwand.com/en/Gibson)

This instrument was groundbreaking in several ways when it first appeared in 1936. Though a few earlier models like the Stromberg-Electro had been manufactured and sold in small numbers, the ES-150 was the first commercially successful electric guitar and the first electric guitar produced by Gibson Guitar Corporation, one of the two most successful and

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influential electric guitar manufacturers. It also incorporated, for the first time, an external “bar” pickup placed right under the strings, rather than within the body of the guitar. The pickup would thus transmit the vibrations of the strings, rather than the vibrations of the body of the guitar, as was the case with the Stromberg. This made for a far clearer and more pleasing sound, and this design would become the standard application of pickups on all subsequent electric guitars. Guy Hart, general manager for Gibson at the time, filed for a patent for the ES-150 in February 1936. The filing explains the function of the electric guitar and its reliance not on the natural resonance of a soundhole or “soundbox,” but on the pickup, for sound: “I have designed the body of the instrument with a relatively thick wall of hard wood...which is substantially lacking in the quality of resonance...The necessity for an expensive sounding box is eliminated, the notes being reproduced very faithfully by the electrical pickup of the invention.”

Perhaps the most enduring influence of the 150, however, is its association with the legendary Charlie Christian. A pioneering jazz guitarist, Christian, who was best known for his work with Benny Goodman, exclusively played and popularized the ES-150. With the greater volume provided by the 150, Christian was loud enough to be heard so that he could play improvised solos, and in doing so he helped revolutionize the instrument, providing impetus for a style of playing that came to be known as lead guitar. Sadly, Christian contracted tuberculosis in the late 1930’s, and died of the disease on March 2, 1942, at the age of 25.
Electric guitar design and sales were stagnant during the Second World War, but the postwar years saw resurgence in the electric guitar. In 1950, the first commercially successful mass-produced solid-body guitar, still widely used today, was released. This iconic instrument was the Fender Telecaster.\(^{36}\)

With this instrument, created by Leo Fender, who founded Fender Musical Instruments in Fullerton, California, in 1946, we see the full fruition of the electric guitar. No f-holes are present. It is a fully solid instrument, reliant on its two pickups for sound. As a solid-body guitar, its sound will be not undermined, but enhanced by loud volume. Feedback will not result as the guitar is turned up. Indeed, a desirable distortion or “overdrive” will be created. With its

modern design, futuristic look, and excellent performance and durability, the Fender Telecaster represented the best in American manufacturing when it first appeared in 1950. Though it represented a breakthrough, the Telecaster or “Tele” also had a very straightforward design. With its bolt-on, detachable neck, sleek headstock, and sturdy, uncomplicated body, the Telecaster was an electric guitar that could be produced in large numbers without loss of quality.

Country music and steel guitars were still very popular when Leo Fender started working on the Telecaster in the 1940’s, and the Telecaster was originally conceived with steel guitars in mind. As Fender told music historian Tom Wheeler, “The steel guitar was extremely popular, and we wanted a standard guitar that had a little bit more of the sound of the steel guitar.” Fender largely succeeded. With its bright, “twangy” sound, unlike the dark, warmer sounds of the Gibsons, the Telecaster sounded something like a steel guitar and became the standard electric guitar used in country music. Virtually all the great electric country guitar players used Telecasters, including James Burton, Albert Lee, and Brad Paisley. With the Telecaster, a new era for the electric guitar began. As Wheeler has written, it was “the world’s first solid-body consequence, and ultimately an indispensible tool for thousands of players.” The Telecaster was a major step forward in electric guitar design.

A new design was to follow, however, which was a compromise between hollow-boded and solid-boded electric guitars. It came to be known as the semi-hollow electric guitar.

38 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cy_BuhWK3-M. The great electric country guitarist Albert Lee playing his 1953 Telecaster in a StarLicks instruction video from 1986
39 Wheeler, 68.
This is the legendary Gibson ES-335, a guitar as popular today as it was when it first appeared in 1958. As we can see, it has a dramatically different shape from the more conventionally designed ES-150. With its thinner profile, “humbucker” pickups, and double “cutaway” design, the ES-335 could hardly be mistaken for an acoustic guitar. Its appearance is more singularly “electric”—that is, it is an electric guitar that not only relies on electricity for sound, but takes on a unique and separate tone when played to its fullest potential. It is termed “semi-hollow” because a solid block of maple wood runs through the center of the otherwise hollow body of the guitar.

This “semi-hollow” design was seen as a compromise between hollow and solid-body designs. Gibson had been producing solid-body guitars for years, successfully competing with its arch-rival Fender. But Gibson president Ted McCarty sought something new, something that could be played at greater volume without the undesired feedback that occurred when a

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hollow-body electric was played loud. It would retain the woody resonance and dark, warm tones of a hollow-body guitar, but would be thinner and less cumbersome to play. The ES-335 was the guitar McCarty had in mind. The 335 has a rich, thick tone when played loudly, much like a solid-body, but is still a light guitar, considerably lighter than the Les Paul Model, Gibson’s signature solid-body electric. As McCarty told Tom Wheeler, “We were after the sustain of the solid-body, but with a little less weight.”41

One reason for its success was its association with great players. Much like the ES-150 and Charlie Christian, the ES-335 is identified with a legend: the great blues guitarist B.B. King, one of the most influential lead electric guitarists of the twentieth century. With the 335, the combination of light strings, loud volume, thick tone, and tremendous sustain, King was able to develop techniques that would be copied by virtually everyone who has played an improvised solo on an electric guitar since he started playing the 335 in the late 1950’s.42 And as with Christian and the ES-150, the association between a particular guitar (the ES-335), and the player (B.B. King), was mutually beneficial. The guitars became almost as famous and revered as the legends who played them.

Another example of a semi-hollow electric guitar, but with a different sound, is the Rickenbacker 330. Like the Gibson ES-335, it first appeared in 1958.

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42 B.B. King can be seen here playing a ES-335. With this guitar, played at sufficient volume, techniques such as string-bending and vibrato were able to be used to great effect, much greater than on any instrument King had used previously. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNr_elgP0tI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dNr_elgP0tI)
43[Rickenbacker-330](http://www.projetmusic.net/ekmps/shops/projectmusic/images/rickenbacker-330-walnut-[2]-16467-p.jpg)
This guitar was produced by Rickenbacker International Corporation of Santa Ana, California, the same company that released the A-22 “Frying Pan” solid-body guitar in 1931. Like the ES-335, it has a much thinner profile than a hollow-body electric, and even more than the 335, it has a futuristic, modern look that could not possibly be mistaken for an acoustic or even an electric hollow-body guitar. It differs significantly in sound and application from the Gibson: with its brighter, more “jangly” tone, the 330 was used more for rhythm and fingerpicking guitar playing than the lead guitar playing of the electric blues guitarists. Rhythm guitar refers to the playing of chords, while fingerstyle, or fingerpicking, refers to picking the strings of the guitar with multiple fingers, including the thumb. Since early rock ‘n’ roll and folk-rock music relied on those styles of playing, the Rickenbacker found favor with bands of that ilk. Indeed, none other than the Beatles and the groundbreaking American folk-rock band, the Byrds, frequently used the Rickenbacker 330. The 330’s sound was an indelible mark that identified the sound of those bands.
From its origins as a way to increase the volume of the guitar, the electric guitar would grow to become an icon. Its various incarnations—hollow-body, semi-hollow, and solid-body—made the electric a remarkably diverse instrument, and it was applied to nearly every form of American music in the twentieth century. Its sleek shape, beauty, and groundbreaking sound gave it an otherworldly quality that no other instrument could match, and its association with legends such as B.B King, Charlie Christian, and the guitar gods of rock ‘n ‘roll, solidified its status as a icon of American culture.

In the next chapter, I will examine how the electric guitar became such an iconic symbol, and explore the way it influenced and was used in various forms of American music. Its versatility made it applicable to every form of American music, and its sleek, futuristic look and beauty appealed to musicians and fans of all types of music, save classical. It also gave rise to a new breed of virtuosos, with skill sets that were peculiar to the electric guitar. And the electric guitar itself would become a symbol of American culture.
CHAPTER 2

SOCIAL IMPACT
By 1965, the electric guitar had been firmly established as an instrument of choice in most forms of American music. Its original purpose of merely providing more volume had long been supplanted by the unique sounds and wide application that the modern electric guitar had to offer. While the acoustic guitar was not abandoned completely, in the genres of jazz, country & western, blues, and especially rock ‘n’ roll, the electric guitar was prominently featured as a rhythm and lead instrument, both in the studio and on stage.

But this did not apply to American folk music. Concurrent with the rise of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950’s and 1960’s was the Folk Boom, a revival in popularity of folk music in American culture. As film, radio, and television helped spur the growth of rock ‘n’ roll, so, too, did folk music benefit from the exposure these mediums gave to the music of legendary folk artists such as Woody Guthrie, Leadbelly, and Pete Seeger. While often performed in ensembles, such as Pete Seeger’s group the Weavers, folk music had a tradition of being performed by a single person, usually a man, with a guitar, always an acoustic.

In the folk realm, a person accompanied by an acoustic guitar could tell vivid, amusing stories or make keen observations with the lyrics he sang, often of his own making. A man with a guitar playing simple songs could articulate the highest aspirations of his listeners with the words he sang, as well as give voice to social concerns and criticisms that many in the folk music community shared.\(^\text{44}\) By the 1960’s, folk music had become a vehicle for social commentary and political activism as new artists such as Peter, Paul and Mary; Joan Baez; and especially Bob Dylan, found great acclaim and popularity with audiences that cherished the

“purity” of folk music—a purity that stood in contrast to the perceived superficiality of rock ‘n’ roll, with its supposedly inane lyrics and loud volume. And in rock ‘n’ roll, no instrument was more responsible for that volume than the electric guitar.

So, when Bob Dylan showed up at the prestigious Newport Folk Festival on July 25, 1965, playing an electric guitar with an electric blues band, many in the audience actually booed the man who had just been introduced by Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul and Mary, as “the man who had changed the face of folk music.” Jim Rooney, one of the organizers of the festival, noted that “there was a conservative streak in some people involved in folk music which said that ‘this is the way it’s supposed to be.’” For anyone, even the Festival’s most highly anticipated and popular artist, to be seen playing an electric guitar with a loud electric band, was tantamount to blasphemy.

Bob Dylan had already utilized electric guitars and a makeshift rock band on his landmark album *Bringing It all Back Home*, released in March of that year. Playing electric guitar on that album was Michael Bloomfield, the first white musician to earn renown as an excellent electric blues lead guitarist, and who would be profoundly influential to electric blues and rock lead guitarists who followed in his wake. *Bringing It all Back Home* was one of the first of the genre known as “folk-rock,” but no one thought Dylan would actually play rock ‘n’ roll in what was supposed to be a folk festival. Indeed, half of *Bringing It all Back Home* was comprised of Dylan playing acoustic guitar and singing folk songs as he always had, and the previous day,

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Dylan had performed alone playing an acoustic guitar at a folk music workshop. However, there was a blues workshop that day as well, which featured Michael Bloomfield performing with his band, the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. That band was groundbreaking in several ways, not least because it was composed of black and white musicians, which was unheard of for a blues band at the time. But their attendance at the festival displeased festival organizer and famed folklorist Alan Lomax, who disdained the band, not only because he thought they were too loud, but also because they were mostly white, which made them somehow less authentic.47

Dylan was apparently irked by Lomax’s condescension, and unbeknownst to anyone, decided to perform Sunday night with the Butterfield Blues Band after a makeshift rehearsal the previous evening. The sound was raw and loud, as can be heard in the video in the link below.48 Michael Bloomfield’s innovative blues licks, which can be clearly heard, shocked the folk festival crowd, who were unprepared for the sight of Bob Dylan actually playing an electric guitar. Jim Rooney and many others cheered Dylan’s new sound, but at least as many others loudly booed, as can be heard at the end of the video. The purity of folk music had been tarnished by Dylan’s and Bloomfield’s noisy Fender guitars.

