

The History of the Guitar

Audry Kentor & Steve Michaels
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The word guitar conjures in the contemporary American mind images of rock stars and ten million dollar annual incomes, incredible solos and blaring amplifiers, shaggy-haired bassists and dynamic lead guitarists wailing until they lose their voices and numb their fingers. Evidence of this is to be found on the shelves in any Borders or Virgin Records in the country, where Metallica and Nirvana sit comfortably on the countless rows of the compact discs of hundreds of other similar artists; it resides in the basements of most prepubescent boys, where the standard wreck of a hand-me-down guitar squeaks in a horribly out-of-tune version of something approximating “Stairway to Heaven.” America is indeed enthralled by the guitar. Whether Muddy Waters dons a slide or NoFX attacks modern society in musical form, America is listening intently. However, at one time this instrument was considered secondary and even unfit for playing in public venues, and in fact cannot even be traced back before the 15th century with any real certainty or before the 13th at all. At certain times in history, one would even be hard pressed to identify one of the predecessors as a guitar at all, as size, shape, number and type of strings, body structure, and sound quality have varied tremendously over time. Of these, many older models have fallen apart or become unplayable; only brief historical allusions and artists’ renderings have survived, and those in scarce quantities. However, experts have come to accept a certain general historical progression of the development of the modern guitar.

The guitar family seems to be traced back to the Arabic oud, a stringed instrument actually still in use today. The oud spawned many popular instruments throughout time, such as the once well-loved lute and cittern. Although in practice it no longer resembles a modern guitar, it carried the seed of the basic theory behind the guitar and its cousins into Europe through the Crusades and the Moorish conquest of Spain, which was to become its birthplace. The very first instrument recognized as a guitar is said to have been invented by the people of Malaga. Early versions, which were exceedingly small by modern standards, included tied frets (if any) and gut strings arranged in courses. A course is a pair or group of strings played together as a single unit. Modernizing this example, one may look at the 12-string guitar, in which two strings are treated and perform in the same manner as a single string, though they produce a different sound. This fledgling instrument remained local for many years, its first mention appearing in the 1265 publication “Ars Musica” by Juan Gil of Zamora. The development in the interim can only be imagined, as no real documentation exists of the earliest progress in the creation of the guitar.

In order to understand the progression of the guitar, one must first examine the music popular just prior to and during the early stages of its creation. At this time, the lute was the predominant instrument used for public performance. Containing between six and ten courses, it varied between twelve and twenty individual strings. These were made of catgut, and were originally extremely quiet. Throughout the lute’s development, methods to increase volume were discovered; this perhaps led to belief that eventually the originally quiet guitar could also be adapted for large performances. Despite its

predominance, however, the lute possessed several major flaws which may have prevented it from retaining its popularity into later eras. The peghead of the lute rests at a 90-degree angle to the neck, making it nearly impossible to tune. It also did not have a saddle. The simpler guitar, at this point, similar to the lute, tuned to A, could produce a somewhat comparable sound with a great deal less effort on behalf of the artist.

Bridging the gap between the lute and the guitar is the cittern. Considered an instrument of the peasantry, and often used as a slang word to describe a promiscuous woman, it grew to extreme popularity but never great artistic respect. However, it originated the pear-shaped body, somewhat foreshadowing the form of the modern guitar. It employed 4 to 5 courses, tuned in fifths. Furthermore, the ease of maintaining the instrument rivaled the lute, as the peghead was mounted vertically and the instrument was available in chromatic or diatonic forms. Also, it overcame the obstacle of volume and could be played quite loudly.

The obvious next step in such a progression is the guitar itself, in its infant state. In the 13th century, the *Guitarra Moresca* originated in Spain. This four course instrument retained a slanted peghead, reminiscent of the lute but not nearly so difficult to tune. Its oval body may have been covered with a skin soundboard; pictorial and written sources differ on this point. It still relied on tied frets, as did the nearly concurrent *Guitarra Latina*. This particular version was much smaller than the *Moresca*, employing only three to four courses, but also represented advancement as its soundboard was constructed from wood. How long these instruments existed before they rose to any

sort of prominence is unknown. The first major literary reference to said instruments was in the collected works of the Archpriest of Hita, which, between 1283 and 1350, mentioned them multiple times.

Though at this point the early guitar was an accepted instrument, it was still considered unfit for large performances and real art. The model which began to lend credibility to the guitar, the first trace of its current popularity, was the Guittern. This five-course instrument actually had permanent frets and was played with a pick. The strings courses themselves could be tuned in unison or in octaves, a flexibility previously not allotted to the guitar. Its body was violin-shaped, somewhat akin to the modern guitar but still significantly smaller. Other differentiating features between the Guittern and the current guitar were the lack of a saddle and the movable bridge and tailpiece of the Guittern. Also, though some dispute remains about the exact date, wire strings were first employed at this time. The Guittern would have been the first instrument to have them. Marking the advancement of this instrument to a viable performance piece, it was played publicly at the Feast of Westminster in England in 1306.

For the next 150 years, the form of the guitar stayed mostly stable. Small changes were made throughout this period and new versions of older models of the guitar began to emerge. Among these was the Ghitarra Battente. This instrument did not significantly alter the form or sound of the guitar, but updated pre-existing pieces. For instance, it added the saddle to the guitar, a fixed or movable bridge, and began the trend towards metal frets. Another offshoot during this time, which did not influence the

development of the guitar but rather demonstrated its growing popularity, was referred to as the Bandora and was the predecessor to the bass guitar. This time may be interpreted as an incubation period, at which the guitar had reached musical viability and no longer needed change to survive. Though it was far from complete, its development could slow appropriately as its then-current forms were enjoyed by the populace.

In the early to mid 1500s, the final steps before the modern guitar began to solidify. The Vihuela de Mano, which can actually