Folk singer-songwriter Oscar Brand later complained that the electric guitar “was the antithesis of what the festival was.”49 Attendee and music critic Greil Marcus extrapolated further: “There was anger, there was fury, there was applause, there was stunned silence, but there was a great sense of betrayal, as if something precious and delicate was being dashed to

48 “Maggie’s Farm” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G8yU8wk67gY.
49 Marshall, 14.
the ground and stomped. As if the delicate flower of Folk music, the priceless heritage of impoverished black farmers and destitute white miners, was being mocked by a dandy, with a garish, noisy electric guitar.” Folk legend Pete Seeger was so incensed that backstage he was looking for something to cut the cables with, to silence the guitars, while Dylan was performing. He later claimed that it was the quality of the sound that bothered him, not the use of electric instruments per se. But this explanation has been contested by those who believe he changed his story over the years, when he realized he was on the wrong side of music history.\footnote{Lifton, paragraph 10.}

It is unthinkable now to imagine Bob Dylan getting booed for merely playing an electric guitar—so established is the instrument in American music of all forms. But such was the impact the instrument had on American society in the mid-twentieth century. The electric guitar went from being a practical necessity for guitarists who needed more volume to a transformative icon of American culture. It was transformative in the sense that its versatility and widespread application changed virtually all forms of American music, and iconic in the sense that it serves as a symbol of American culture in several ways. When considering the criteria for what makes an object an icon, historian Andre Millard points out that an icon should define values, provide meaning, and stand for something more than just its original intended purpose. The electric guitar is an American icon because it came to represent more than just a means to increase the volume of the guitar. It became representative of American culture.\footnote{Millard, 8.}

In this chapter, I will examine the ways in which the electric guitar, with its remarkable versatility, changed various forms of American music, and represented and influenced

\footnote{Ibid, paragraph 11.}
American culture in the mid-to late twentieth century. But first let us examine how electricity and a subculture of tinkering played a role in the electric guitar’s development.

Considering how much electricity radically altered life in the first half of the twentieth century, not just in terms of entertainment and popular consumption, but also in everything from refrigeration to labor-saving tools and convenient appliances, it is no wonder that electricity was seen as a wondrous, mysterious force in early twentieth-century America. Electricity was still a novel phenomenon when the electric guitar was developed in the early 1930’s. The electric utility industry began when Thomas Edison’s Edison Electric Illuminating Company, with backing from J.P. Morgan, provided current to eighty-two customers in New York City in 1882. The spread of electricity was steady, but it was not until the 1930’s that most of rural America was electrified, thanks to initiatives such as the Tennessee Valley Authority, which brought affordable hydroelectric power to Tennessee farmers.

By then, thanks to innovations such as vacuum-tube amplification and paper-coned speakers, along with the ever-increasing availability of electricity to both urban and rural homes, the radio had become a groundbreaking new medium. The National Broadcasting Company (NBC) in 1926 and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) in 1927 began broadcasting coast to coast, bringing news, weather, sports, music, serial dramas, and more to consumers nationwide.

Sales of vacuum-tubed radios reflected how popular the new medium had become as more and more homes became electrified, booming from an annual $60 million in 1922 to $843

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54 Ibid., 1077.
million in 1929. Up to 75% of homes in affluent communities had radios by the start of the 1930’s. Vacuum-tube amplification, developed by inventor Lee De Forest, also greatly improved phonographs, which allowed for the first public-address systems, as well as motion pictures with sound (talkies), and amplifiers to be used with electric instruments.

With these innovations came a whole new way of perceiving sound—electrically amplified sound. A singer’s voice heard loud and clear, unlike ever before, through a microphone; an actor’s voice, previously silent, now heard in a movie theater through loudspeakers; all kinds of sounds coming from a magical box in a living room, that could be heard instantaneously with the flip of a switch. All were profound and permanent changes to American popular culture, and they transformed how entertainment was consumed and created. The electric guitar was a direct result, and representative of, this new age. It also sprang from a culture of tinkering that electricity and the radio inspired.

The men, and they were all white men who were the prime movers behind the creation of the electric guitar, came from a culture of electronic tinkering that was galvanized by the technological innovations of the new electric age. Guitar legend Les Paul crystallized the spirit of this new tinkering culture in a 1992 interview: “Because it was all brand new, it was a heaven and a haven for me. I’d take the plate off the light switch, and I’d have to get a shock to find out exactly what made that light light. My mother’s player piano—that came apart; the wind-up

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56 Ibid, 316.
phonograph—oh, I had to take that apart right away. I was so curious, my brother thought I was nuts."57

Of greatest interest to tinkerers was the crystal radio set, which, with its vacuum-tubes emitting glowing light and receiving sounds from far-off places, assumed a magical, futuristic aura that fascinated the men who would make the electric guitar a reality.58 Indeed, it is no coincidence that the earliest progenitors of the electric guitar were tinkerers and radio enthusiasts, as their passion for tinkering with radios and harnessing electricity grew into a means of applying electronic, technological innovation to the guitar. Les Paul and Leo Fender, the two most famous innovators behind the development of the electric guitar, were radio enthusiasts before they began tinkering with guitars in order to make them electric. Fender’s guitar factory in Fullerton, California, where Fender Musical Instruments was born, started out as a radio repair shop. Paul built his first crystal radio set in 1927, and shortly thereafter began broadcasting from the basement of his mother’s house.59

Born Lester Polfuss on June 9, 1915, in Waukesha, Wisconsin, Les Paul (1915-2009) was a million-selling performer, guitarist, guitar builder, and recording pioneer, whose innovations in that realm included multitrack recording, delay effects, and overdubbing. A performer from an early age, often going by the moniker Rhubarb Red, Les first got the idea of tinkering with his guitar when, after a performance, a patron passed him a note saying his guitar was not loud

58 Waksman, 41.
59 Waksman, 42.
enough. He then took his father’s radio-phonograph set, and after some tinkering, came up with something like an electric guitar: “Then I had to take my dad’s radio, and I just took a phonograph pick-up [needle], and jabbed it into the top of the guitar, wired it up, and turned it on. And that was the beginning of the electric guitar for me. And that electric guitar—boy, I’m telling you, the tips went up and it became quite an argumentative subject. Many musicians said, ‘What in the world are you doing amplifying a guitar? You’re ruining the sound.’”

That polarizing reaction, not to what Les Paul was playing or how well, but to the sound that was coming from his rudimentary electric, was not unlike the reaction Bob Dylan would endure at Newport in 1965. The mere sound of the electric guitar—loathsome to some, delightful to others—was one of the key factors in its influence on popular music and American culture. In rock ‘n’ roll, particularly, it not only reflected but helped to create the culture surrounding rock ‘n’ roll music, and it was an indispensible tool in creating the genre itself. I will further explore this connection between rock ‘n’ roll and the electric guitar, but first let us examine how the electric guitar changed other genres in American popular music.

As we saw in the first chapter, the electric guitar’s raison d’être originally was to allow guitarists playing in big band ensembles to be more easily heard. In the process, guitarists began to be featured as soloists, no longer relegated to playing only chords as rhythm accompanists. The style of lead guitar—lead meaning taking solos much like a horn player would—blossomed with the advent of the electric guitar. It was not unheard of before electricity: Django Reinhardt was an outstanding jazz lead acoustic guitarist in Europe in the

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61 Ibid.
1930’s. But Reinhardt was exceptional. Apart from him, few jazz players and none of note were playing lead before the electric guitar. His playing was also limited to quartets, as he would not have been loud enough in a larger ensemble, and the electric guitar, with its ease of play, thicker tone and sustain, and higher volume, facilitated a new specialization of lead guitar playing that eventually gave rise to a mythic figure in American culture—the guitar hero, or guitar god.

This new lead guitar style was popularized first by the aforementioned Charlie Christian, who was the first electric lead guitarist of note and, by elevating the guitar from a rhythm to a lead instrument, transformed the genre of jazz, in particular, and American music generally. Christian ushered in the new age of electric lead guitar in an article he wrote for Down Beat magazine in 1939, in which he charged that “most bandleaders did not know how to use their guitarists effectively and relegated these musicians to rhythm parts, which gave guitarists little chance to demonstrate their artistry.”62 Christian decried the traditional role of guitarists, saying they had been merely “plunking on a gadget to keep the rhythm going.”63 He goes on to write that “Electrical amplification has given guitarists a new lease on life,” and speaks directly to his fellow pickers, heralding a brighter future for guitar players:

“I know, and so does the rest of our small circle, that you play damned fine music, but now you’ve got a chance to bring the fact to the attention of not only short-sighted bandleaders but to the attention of the world. And I don’t think it’ll be long before you’re

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feeding your stomach as well as your heart. So take heart, all you starving guitarists...practice solo stuff, single string and otherwise, and save up a few dimes to amplify your instrument. You continue to play the guitar the way it should be played, and you’ll make the rest of the world like it.”

Christian could hardly have been more prophetic. He is advocating the use of the electric guitar not only to make the guitar louder, but also to facilitate a player’s growth into a lead soloist and to change the role of the guitarist within the band. And if lead guitar playing is pursued, according to Christian, the rest of the world will surely like it. What Christian wrote turned out to be true.

We heard Charlie Christian playing at Minton’s club in the previous chapter. His fluid playing would influence a long list of brilliant lead jazz guitarists, including Wes Montgomery, Joe Pass, Tal Farlow, Jim Hall, Pat Martino, George Benson, and many others. A fine example of electric jazz guitar playing, and the technique that an electric guitar facilitates, can be heard in this Youtube clip of Wes Montgomery playing “Round Midnight” in 1965. Montgomery’s brilliant use of octaves as his fingers slide around the neck of the guitar creates a pleasing soundscape that could not be replicated on an acoustic guitar. Note that Montgomery is only using his thumb to pluck, not a pick. This produces a warmer, softer tone than playing with a pick, but at the expense of lower volume. On an acoustic guitar, Montgomery’s thumb would hardly be heard, without picking very hard. This would nullify the intended effect, as the electric’s volume allows Montgomery to pick lightly and softly, creating a warm, pleasing tone.

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64 Ibid.
that is still loud and clear enough to be heard. We can also see and hear in this clip how Montgomery uses the technique of sliding horizontally with his fingers from note to note across the neck of the guitar, creating a fluid sound that is enhanced by the warm tone of his guitar and amplifier. The slides would hardly be audible on an acoustic. The loud volume provided by the electric guitar allows for Montgomery to play more softly, which permits his technique to be fully realized.

This approach is different than the way Hard Rock guitarists look at volume; while they, like jazz guitarists, may pick lightly and appreciate that they do not have to pick hard to produce sound, they choose to turn the amplifier up as loud as it can go, or close to it, to explore all the sonic possibilities that high volume can provide on an electric guitar. Such is the broad functionality of the electric—it can facilitate and enhance Montgomery’s quiet style, while doing the same, in a very different way, for a hard rock virtuoso such as Jimi Hendrix.

In the realm of blues, players also found great use for the electric guitar.

No genre was more dramatically altered by the electric guitar than the blues. The acoustic guitar had always played a central part in the music, as itinerant bluesmen such as Charley Patton and Robert Johnson toured the south in the twenties and thirties, playing at juke joints and picnics. The music followed the migration of African-Americans to northern cities such as Chicago and New York in the 1940’s and 50’s. Chicago, in particular, became the epicenter of urban blues music. But, like Charley Patton, guitarists found themselves unable to be heard sufficiently amongst the clamor of a well-imbibed audience in a smoky blues club. As Muddy Waters’ lead guitarist Jimmy Rogers explained to blues historian Jas Obrecht, “[When]
the crowds commenced getting bigger and more noisy, you could be playin’ a number and the people was noisy, and you really couldn’t cut through too well.” But far beyond providing more volume, the electric guitar inspired new techniques and sounds that would not only change the course of the blues, but would also greatly influence later rock guitar heroes.

A particular style of playing that was enhanced by the electric is slide guitar, which, like the lap steel, entails sliding a metal or glass tubing across the strings rather than fretting them, or pressing down on the string to produce sound. This style was utilized from the earliest days of the blues, as can be heard in this 1937 Robert Johnson recording of “Traveling Riverside Blues.” Johnson’s slide guitar perfectly complements his voice as he demonstrates his prowess at both playing and singing. But even with his aggressive style, Johnson’s slide guitar sounds understated when compared to the sound of Elmore James, the foremost electric slide blues guitarist of the 1950’s. On this rendition of “Dust My Broom,” James’ slide guitar projects in a way that Johnson’s never could. The volume provided by the electric guitar allowed James to front a band, and play melodic slide guitar solos, with the bass and drums providing the harmony and rhythm.

Slide guitar was not the only style of blues guitar playing that was changed by the electric guitar. As with jazz, there were virtually no lead guitarists in the blues vein before the arrival of the electric guitar. But electric blues guitarists took things a step further; they

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developed new techniques that were created solely on, and facilitated by, the electric guitar. Chief among these techniques are string-bending and the application of vibrato. And while he was not the first electric guitarist to bend a string or apply vibrato, B.B King (1925-2015) developed these techniques more so than any other player before him, and his influence can be heard in the playing of virtually all of the lead rock and blues guitarists who followed him.

Born in the Mississippi Delta in 1925, King grew up listening to great acoustic blues guitarists such as his cousin Bukka White. But he could never play slide guitar. As he told Rolling Stone Magazine, “I wanted to be able to do like my cousin, Bukka White and some of the other

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great slide guitarists. I have stupid fingers. They just wouldn't do it.” To approximate that slurring sound of the slide guitar, King developed a new way to apply vibrato that would forever change lead guitar playing. Previously, guitarists had applied vibrato by rapidly shaking their finger while pressing down on the string. They would shake their finger horizontally, without bending or moving the string at all. But King would shake his finger vertically, and often actually bend the string slightly, back and forth very rapidly, producing a pronounced vibrato effect. As he said, “I just trill my hand. I got better at it...you grab a note and just trill your hand...after I practiced for a while, you learn that you can sustain it.” King, and other Blues greats such as Albert King and Otis Rush, found that bending lighter, thinner strings in various ways on an electric guitar produced sounds previously unthinkable for a guitar, which would become a standard technique for lead electric guitarists thereafter.

Country & western music also was dramatically altered by the use of the electric guitar. As we saw in the previous chapter, acoustic guitarists could hardly be heard when playing in loud Western Swing bands in the 1920’s and 30’s, and often resorted to playing banjo, which was somewhat louder, but clearly not the same as a guitar. Leo Fender, with his groundbreaking solid-body guitar, the Fender Telecaster, gave country guitar players a new lease on life. With its distinctive twang, the Telecaster suited country music perfectly, and players such as James Burton, Albert Lee, and Clarence White developed a whole new style of playing that would not have been possible without an electric guitar. Like the blues players, country players utilized string bending on an electric, but in a different way.

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71 Ibid.
As we saw in the previous chapter, among the first electric guitars to be produced was the Rickenbacker A-22 “Frying Pan” solid-body lap steel guitar. This idea of electrifying a steel guitar was developed further with the invention of the pedal steel guitar.

This instrument hardly looks like a conventional electric guitar. The player sits in front of the instrument and uses a slide to play the notes much like a lap steel or slide guitar player would. The pedals are used to raise or lower the pitch of the chord being played without using the slide to do so. This produces a wonderful sound as can be heard in this YouTube clip by Speedy West.73

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Electric country lead guitarists often try to mimic this sound with string bending. Clarence White (1944-1973), the brilliant electric country guitarist, was perhaps the greatest at this style. Apart from being a great guitarist, he also, along with Byrds bandmate Gene Parsons, invented a device known as the Parsons-White String Bender. This mechanism, built into the back of a Telecaster, would raise the pitch of the second string (B) on an electric guitar when the guitarist pulled on the guitar strap, which would activate the device, much like the pedals would alter the pitch on a pedal-steel guitar. The striking effect of this can be heard in this clip of Clarence White playing a Telecaster with a String Bender. This method of playing is not possible on an acoustic guitar.

In addition to being one of the greatest electric country guitarists, White was a groundbreaking acoustic player in the field of bluegrass, an acoustic wing of country music. Some of his playing in this style can be heard here. The difference in White’s playing in these two clips is astonishing. Together these clips show not only White’s remarkable breadth as a player, but also how different electric and acoustic country guitar playing can be. This is due to the unique properties of the electric guitar. Clarence White used these properties to create sounds even he could not achieve on an acoustic. Thus, as in jazz and blues, the electric guitar was not only a new instrument that country guitarists could employ when they needed more volume. It also changed the music itself, by creating a whole new style of playing. Because of this, the Fender Telecaster became an iconic symbol of modern country music.

But in no genre is the electric guitar more important, and iconic, than in rock ‘n’ roll. The instrument changed permanently the other genres we have discussed, but they had all existed before the electric guitar. But the electric guitar is intrinsic to rock ‘n’ roll. It is an essential aspect of the music. Rock ‘n’ roll had not existed until the advent of the electric guitar. It symbolized the music, and, over time, became a symbol of American culture, as rock ‘n’ roll became a cultural phenomenon and both a polarizing and a unifying force.

In *Baby Boomer Rock ‘n’ Roll Fans: The Music Never Ends*, historian Joseph Kotarba defines rock ‘n’ roll using several criteria. First, rock ‘n’ roll was created for and marketed to young people, whose musical tastes reflected their cultural milieu. Second, the music has its origins in African-American musical styles. In addition, rock ‘n’ roll is “primarily guitar-driven and amplified.” 76 Very few, if any, bands thought of as “rock” groups have existed without an electric guitarist, and the guitarist is almost always the main driver of the rhythm, and the focus of the instrumental breaks and solos. It also provided most of the volume, and, as the need for louder volume was the *raison d’être* for the electric guitar’s origins, so loud volume became an indelible mark of rock ‘n’ roll music: the electric guitar and rock ‘n’ roll became inextricably linked. Thus, the tonal possibilities and excitement that a loud electric guitar produced also made rock ‘n’ roll, and, by extension, the electric guitar, a noisy, disruptive, and potentially dangerous medium, especially in the conservative environment of 1950’s America from which rock ‘n’ roll emerged.

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Rock ‘n’ roll certainly challenged established hierarchies and acceptable norms when it first appeared in the 1950’s. In All Shook Up: How Rock ‘n’ Roll Changed America, Glenn Altschuler writes how Rock ‘n’ Roll was very much a dangerous noise and a threat to established order: “ridiculed by self-proclaimed arbiters of musical taste, deplored by guardians of sexual morality, attacked by whites who feared its breaking of racial barriers, blamed by the media for juvenile delinquency, rock ‘n’ roll was embraced by the young.”

Certainly, the racial aspect of rock ‘n’ roll was significant. African American stars were embraced by white teenagers, which helped dissolve racial barriers. White youths (including later white rock stars) idolized Chuck Berry (1926-2017) when he became one of the first and most popular rock n’ roll stars of the 1950’s. White boys with dreams of stardom wanted to be like him. They did not necessarily want to be black, but they wanted to play guitar like Chuck, and have an electric guitar like the one Chuck had. This embrace of Berry and other guitar-toting rock ‘n’ rollers was reflected in sales. In 1955, fewer than 300,000 electric guitars were sold when Chuck Berry first appeared on the national scene with his hit “Maybellene.” By 1965, sales of the electric guitar had jumped to 1.5 million.

Certain technological changes in the 1950’s also helped spur the rise of rock ‘n’ roll. The development of vinyl records was one. Aspiring guitarists could buy the records of their favorite players and try to learn their licks. Television replaced radio as the primary medium for theatrical productions, leaving space for radio programming to be filled with music. Television,

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too, helped promote rock ‘n’ roll. The Ed Sullivan Show helped make Elvis Presley a star with his three appearances in 1956—appearances that also caused controversy when Elvis’ dance moves were considered too provocative by some to be televised. Indeed, apart from technological changes, rock ‘n’ roll also emerged in response to the generally stifling atmosphere of the 1950’s.

Historian Trent Hill notes that in the 1950’s there was a “cultural and economic space waiting to be filled,” which was a response to the “range of controls” placed on American society, such as “the political projects of McCarthyism” and campaigns to eradicate juvenile delinquency.79 Fears of what juvenile delinquency could bring can be found in the literature as early as 1952, when most music that sounded like rock ‘n’ roll was still being called rhythm & blues. But already this “race” music had found a blossoming white audience that heard it as music you could dance to—music that created a space where inhibitions could be diminished and sexuality explored.80

But that was all wrong to journalists Jack Lait and Lee Mortimer, who published their 1952 best-seller U.S.A. Confidential, a diatribe against the harmful influences afoot in America, which were conspiring to undermine the moral fiber of young Americans. Their racism is hardly veiled when discussing early rock ‘n’ roll/r&b music. They describe the music’s fans as existing in “cells,” which can be found in “juke-box joints,” “soda dispensaries,” and especially “hot record shops.” “Like a heathen religion,” they continue,

80 Ibid., 44.
“it is all tied up with tom-toms and hot jive and ritualistic orgies of erotic dancing, weed-smoking and mass mania, with African jungle background. Many music shops purvey dope...white girls are recruited for colored lovers...many platter-spinners are hopheads. Many others are Reds, left-wingers, or hecklers of social convention...Through disc jockeys, kids get to know colored and other musicians...they frequent places the radio oracles plug, which is done with design...to hook juves [juveniles] and guarantee a new generation subservient to the Mafia.”

But the “cells” of early rock ‘n’ roll enthusiasts grew into millions of young fans by the mid-fifties, who could not get enough of rock ‘n’ roll’s infectious beat and the remarkable new sounds coming from the genre’s dominant instrument, the electric guitar. This led to sharp criticism. In an uncredited article in the New York Times on March 28, 1956, psychiatrist Francis Braceland observed that rock ‘n’ roll is a “communicable disease,” which is “cannibalistic and tribalistic in nature.” Racial integration was clearly a concern for observers like Braceland, Lait and Mortimer, as were permissive, apathetic parents who actually let their children listen to rock ‘n’ roll. Such behavior, according to Senator Robert Hendrickson, was intolerable, for “not even the Communist conspiracy, could devise a more effective way to demoralize, confuse, and destroy the United States.”

*Time Magazine* took a slightly more reasoned view in a 1956 article. The article describes reactions to relatively minor outbreaks of unseemly behavior, but the racial malice and fear of integration is still apparent:

In Hartford city officials considered revoking the State Theater's license after several audiences got too rowdy during a musical stage show...in Minneapolis a theater manager withdrew a film featuring the music after a gang of youngsters left the theater, snake-danced around town and smashed windows. In Birmingham champions of white supremacy decried it as part of a Negro plot against the whites.

The journalist goes on to write that rock ‘n’ roll does for music what “a motorcycle club at full throttle does for a quiet Sunday afternoon.” While the music is said to be based on “Negro Blues,” the story describes it as “a self-conscious style which underlines the primitive qualities of the blues with malice, aforethought.” The author describes the music in this way: “Characteristics: an unrelenting, socking syncopation that sounds like a bull whip; a choleric saxophone honking mating-call sounds; an electric guitar turned up so loud that its sound shatters and splits; a vocal group that shudders and exercises violently to the beat while roughly chanting either a near-nonsense phrase or a moronic lyric in hillbilly idiom. “ Here we see mention of the electric guitar, already being admonished for its excessive volume, so loud that the sound “shatters and splits.” Its status as rock’s defining instrument, for better or worse, would only grow as the music, and the guitars got even louder in the 1960’s and 70’s.

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Despite rock ‘n’ roll’s increasing popularity, the negative press kept coming. In 1957, pop music legend Frank Sinatra, whose status as a pop music icon was threatened by rock ‘n’ roll, weighed in. He describes himself as having only one “deep sorrow,” which is “the unrelenting insistence of recording and motion picture companies upon purveying the most brutal, ugly, degenerate, vicious form of expression it has been my displeasure to hear—naturally I refer to the bulk of rock ‘n’ roll.” He goes on: “It fosters almost totally negative and destructive reactions in young people. It smells phony and false. It is sung, played and written for the most part by cretinous goons and by means of its almost imbecilic reiterations and sly, lewd—in plain fact dirty—lyrics, and as I said before, it manages to be the martial music of every sideburned delinquent on the face of the earth. This rancid smelling aphrodisiac I deplore.”

By 1958, rock ‘n’ roll was firmly established, as stars like Elvis Presley replaced Frank Sinatra as the focus of young consumers of popular music. Crooners had been replaced by rockers such as Presley, Little Richard, and Buddy Holly. Yet articles warning of the dangers still appeared. Writing in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1958, Gertrude Samuels asked the question that so many parents and others of their generation had asked: “What is it that makes teen-agers...throw off their inhibitions as though at a revivalist meeting?” Indeed, rock ‘n’ roll had become something of a Great Awakening for America’s youth in the 1950’s. Their generation would not be silent and conformist, biding their time, as previous generations of

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American youth had. This was a generation that lived in the here and now, and made its own decisions about what cultural tastes and trends it would embrace and consume.

This was met with great consternation, as we have seen. As historian James Gilbert points out, while the 1950’s is often viewed as a conservative time, forces of liberalization were at work that would give rise to the social upheaval and change that characterized the decade that followed. Among these was a general change of attitude towards traditional ideas about social order. A dispute over mass culture thus emerged from the general democratization of American society. Gilbert describes it as a “struggle in which the participants were arguing over power—over who had the right and responsibility to shape American culture.” The defiant youth culture that had sprung forth not only had its own ideas about culture; it had its own culture, a subculture, which had its own tastes and mores. Rock ‘n’ roll became the soundtrack of that generation, and the electric guitar, its symbol.

Historian Grace Elizabeth Hale explores the appeal of this rebellious sound and culture in *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America*. Hale writes that amongst white middle-class youth in postwar America, the “romance of the outsider, the belief that people somehow marginal to society possess cultural resources and values missing among other Americans,” became an attractive ideal to postwar youth.

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88 Ibid, 9.
47 Ibid., 3.
Many came to see themselves as outsiders, even if they came from very comfortable and conventional backgrounds. She explains that white, middle-class youth imagined “people living on the margins, without economic or political or social privilege, as possessing something vital, some essential quality that had somehow been lost from their own lives.” This idea makes sense when considering the appeal of rock ‘n’ roll and the musicians who played it. Musicians in general, and black performers in particular, tended to be regarded as outsiders, but America’s postwar youth saw this as “hip.” It was cool to be outside the mainstream, especially if that status reflected an esoteric taste, such as liking rock ‘n’ roll, or, better yet, a skill, such as being an accomplished guitar player in a rock ‘n’ roll band.

It also became cool to embrace African-American culture, from which rock ‘n’ roll was largely derived, and it became cool to look up to great black rock guitarists like Berry and Jimi Hendrix, with the idea that one day a young white middle-class kid could become a rock star, a cool, hip outsider. White teenagers often identified with black artists as much or more than any white role models they encountered in their daily lives.

Rock ‘n roll thus represented a threat to the social order, including racial segregation, and the electric guitar, with its novel appearance, sound, and capacity to drown out any other sounds with its volume, embodied that threat. But was the music really worthy of such concern? Let’s look at one of the first rock ‘n’ roll recordings, the kind that caused such alarm to those who feared the music.
Often considered the first rock ‘n’ roll recording, “Rocket 88,” by Jackie Brentson and Ike Turner, features some of the first recorded distortion of an electric guitar. Distortion, or overdrive as it is also called, is the effect that is produced when an electric is turned up loud enough. On this particular recording, the distortion we hear came about by accident. Willie Kizart, lead guitarist for Ike Turner’s Kings of Rhythm, dropped his amplifier and damaged the speaker cone shortly before “Rocket 88” was recorded. The resulting effect, though not intended, is not undesirable. Distortion would eventually become a distinctive feature of rock guitar playing.

By the late 1960’s, distortion was not achieved by accident, but by the intentional application of power and volume. In England, amplifier builder Jim Marshall started building amplifiers capable of producing volumes at unprecedented levels. The resulting distortion was produced not by a broken cone but by intentional oversaturation, or “overdrive” of the power tubes within the amplifier. The resultant sound is very loud, but warm and smooth, as can be heard in this remarkable video of Jimi Hendrix playing a 100--watt Marshall turned all the way up. The Marshall sound became a distinctive feature of hard rock groups in the 1960’s and 70’s. Bands such as the Who, Led Zeppelin, and Deep Purple would play Gibson and Fender guitars through Marshalls, and similar amplifiers at deafening levels to thousands of adoring fans.

91 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gbfnh1oVTk0 Ike Turner and Jackie Brentson, “Rocket 88,” 1951.
93 Ibid., 286.
With this new style of very loud guitar-driven music, the electric guitar became firmly entrenched, not just as a symbol of American culture, but as a polarizing one. The guitar was always an essential facet of rock ‘n’ roll. But it was the music itself, rather than the guitar, that initially got the blame. With the dramatic increase in amplification, electric guitars made an already loud genre much louder. In a documentary film about a Led Zeppelin concert in New York City in 1973, a police officer standing outside of Madison Square Garden is asked what he thought of the music. He had no comment other than to say “Why does it have to be so loud?” Inside 20,000 young fans were delighted with what he thought was noise.95

That became the polarizing effect of the electric guitar: what was outrageously loud noise to some was ecstatic music to others, and the differentiation inevitably fell along generational lines. Few parents cared to acknowledge the musicianship and virtuosity displayed by the great rock guitarists of the 1960’s and 70’s. What was music to the young was noise to their parents. And that noise was not just annoying; it was a primary driver of youthful rebellion and all that was supposedly wrong with America’s youth in the 1960’s and 70’s. The concerns that had caused such worry in the 1950’s persisted; by the seventies, though, white parents were less concerned with racial integration than with the rampant drug use that seemed to have become as much a part of rock culture as the electric guitar itself. Indeed, the two became somewhat intertwined, as the great rock guitar virtuosos, adored by fans and aspiring guitarists, were typically heavy drug users. Thus, their lifestyles, and not just their musicianship, became a concern, as fans who aspired to play like them might also choose to live like them. But drug use was not a requisite for liking rock ‘n’ roll. Accepting the noise produced by rock guitarists was.

95 The Song Remains The Same, directed by Peter Clifton and Joe Massot, Warner Brothers, 1976.
And if one aspired to play rock guitar and studied it, one would find that within all that noise was considerable musicianship and virtuosity, as much as one found in any other form of music.

French social theorist Jacques Attali explores the fine line between what is considered noise and what is considered music in his book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Attali points out that that fine line is carefully guarded and defined in modern societies, and maintaining those distinctions is essential to maintaining established hierarchies and accepted norms. If a particular music is defined as being outside those acceptable musical norms, it is noise, an annoying threat to established order, which should be denigrated or even censored. Attali also points out that noise can be transformative, creating norms and orders which are unstable and changing.96

That was certainly true by the 1960’s when the appeal of the outsider and the “noise” of rock ‘n’ roll and the electric guitar were indeed transformative. By then, the electric guitar had become a defining symbol of both rock ‘n’ roll and of the youth culture that had embraced it ten years earlier. Apart from helping, in its own way, to advance the cause of racial integration, the electric guitar became a symbol of the counterculture and associated social movements, such as opposition to the Vietnam War and the sexual revolution. Its sleek contours and shape, bright colors and futuristic look were also representative of the mid-century modernist movement in architectural, domestic, and industrial design.97 Rock ‘n’ roll raised the electric guitar to an iconic status that transcended music, but the actual music produced by rock ‘n’ rollers demonstrated real virtuosity, which was not lost on fans. Indeed, the counterculture saw

97 Di Perna and Tolinski, Location 96.
their instrumental prowess as validation of their taste in music and of their culture generally. It was loud, but not noise. And in terms of technical virtuosity, they were right. Guitar heroes Jimi Hendrix, Eric Clapton, and Duane Allman were indeed virtuosos, demonstrating skills that were a match to what any other guitarist was doing in any other genre. Thus, with the rise of rock ‘n’ roll, the electric guitar thus reached its apex as a cultural symbol and as an instrument.

The electric guitar had a powerful impact on American culture in the twentieth century. It dramatically changed every musical genre in which it was employed, and that alone would bestow upon it a special status. But, through the medium of rock ‘n’ roll, it was also a force for social change, and an enduring symbol of the times and culture from which it originated. In the following chapter, I will discuss the legendary guitar heroes that helped solidify the electric guitar as an American icon.
CHAPTER 3

GUITAR GODS
1965 was a transitional year in the rise of the electric guitar as the preeminent instrument in popular music. In that year, sales had soared to an all-time high of 1.5 million. Bob Dylan created quite a stir at the Newport Folk Festival in July by playing an electric guitar during his set, accompanied by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. Their lead guitarist, Michael Bloomfield, both astonished and disturbed the unprepared folk music crowd with his playing, as he reeled off one extraordinary blues lick after another on his electric guitar, played very loud. Bloomfield’s revolutionary playing would be captured for posterity on the Butterfield Band’s first album, *The Paul Butterfield Blues Band*, released in October of that year. *Rolling Stone* magazine observed that Bloomfield played “the flashiest blues anyone had ever heard.”

And in England, a certain guitarist had inspired graffiti to be written on subway walls, first in the town of Islington, than in the London Underground, and soon, all over London. “Clapton is God,” it read.

In this chapter, we will examine the criteria that make up a guitar god, and why the guitar god attained his special status. We will then examine the lives of some of the men who were some of the most celebrated and influential guitar gods in blues and rock music. As we shall see, with the great adulation they received there was also a lot of turmoil, and sometimes death. The guitar god, apart from being a hero, could often be a tragic figure.

Eric Clapton was already a well-known musician in Britain when he joined John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers in early 1965. He had been the lead guitarist in the Yardbirds, one of the more popular bands to emerge from the British Blues scene that flourished in England in the 1960’s.

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Clapton’s final recording with them, “For Your Love,” had reached the top of the charts in the U.K. and number 6 on the Billboard charts in the United States when it was released in March 1965. But Clapton was displeased with the commercial direction the band had taken. He did not want to play pop songs that were only vaguely based on American blues and R&B compositions. He wanted to play authentic Chicago blues, without commercial aspirations, and fully realize his talent on the electric guitar.

In John Mayall, he had found a kindred spirit. Mayall’s band, the Bluesbreakers, had been a mainstay of the British Blues scene for years. Unlike the Yardbirds and the Rolling Stones, who had used the blues as a template from which to create commercially viable rock and pop music, Mayall was a purist. Even in 2016, at the age of 82, Mayall’s attitude had not changed. In an interview from that year, he described his music as “still an acquired taste for my listening public, and they’re not of sufficient numbers to put me on the charts...but we just have a great time playing which is just an enviable situation because people in big hit groups and everything, they’re kind of stuck with what they’ve made famous, and they’ve lost the opportunity to improvise and explore.”

That kind of attitude was just what Clapton was looking for, and Mayall likewise identified with Clapton’s commitment to the blues. As Mayall said, “Until Eric came long, there wasn’t anybody who understood the history or background or the whole thing, what it was really all about. Up to that point they were just really copying. The better musicians were able

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to copy certain solos and licks and things, but the heart and soul of it was a very elusive thing. And like I say, Eric was the first one to come along to have that.”  

After joining the Bluesbreakers, immediately after his departure from the Yardbirds in March 1965, Clapton moved into Mayall’s house and began woodshedding—a musician’s term for practicing, day and night, in order to improve their “chops.” Clapton took full advantage of Mayall’s extensive collection of blues records during this time, painstakingly listening and learning from the great electric blues guitarists, such as Freddie King, Buddy Guy, and Otis Rush. Soon Clapton became more than what he had been in the Yardbirds—far more than just one of those “better musicians” Mayall had described, who could “copy certain solos and licks and things,” but lacked the “heart and soul” of an accomplished blues guitarist. By the summer of 1965, Clapton had not only become the equal of the great blues guitarists he so admired, he had also taken lead electric guitar playing to an unprecedented level. He had become one of the very first guitar “gods.”
Fans at Mayall concerts became mesmerized and astonished by Clapton’s skill and sound.

At the time, music journalist Nick Jones described the scene: “At every gig John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers play, there is the Clapton-idolizing contingent who shout out things like ‘Give God a solo,’ or ‘We want more God.’” Clapton didn’t just copy the great blues masters; he had come up with his own brilliant guitar licks and phrases, far beyond what any of his peers in Britain were capable of doing at the time. He could play faster and louder than his predecessors in America. Also, his choice of instrument and amplifier had changed since his days with the Spin Staff, “Bigger Than Jesus: 25 Rock Deities, Rap Messiahs, and Would-Be Golden Gods,” Spin Magazine, May 9, 2013 https://www.spin.com/2013/05/bigger-than-jesus-rock-stars-god-kanye-west-beatles/130508-clapton-is-god/

Yardbirds. The Fender Telecaster and Vox amplifier he had been using were retired in favor of a 1960 Gibson Les Paul and a Marshall amplifier.

This change was crucial. The combination of the solid-body Gibson Les Paul and Marshall allowed Clapton to create sounds that had never been heard before. No blues guitarist had played this loud. The new Marshall amplifiers were far louder than any other brand, and had been designed in consultation with British rock guitarists such as Pete Townshend of the Who, who encouraged founder Jim Marshall to build amplifiers that could be played much louder than any other amplifier available. Rather than produce the usual 20 or 30-watt amplifier played through a single speaker, Marshall began selling 50, 100, even 200-watt amplifiers played through two to four speakers. This allowed for unprecedented volumes, as Marshall and other manufacturers created amplifiers so loud that they changed the nature of popular music, both in terms of how it was played and how it was heard.

In the early to mid-sixties, most popular bands, especially the Beatles, could not properly hear themselves during live performances. The limited output of their equipment was often drowned out by the incessant screaming of the girls in the audience. The musicians could not hear themselves and neither really could the girls, who seemed content to scream at the band rather than listen to their music. But with the advent of increased amplification, any noise produced by the audience was now subsumed by the even louder noise produced by these far more powerful amplifiers. The effect was that rock music became something that the audience was now compelled to listen to. They could no longer simply scream over the performance. Thus the musicianship of the band on stage became as important as their appearance or any
other factor that appealed to the crowd. Rock music concerts became more akin to jazz, as lengthy improvisation became common in performances where considerable musical skill was appreciated, and eventually, expected. These were the conditions under which Eric Clapton emerged as the first British guitar hero, or “god.”

Clapton’s ability to harness and control the remarkable volume, sustain, and distortion of the Marshall amplifier earned him the adulation of blues and rock fans who had never before heard anything like his playing. In the British Blues scene, fans had never drowned out the performances with idle screaming, as was the case with Beatle concerts. They had always listened, but nothing like the sound coming out of Clapton’s amplifier had ever been heard. Distortion, the sound produced on the electric guitar when amplifiers are played very loud, had previously been heard on some R&B and blues recordings, such as Jackie Brentson’s 1951 classic “Rocket 88,” but the playing on those records was rather pedestrian compared to Clapton’s instrumental prowess. And the distortion on those early recordings did not as dramatically alter the tone of the electric guitar, nor was it as pleasing to the ear as the tones Clapton was getting out of his 50-watt Marshall amplifier in 1965. The distortion produced by the combination of the Gibson guitar played through a Marshall amplifier was rich, warm, and totally different from how the guitar sounded when played at low volume without any distortion.

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105 The terms “guitar hero” and “guitar god” are used interchangeably; they mean the same thing.
Clapton’s skills clearly developed into something beyond what had previously been heard in blues or rock music by the mid-sixties. The electric guitar had been established as the most important instrument in rock ‘n’ roll, but it had been employed as primarily a rhythm instrument. Guitar solos had been brief instrumental breaks where most guitarists played simple, often repetitious licks and phrases that were hardly extraordinary. Clapton, and Michael Bloomfield in America, were the first guitarists of renown to bring to popular music a superior knowledge and skill-set of lead electric blues guitar playing. With the latest technology in amplification, these men and others like them would be able to bring their talents to full fruition. They would be taken seriously as great instrumentalists and musicians, equal to the greatest jazz and blues players, just as adept at improvisation. Rock ‘n’ roll would, in turn, be taken more seriously by the late sixties, as these great guitarists were really listened to, not just screamed at or mindlessly danced to.

Thus, by the mid-sixties, the stage was set for the emergence of the guitar god. Just as the electric guitar became an iconic and exalted instrument in America culture, so too did the guitar god become a transcendent figure amongst musicians in twentieth-century America. The guitar god, always a lead guitarist playing rock music, held a special place in American culture, unequaled by any other type of musician in any other genre. There were, of course, several brilliant instrumentalists in other forms of American music, but none were so readily labeled and identified, especially coupled with their instrument, as a “hero” or a “god.” Certainly many fans of John Coltrane may have referred to him as a hero or god, but the terms “saxophone god” or “trumpet god” have never become part of the vernacular the way “guitar hero” and “guitar god” have. The rock lead guitarist of the sixties and seventies became a kind of
mythological figure, a “superhero” of sorts, with special powers—the special powers being the ability to render the awesome noise of an electric guitar, played through an amplifier capable of incredible volume, into music, while displaying skills comparable to that of the finest instrumentalists in other genres.

Historian Andre Millard discusses the seeds of the guitar god in his essay “The Guitar Hero.” He sees as the progenitors of the guitar gods the itinerant African-American blues guitarists of the early twentieth century, like Charley Patton. There are interesting parallels between the early bluesmen and the rock guitar heroes. Like the guitar gods, guitar-playing bluesmen like Charley Patton were soloists whose livelihood depended on their ability to play guitar solos, or at least some kind of melodies on the guitar during instrumental breaks. Virtuosity and technical skill were important, but making an emotional connection to the audience and provoking a reaction was also essential.  

This was key to the guitar god’s existence—the emotional connection he made to the audience, which engendered an almost cult-like worship in return. Rock ‘n’ roll, especially the loud hard rock that many guitar gods played, is, like the blues, an exciting, emotional music, and rock concert crowds can be loud and rambunctious in response to the remarkable sounds emanating from a guitar god’s amplifier. Like the electric blues on which it is based, lead electric guitar in rock music can be captivating, and the volume at which it is played commands attention. In the hands of truly exceptional rock guitarists, the emotional peaks and valleys in a rock guitar solo can move a crowd to a remarkable degree. Thus, a gifted guitarist like Jimi

Hendrix was not only a virtuoso like an accomplished jazz player, but he also played remarkably flashy, provocative and exciting guitar solos, always at tremendous volume, which set him apart, in a way, from equally adept jazz musicians. While great jazz musicians display great skill that can move a listener emotionally, jazz music tends to be played at a much lower volume than rock, and the music generally has a more intellectual, complex, and sophisticated nature that provokes a different kind of reaction. The esoteric quality of jazz also limits its audience.

Rock ‘n’ roll in the sixties and seventies was some of the most popular music of the day, and its widespread appeal undoubtedly contributed to the transformation of the guitar virtuoso into a god. Tremendous commercial success brought widespread media coverage, and rock guitarists have always received far more attention and adulation from the press than jazz and blues musicians. Even specialized media outlets like Guitar Player Magazine always gave more coverage to rock guitarists than to players in other genres. Thus, rock virtuosos became famous celebrities, not unlike movie stars. Indeed, the most successful rock musicians came to be known as “rock stars” in the sixties and seventies, and no member of a rock band had a more star-like quality than the lead guitarist. The singers undoubtedly had a high profile and were celebrated rock stars, but their actual skill as singers was often unappreciated, or sometimes, not apparent. But in an era of when standards of musicianship were high, the lead guitarist in a rock band had to be good. When it was his turn to take a solo, the reputation of the band often rested on his instrumental prowess. By the seventies, the sound of the electric guitar, and the ability to play it very well, had become such essential requisites for a rock band that it was
inconceivable for one to exist without at least one highly accomplished lead guitarist. Some had two or three.\textsuperscript{108}

Thus, though rock was a popular form of music, and its most commercially successful artists were famous celebrities, and one or two, such as Hendrix, were household names, it blossomed in the sixties and the seventies, in the sense that its audience came to appreciate, if not demand, music that had real artistic merit, played by musicians with demonstrable skill who could improvise at length. In this sense, rock ‘n’ roll became more like jazz, and the lead guitarist became the most conspicuous and relied-upon member to demonstrate the kind of musical skill the audience was expecting. By the early seventies, many lead guitarists would play lengthy guitar solos in live performances, where songs would be used as vehicles for extended improvisation.

This can be heard on live concert recordings of rock bands of that era, such as \textit{Live Dead} by the Grateful Dead from 1969, and \textit{Live at the Fillmore East} by the Allman Brothers Band from 1971. On these two albums, some of the songs are listed as lasting 23:18 minutes, 15:05, 19:15, and 23:03 minutes long. Lengthy improvisation was featured on songs such as these, with lead guitar solos comprising most of the instrumental breaks. Thus the lead guitarist had far more exposure and responsibility than when rock ‘n’ roll started in the 1950’s, when lead guitarists would play simple, quick solos in songs that rarely lasted longer than two and a half minutes.

\textsuperscript{108} The rock group the Allman Brothers Band, led by guitar god Duane Allman, appeared in 1969 featuring not one but two lead guitarists. They often played melodies and riffs in harmony, rather than having one guitarist play rhythm while the other played lead, as previously had always been the case. The Allman Brothers were a very influential band, and in the seventies many other bands, such as the Eagles, began to employ two lead guitarists that often played lines in harmony. The band Lynyrd Skynyrd, heavily influenced by the Allmans, had three lead guitarists.
Lengthy, blues-based guitar solos became so commonplace in rock concerts that by the early seventies, they could last several hours. If the guitarist demonstrated great skill and met or exceeded the audiences’ expectations, he could be considered not just a great musician, but a guitar hero, or god.

Genuine musical skill was an essential aspect of the guitar god persona, but the appearance of the guitarists and the presentation of the music undoubtedly contributed to the mythos of the guitar god. Unlike the usually conservative and staid appearance of jazz and blues musicians in the 1960’s, rock guitarists always had long hair and often wore flamboyant clothing in keeping with the hippie fashions of the day, which no doubt endeared them to their

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audience. By the seventies, rock guitarists wore costumes that gave many of them a kind of “superhero” appearance, as rock concerts became increasingly elaborate and theatrical affairs. One of the most revered guitar gods, Jimmy Page, of the hugely successful band Led Zeppelin, exemplified the appearance of the guitar god, as can be seen in the following picture and the one above.

These pictures show Page at his peak in the seventies. His appearance has all the attributes of the guitar god. The long hair, flamboyant costume and posture, and use of a Gibson Les Paul guitar are all hallmarks of the guitar-god look. In the second photo, we see Page surrounded by a mist of dry ice, a special effect that became commonplace at rock concerts in

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the seventies. This effect only added to the mythic, wizard-like appearance of a guitarist like Page, and others like him. In the second photo we can see that he is using a cello bow, often employed during a lengthy solo on the classic Led Zeppelin song “Dazed and Confused.” A video of this can be seen here.\textsuperscript{111} Using the cello bow gave the guitar an even more otherworldly sound than it already had, and, as can be seen in the photo and video, Page seems almost like a wizard, with the bow as his magic wand. He is practically like a superhero, with his “special power” being the ability to extract from the electric guitar remarkable sounds that are unlike that of any other instrument, played at volumes far greater than any other. Performances like these gave great lead rock guitarists of the sixties and seventies an exalted, mythic quality that went beyond mere musicianship. The appearance and aura of the lead guitarist, the surreal sounds they were getting from their instruments, and the volume they were played at, made them seem like “gods” to their adoring fans, and heroes to the countless amateur guitarists who wished to be, and tried to emulate, venerated guitarists like Page.

These exalted guitar players also represented to their fans an ideal of masculinity and sexual potency. It was no coincidence that guitar gods were exclusively male and their lifestyles seemed to be, as Millard writes, “an advertisement for testosterone-driven behavior.”\textsuperscript{112} The notion of the guitar god as the ultimate object of female fans’ sexual desires is very much part of the guitar god and rock star mythology, and indeed, recent autobiographies written by rock stars of the sixties and seventies, such as Kiss drummer Peter Criss’ tome \textit{Makeup to Breakup: My Life In and Out of Kiss,} are replete with tales of sexual conquests and liaisons with countless

\textsuperscript{112} Millard, 156.
adoring female fans, often referred to as “groupies.” While some of these stories may be exaggerated, there is little doubt that guitar gods did frequently have sexual relationships with groupies who purposely sought these men out backstage or at their hotel, before or after a show. In a 2016 interview, Criss’ bandmate Gene Simmons claimed to have slept with 4,800 groupies, adding, “I didn’t do drugs in the crazy times but I did do sex.”

For male fans, the guitar god represented an ideal of masculinity that seemingly came with rewards—if an awkward male teenager could become a great, or at least good, lead guitarist, maybe he too, could play in a celebrated rock band and be sought after and fought over by attractive female fans. Many electric guitar ads featured provocative displays of scantily clad beautiful women, not so much to encourage women to buy an electric guitar, but to

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appeal to men and boys who may have thought getting and playing a guitar like that would bring with it the attention of women like the one in the ad.

That guitar gods are exclusively male has its roots in a masculinization of technology that coincided with the development of the electric guitar in the twentieth century. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the inventors of the electric guitar came from a culture of tinkering that was exclusively male, and the culture of electric guitar playing that developed was equally dominated by men. As historian Monique Bourdage points out in her thesis, “From Tinkerers to Gods: The Electric Guitar and the Social Construction of Gender,” a shift occurred in American culture in the mid-twentieth century that saw music appreciation become an activity associated with men, where it had previously been an activity associated primarily with women. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, guitar playing and music appreciation were considered feminine hobbies, but the advent of electricity, and particularly the radio, which could be taken apart and tinkered with, legitimized music appreciation for men. Many men came home from World War II with electronic skills they had acquired in the service, skills that most women did not have.\(^{115}\)

A stereotype developed that men were intrinsically more adept at working with electronics than women, such as tinkering with a radio, or building an electric guitar. Women came to be seen as consumers, while men were producers. Women had largely been excluded from technologically advanced, machine-related jobs since the late nineteenth century, and the advent of electricity and electronic tinkering and production only strengthened the male

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producer/female consumer dichotomy.\textsuperscript{116} The harnessing of electricity, and any skill that came to be associated with electronics, were exclusively male pursuits. The electric guitar, and the culture surrounding it, also became exclusively male, as the inventors and manufacturers of the electric guitar, and the bands that electric guitarists played in, were entirely made up of men. As Bourdage writes, “An important step in masculinizing the electric guitar came with the instruments electrification...with electricity in male hands and the increased linking of other technologies to masculinity, the electric guitar also became a male preserve...mainstream audiences considered female guitarists to be novelty acts.”\textsuperscript{117}

Let us now examine the lives of the some of the most celebrated and respected guitar gods. With great success and acclaim often came tragedy and turmoil. Andre Millard likens this aspect to a Faustian myth surrounding the brilliant bluesman Robert Johnson, a contemporary of Patton’s. Johnson supposedly sold his soul to Satan at a crossroads in Mississippi, and in return received his tremendous ability to play the guitar. But with that deal came a troubled life and an early death at 27. Many guitar heroes, for all their success and skill, also led troubled lives, and some even died young like Johnson. Let us begin with Eric Clapton, the first great electric guitarist to be called a “god.”

Eric Clapton was born on March 30, 1945, in Ripley, Surrey, England. His mother was a sixteen-year-old girl who had a brief relationship with a twenty-five-year-old Canadian soldier. Eric was sent to live with his grandparents, though his mother lived close by and saw the boy from time to time. For years, however, Clapton lived under the impression that his grandparents

\textsuperscript{116} Bourbage, 43-44.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, 45.
were his parents and that his mother was his sister. The gradual realization of the truth was traumatic, and caused him to become reticent and introverted. As Clapton wrote in his 2007 autobiography, “In spite of the fact that Ripley was...a happy place to grow up in, life was soured by what I had found out about my origins. The result was that I began to withdraw into myself.”

He found solace in the blues and the guitar. “Music became a healer for me, and I learned to listen with all my being. I found that it could wipe away all the emotions of fear and confusion relating to my family.” He started out playing Big Bill Broonzy tunes on acoustic guitar in clubs, but when he saw his first electric guitar on the television show Sunday Night at the London Palladium, he knew he had found his calling: “It was like seeing an instrument from outer space, and I said to myself: ‘That’s the future—that’s what I want.’ Suddenly I realized I was in a village that was never going to change, yet there on TV was something out of the future. And I wanted to go there.”

Clapton became entrenched in the British Blues scene that emerged in the early 1960’s, and found work as an above-average lead guitarist in the Yardbirds. But when he joined John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers, his playing grew into something unprecedented. On Mayall’s 1966 album, Blues Breakers with Eric Clapton, Clapton’s playing was unlike anything previously heard on record. While distortion had been employed on blues albums in the fifties, Clapton’s use of distortion created a tone that became the standard for rock guitarists to emulate in the years to come. His playing on every track is remarkable, as this rendition of Freddie King’s Hideaway

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119 Clapton, location 268.
120 Ibid., location 315.
demonstrates. His brilliant and innovative playing particularly stunned those who could really appreciate what Clapton was doing, like his idol, B.B. King. King described his reaction when he first heard the *Blues Breakers* album: “When I first heard Eric Clapton, I was shocked. I mean, he was so good, so young.” At the age of 21, Clapton had revolutionized electric guitar playing, and it would make him, as Millard writes, “the most revered and imitated guitarist of his generation.”

Clapton did not know quite what to make of the “Clapton is God” graffiti that began springing up all over London, and was ambivalent about the recognition. As he wrote in his autobiography, “I was a bit mystified by this, and part of me ran a mile from it. I didn’t really want that kind of notoriety...another part of me really liked the idea, that what I had been fostering all these years was finally getting some recognition...as for technique, tons of white American guitarists were better than me.”

He didn’t stay with Mayall for long. He grew tired of Mayall’s patrician ways and wanted to expand his musical horizons. He soon joined with bassist Jack Bruce and drummer Ginger Baker to form Cream, rock music’s first “power trio,” a group of only bass, drums and electric guitar that played rock music at thunderous volume. Playing through an even louder 100-watt amplifier made Cream’s sound almost impossible to ignore.

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121 “Hideaway” by John Mayall’s Bluesbreakers featuring Eric Clapton, 1966. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9N8Qj6zL5U](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m9N8Qj6zL5U)

122 B.B. King, interviewed in *The History of Rock ’n’ Roll*, Episode 7, “Guitar Heroes.” PBS documentary. [originally aired April 17, 1995].

123 Millard, 146

124 Clapton, location 959-967.
Marshall amplifier, Clapton and his bandmates began playing a hybrid of psychedelic pop songs and electric blues, often called “blues rock” or “hard rock.” These new subset categories of rock would become standard for rock bands to play, following in Cream’s footsteps.

Cream would become one of the most popular rock bands of the sixties, but they only lasted for two years, from 1966-1968. Relentless touring and a sense of complacency began to set in, and in Clapton’s career, a pattern was established that would see him playing in many bands, but none for very long. Even when he established himself as a solo artist in the mid-seventies, he would change the lineup of his bands frequently. Perhaps his greatest heights were achieved with the band Derek and the Dominos, a band he formed in 1970. On the album *Layla and Other Assorted Love Songs*, Clapton is joined by fellow guitar god Duane Allman for much of the album. Allman’s contributions inspired the band, and the song “Layla,” homage to his unrequited love for Beatle George Harrison’s wife, became one of the most recognizable rock songs of the seventies, and remains to this day one of the most frequently played songs on classic rock radio.

The Dominos band did not last long. Debilitated by heavy drug use, the band soon broke up after *Layla* was released, and Clapton retreated to his mansion in England and did little but consume hard drugs for three years. He overcame his addiction and began a successful solo career in 1974, scoring a number one single in that year with his cover of Bob Marley’s “I Shot the Sheriff.” Unfortunately, by the end of the decade, alcoholism had become his undoing, as his physical health became endangered. On April 13, 1981, things came to head: “I collapsed in agony as I came offstage in Madison, Wisconsin...I was diagnosed with five bleeding ulcers; one
the size of a small orange.”\textsuperscript{125} Happily, he overcame his drinking, and has continued to perform and record with great success and acclaim. Like a bluesman who sacrificed his soul to become a virtuoso, Eric Clapton has experienced hard times, but he has also endured and prevailed as one of the most famous and accomplished guitar gods.

Even before Eric Clapton made waves with his amazing playing on the first Bluesbreakers album, released in 1966, another guitarist in America was also revolutionizing lead guitar playing. Michael Bloomfield (1943-1981) was as influential and innovative as his British counterpart Clapton, though he was never as famous. Like the first Bluesbreakers album, the first album by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, simply titled \textit{The Paul Butterfield Blues Band}, released in October 1965, contained guitar playing the likes of which had never been heard before. Few, if any, blues guitarists had played with the speed and command that Bloomfield displayed on this record. Like Clapton, Bloomfield was not just copying the great blues masters, he was coming up with licks, melodies, and phrases all his own, and his flashy and fast guitar solos on the Butterfield album would be the first of what came to be considered lead rock guitar playing. Before that, rock ‘n’ roll guitarists were playing mostly rhythm with brief, simple guitar solos that were hardly extraordinary, and the great blues players, like B.B. King, were not playing their blues licks as fast and loud and with the same dexterity as Bloomfield. An example of Bloomfield’s revolutionary playing can be heard here.\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{125} Clapton, Location 2844.
\textsuperscript{126} “Shake You Moneymaker,” by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, 1965. \url{https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j1L2vJ0U4Bc}
\textsuperscript{127} Michael Bloomfield, 1968. \url{https://www.michaelbloomfield.com/d2ijjkhh0eixt0ejrreg8dg18kgbzq}
Bloomfield would go on to influence virtually every American lead rock guitarist, and helped establish blues-based lead guitar playing that every rock band would feature from the time of the first Butterfield album. Bloomfield was the first guitarist to have real command of this style. As Jorma Kaukonen, lead guitarist for the legendary group the Jefferson Airplane said in a recent interview, “When I started to play with the Jefferson Airplane I didn’t know how to play electric guitar. That was all devised as the Airplane grew. Mike Bloomfield gave me – I

don’t think he perceived it as such – but he really gave me one of my first guitar lessons and showed me how to do a bunch of stuff.” Another legendary lead guitarist from a San Francisco band, Carlos Santana, who also learned from Bloomfield, described how much Bloomfield impressed the crowds who came to watch him: “We all used to wait for [Bloomfield] to take his solos...all of us were anticipating, ‘What is Michael going to do man?’ Just the way he put his finger on it—you get a chill and it gets you excited, you know.”

In his book *Michael Bloomfield: The Rise and Fall of an American Guitar Hero*, biographer Ed Ward discusses the shift that was occurring in the mid-sixties, when artists like Bob Dylan, the Beatles, and the Butterfield Blues Band were redefining the terms of popular music. Pop music was to be *listened* to and taken seriously, and was no longer simply “danceable three-minute pieces of fluff.” Ward claims the sixties were turning into an era of virtuoso lead guitar players, and writes that Bloomfield was responsible for this development: “The turnaround to the focus on the guitarist, the fans putting the guitar player in the spotlight, must be laid to the incredible influence that Michael Bloomfield’s work with the Butterfield Band—and with Dylan—had on musicians and the musically aware public.”

Ward goes on to describe Bloomfield as “the man who started it all, the very first bona fide American guitar hero.” Bloomfield certainly was that, but he never saw himself as a guitar god or rock star. The scion of a wealthy and prominent Jewish family from the northern
suburbs of Chicago, Bloomfield did not indulge in the flamboyant fashions and hairstyles of his guitar god peers, and never was interested in the celebrity that came with guitar god status. He thought of himself as a scholarly musician. As he said in a 1979 interview with *Guitar Player Magazine*, he could see others as guitar gods, but not himself: “I couldn’t even conceive of myself as a rock star. I was into researching old forms of music and belonging to folklore societies. I just never pictured myself as a big electric guitar hero.”

When asked if he thought of himself as the American Eric Clapton, Bloomfield replied “No, never. Clapton, I thought, ‘Now here’s a guy, here’s a rock star.’ I thought ‘If only I could do what he could do.’ So I didn’t relate to being a rock star at all. All of those social implications and ramifications of a rock star trip—I was never into it.”

Indeed, the lifestyle of a touring musician did not sit well with Bloomfield, who suffered from chronic insomnia. Like Clapton, he never played with one band for very long, and he never attained the kind of success Clapton enjoyed in the seventies. Instead, after taking part in some of the most seminal recordings in popular music in the 1960’s, Bloomfield spent much of the seventies making mediocre albums that were poorly distributed. His insomnia, which was particularly severe when on the road, prevented Bloomfield from touring to properly promote his music. Heavy drug use began to plague him. He had experimented with heroin as early as 1964, and it had caused the disintegration of one of Bloomfield’s bands, The Electric Flag, in

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134 Ibid., 61.
135 Ward, location 1728.
1968. In several interviews in the 1970’s, Bloomfield would talk about how glad he was to be done with heroin, but then would inevitably relapse.\textsuperscript{136}

The tragic end came on February 15, 1981, when Michael Bloomfield was found dead in a car in San Francisco. The cause of death was a drug overdose, but strangely, heroin was not the cause. The pathologist had ruled the death was due to cocaine and methamphetamine poisoning. This was completely out of character, for Bloomfield did not like either of those drugs and was never known to use them.\textsuperscript{137} What had happened? Perhaps Bloomfield thought he was taking heroin and didn’t realize what he had done. In any case, it was a tragic end to the life of America’s first guitar god.

If Bloomfield was the first, the most famous and recognizable American guitar god was without question Jimi Hendrix. Perhaps more than anyone else, Hendrix exemplifies all the qualities that make up a guitar hero—from the virtuosic skill, flamboyant appearance and persona, to the masculine virility and tragic end. Jimi Hendrix was the quintessential guitar god.

James Marshall Hendrix was born on November 27, 1942, in Seattle, Washington. After a stint in the army, Hendrix moved to New York City’s Harlem neighborhood in 1964, where he hoped to become part of the neighborhood’s music scene. Despite winning first prize at an amateur music contest at the Apollo Theater just a month after he had arrived, Hendrix found the New York music scene a hard one to break into. He would be frequently turned away when he tried to sit in and jam at music clubs, and he found the Harlem scene to be exceptionally narrow. R&B, jazz, and blues were the only acceptable genres a musician could play, and the

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid, location 2223.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid, location 2530.
culture of Harlem seemed generally conformist. Close Hendrix friend and Harlem native Taharqa Aleem described the scene at the time: “Black people didn’t want to hear any rock ‘n’ roll in Harlem. There was a dress code—if you didn’t look or sound a certain way, you were shunned.” Hendrix found the vibrant and diverse music scene in Greenwich Village more to his liking, and there he founded a band called Jimmy James and the Blue Flames. In this environment, Jimi could develop as a lead guitarist, unlike the more restrictive R&B scene in Harlem, where his playing was relegated to mostly rhythm.

For a while, Hendrix was a part of both scenes, though there was little cross-pollination between the two. Hendrix would never attempt to play his experimental rock music in Harlem clubs. As Aleem observed, “If he would have taken that to Harlem, he would have been laughed at.” Very few of his black friends in Harlem, apart from Aleem, would come down to the Village to see him play rock ‘n’ roll. This would become an issue for Hendrix for the rest of his career—that his brethren in Harlem and the African-American community generally did not take to his music. Ironically, he came to feel more welcome and at home in the predominantly white, folk, and rock music scene. Even after his first album came out to great acclaim in 1967 and he had returned to Harlem to share his success with his old neighborhood friends, he found their response to be oddly muted. As Aleem’s brother Tunde-Ra recalled, “We hadn’t realized

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139 Ibid, 126.
that he had become successful. We knew that James Brown was successful, but we weren’t sure about Jimi because we had never heard about him.”

Hendrix had moved to London in 1966 and put together a new band called The Jimi Hendrix Experience with two white English musicians, Noel Redding and Mitch Mitchell. They made quite an impression in London, and several prominent English musicians had come to see them play, and were taken by Hendrix’s remarkable playing. Clapton reports in his autobiography an altogether different reaction to Hendrix’s first album than Hendrix’s Harlem friends had. He writes that although his band Cream had recently released an artistically and commercially successful album, Disraeli Gears, Hendrix’s album “was all anyone wanted to listen to. He kicked everybody into touch, really, and was the flavor not just of the month, but of the year. Everywhere you went, it was wall-to-wall Jimi, and I felt really down.”

Hendrix’s first album, Are You Experienced?, was released in the United Kingdom on May 12, 1967, where it peaked at number 2 on the U.K. charts. Beatle Paul McCartney recommended Hendrix to the organizers of the Monterey Pop Festival, a three-day concert held from June 16-18, 1967.

This seminal event raised the profile of many up-and-coming rock artists, especially Hendrix. Hendrix’s remarkable performance was captured on film, a brief clip of which can be seen this video.

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141 Clapton, 91.
Hendrix first lays the guitar on the stage while it is still making sound, and kneels before it, seeming to pray to it. He then douses the guitar with lighter fluid and burns it, as if making a sacrifice. As he stated later, “I decided to destroy my guitar...as a sacrifice. You sacrifice things you love. I love my guitar.” His remarkable showmanship, together with his considerable musicianship, made Hendrix into the most recognizable and celebrated guitar god of all.

Previously, Jimi had been given the chance to jam with Cream, and during the session Hendrix had displayed all the physical gyrations that he would become famous for. As Clapton writes, “He played the guitar with his teeth, behind his head, lying on the floor, doing the splits,

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the whole business. It was amazing, and it was musically great too, not just pyrotechnics."

Hendrix’s physicality on stage was an essential part of his performance. In other genres, such as jazz, performers tend to be rather conservative in terms of their stage demeanor, no matter how brilliantly they play. But Hendrix and other lead rock guitarists would move, dance, and make overtly sexual gestures that would help to establish the guitar god as a symbol of masculinity and sexual potency.

Hendrix would often use the guitar as a phallic symbol, often thrusting it from between his legs. Historian Steve Waksman described Hendrix’s overt gestures with the guitar as creating a phallic extension of his body—a “technophallus” as Waksman terms it. He writes that the electric guitar as a technophallus represents “a fusion of man and machine, an electronic appendage that allowed Hendrix to display his instrumental and, more symbolically, his sexual prowess.” The exciting nature of the music being played, and the ability to use the guitar as a

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145 Ibid, 84.
phallic symbol, gave rock guitar gods like Hendrix a display of showmanship that was far more flamboyant and conspicuous than what is typically seen in performers in other genres, creating a larger-than-life persona that went beyond mere musicianship.

But, Hendrix’s musicianship was also extraordinary, and his ability to evoke all kinds of sounds from his guitar firmly established him as a guitar god. On all his albums and live performances, the sounds Hendrix got from his guitar and amplifier were remarkable. One of the best examples of this is his rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner” at Woodstock on August 17, 1969. Hendrix intersperses all kinds of sound effects within the melody, many of which sound like bombs diving and explosions—the sounds of war. This was quite adroit of Hendrix at a time when America had fully committed to the Vietnam War. The ironic coupling of “The Star Spangled Banner” with incendiary sound effects crystallized the troubling dissension and unrest the war had caused and was one of Hendrix’s greatest moments.

Sadly, Hendrix also exemplified the tragic aspect of the guitar god. Drugs and alcohol were plentiful in Hendrix’s life, and the pressure to sustain his tremendous commercial success seemed to be getting to him by the end of the sixties. He unaccountably walked off the stage at Madison Square Garden on January 28, 1970, after only two songs. At times, while under the influence of alcohol, he was physically violent with both men and women. Tragically, he succumbed to the effects of drugs and alcohol and died in London on September 18, 1970, at the age of 27.

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148 Jimi Hendrix, “Star Spangled Banner” at Woodstock, 1969. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKvnQYfHGCc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MKvnQYfHGCc)

149 Cross, 237.
The guitar god was a remarkable phenomenon in twentieth-century America which set the finest lead guitarists in rock ‘n ‘roll apart from other celebrated virtuosos in other musical genres. The novel and other-worldly sounds the guitar gods could coax from their guitars and amplifiers made them not just virtuosos, but something akin to superheroes, blessed with special powers. The guitar gods’ flamboyant appearance and demeanor only enhanced this effect, and widespread media coverage greatly augmented their exposure. The exclusively male domain that the electric guitar and guitarist evolved from ensured that guitar gods would be male, and they came to symbolize male sexual potency and masculinity with their brash, aggressive music, cool demeanor, and popularity with female fans. Above all, genuine technical skill was the main driving force behind the construction of the guitar god. The audiences that the guitar gods played to when they first arose in the 1960’s began to have much higher standards of musicianship as popular music began to be taken more seriously, and audiences came to expect virtuosity from the lead guitarists after standards had been set by the original guitar gods, Clapton, Bloomfield, and Hendrix.

The guitar god persona flourished in the seventies, but by the end of the decade things were changing. The new generation of guitar heroes was represented by great guitar players such as Eddie Van Halen and Randy Rhodes. These players, however, emphasized speed over sustain, and the tone of their guitars was less warm and more shrill, though no less loud. By the eighties, blues-influenced lead guitar playing like that of Hendrix or Clapton had largely vanished from popular music, and the only guitar gods around were playing hyper-fast solos in Heavy Metal or Hair bands, dressed in tacky attire. They were cool to some, but others thought they were silly showboats who paled in comparison to the guitar gods of yore.
Still, there are always great guitarists playing in the style of the great guitar heroes, even if they are not considered gods. While current and future lead rock guitarists may never attain the celebrity and mythic status of their predecessors, there will always be an audience for the kind of guitar playing that so moved audiences in the sixties and seventies, when the guitarists playing the licks and solos became not just guitar stars, but gods.
The electric guitar was one of the most significant musical inventions of the twentieth century. While there was no single inventor, as its development was the result of several innovators, it would profoundly change American music and become as identifiable a symbol of American culture as any other. Its creators sprang from a culture of tinkering that arose with the advent of electronics, particularly the radio. Taking apart and tinkering with radios came to be regarded as an exclusively male pursuit, as a bias developed that women were not capable of working with electronics. This bias continued with the electric guitar’s emergence: constructing, selling, and playing the electric guitar came to be almost exclusively the domain of men. While many women played the electric guitar, and some with considerable skill, the most acclaimed and accomplished electric guitarists were all men, and electric guitar playing came to be associated with male virility, much like playing certain sports.

The electric guitar’s original purpose was simply to provide more volume to a guitarist who could not be heard in a band setting. Over time, as the instrument was refined and improved, it became capable of sounds that were unique, and quite unlike those of an acoustic guitar. Its remarkable versatility allowed it to be applied to all forms of American music. It was used in jazz, folk, blues, and country, and was crucial to the rise of rock ‘n’ roll, as the genre could not exist without it. From the beginnings of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950’s to the end of the century, every rock band prominently featured an electric guitarist. Its distinctive sound was the most essential element of rock ‘n’ roll. And as the skills of rock guitarists grew and they came to be taken seriously as musicians, so, too, was rock ‘n’ roll taken seriously as a genre with genuine artistic merit, not merely simple pop music.
As amplification improved in the 1960’s, the electric guitar evolved, as the instrument was played louder and became capable of a greater variety of sounds. In the hands of some of the finest rock players, the electric guitar became a vehicle of virtuosity with skill sets that were peculiar to the instrument. Men such as Eric Clapton and Jimi Hendrix came to be considered virtuosos equal to the greatest players in other genres.

Unlike their peers in other genres, however, these men, and others like them, came to be considered more than just virtuosos of the electric guitar. They came to be considered guitar heroes, or gods. The otherworldly quality of the sounds they were making, their appearance, their remarkable skill, the quality and popularity of their music, and the widespread media attention they received, all contributed to a mythic construct that made them objects of adoration, much like superheroes in fiction with special powers. And as electric guitar playing had long been an almost exclusively male pursuit, these men came to symbolize male potency, and were much sought-after objects of female desire. Many male fans, wanting to be guitar gods themselves, saw the electric guitar as an essential item to acquire. Sales of the electric guitar skyrocketed as a result. One might have thought the electric guitar and its greatest rock players would endure indefinitely as conspicuous fixtures in American life.

But the influence and prominence of the electric guitar, and the guitar god, has declined in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Eric Clapton, the original guitar god who still records and performs at 73, fears that “maybe the [electric] guitar is over.” Former Beatle Paul McCartney agreed in a recent interview, and points to the absence of guitar heroes as a

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reason: “The electric guitar was new and fascinatingly exciting in a period before Jimi [Hendrix] and immediately after. So you got loads of great players emulating guys like B.B. King and Buddy Guy...now, it’s more electronic music and kids listen differently...They don’t have guitar heroes.”151  George Gruhn, a writer and dealer of electric guitars since he opened his music shop in Nashville in 1970, also laments the decline of the guitar hero: “What we need is guitar heroes...Eric Clapton is my age.”152  When asked to consider the influence of John Mayer, one of the most commercially successful rock guitarists of today, Gruhn is dismissive: “John Mayer? You don’t see a bunch of kids emulating John Mayer and listening to him and wanting to pick up a guitar because of him.”153

Gruhn makes a salient point. It is not that there are no electric guitarists playing in the vein of Eric Clapton. Players such as Mayer and Joe Bonamassa, who both play classic rock lead guitar, are very good, but not extraordinary. They are not innovative. This is not because it is impossible to be innovative in an old genre like classic rock, which has featured so many great players since the 1960’s. Stevie Ray Vaughan, the late blues and rock player from Dallas, Texas, was considered innovative, but his recording career did not begin until 1983, when classic rock was largely ignored by mainstream audiences. Punk rock, new wave, and dance music were the order of the day. Yet Vaughan had a successful career, and helped keep the myth of the guitar god going. Young players who had no interest in the current trends were inspired by Vaughan and appreciated that he played music inspired by Jimi Hendrix and the blues, rather than new

153  Ibid.
wave or alternative rock. They copied his specific techniques and innovations, which included tuning the guitar down a half-step and using heavy strings, much heavier than what is normally used by lead rock guitar players. This gave his Fender Stratocaster a warmer, thicker tone, more akin to a typical Gibson. Vaughan’s flashy clothes and cool stage demeanor also appealed, and by the time of his tragic death in 1990 at the age of 35, he was universally considered a guitar god, like his friend Eric Clapton. Bonamassa and Mayer have never achieved this kind of recognition, despite having careers much longer than Vaughan’s.

The musical trends in the eighties that Vaughan had to contend with were also an important factor in the decline of the electric guitar and the guitar god. In these years, many thought the era of the guitar god was already over. New wave, punk, and alternative rock bands featured electric guitarists, but most were not highly skilled lead guitar players. They played rudimentary rhythm, and few lead guitar solos were played in the songs they performed. If there were solos, the playing paled in comparison to Vaughan’s and that of other guitar heroes. By the end of the decade, a renewed interest in classic rock helped revitalize the careers of rock bands from the sixties and seventies, but the impact of eighties’ music on the role of the electric guitar would endure.

By the nineties, resurgent classic rock bands such as the Allman Brothers toured regularly for a new legion of fans who wanted to hear the kind of music that the original guitar gods played, as eighties music fell out of favor. Heavy metal bands, which had always featured lead guitar prominently, still had an audience, but it was limited and stagnant. The hyper-fast solos they played had limited appeal. To many who wanted to hear soulful, dynamic playing in
the vein of Jimi Hendrix, the heavy metal players sounded like they were practicing instead of really playing. Some new rock bands, such as Widespread Panic, came to be known as jam bands, and they played music that was essentially classic rock. They featured excellent lead guitarists who played more in the style of the old masters than the metal players did. None, though, stood out as a singular guitar hero.

One important factor for this, which is still a matter of importance, is the oversaturation of the market. By the mid-nineties, countless bands were appearing, many with fleeting careers lasting an album or two. Many were not properly promoted, in part due to record companies’ troubles with declining sales and piracy, but also because there were just too many bands. It was quite unlike when the Beatles were featured on *The Ed Sullivan Show* or Jimi Hendrix played at Woodstock. All eyes were on them. Today, the internet provides instant exposure to any rock band with a website, but the market for guitar-driven rock music is far more dispersed and less promoted than it was in the sixties and seventies.

Finally, in the twenty-first century, the allure of rock music itself, of all kinds, always inextricably linked to the electric guitar, is in decline. Sales of the electric guitar have declined steadily in recent years. The remarkably enduring appeal of rap, hip-hop, and electronic dance music has not been good for the electric guitar. Most of this music features no electric guitar at all. Many children and teenagers today, raised on hip-hop and dance music, neither know, nor care to know, who Jimi Hendrix was.

But at least they know what the electric guitar is and about its connection to rock music. In my role as an educator in Harlem, sometimes I will ask the kids if they ever listen to rock ’n’ roll.
Very often they’ll answer by saying “You mean this?” and then play what’s known as “air guitar,” the mimicking of playing guitar with one’s hands without actually holding an instrument. They might not know much about rock ‘n’ roll, but it is a testament to the electric guitar’s status as an American icon that inner-city third-graders who listen to nothing but hip-hop and pop music think instantly of the electric guitar when rock ‘n’ roll is mentioned.

The concept of the guitar hero is not unknown to young people today. The remarkable success of the video game Guitar Hero, released in 2005, shows that the guitar god is a recognizable artifact to today’s youth, even if none is apparent in real life. And School of Rock, a nationwide after-school program founded in 2002 that teaches rock music to children, has been a tremendous success. Thus, there is reason to think that rock ‘n’ roll, and the electric guitar, may have a future after all. Both likely will never be as dominant as they were in the mid-to late twentieth century, but as long as electric guitars exist, it is possible that a new group of guitar gods, playing music that has artistic merit and commercial potential, will emerge.
Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


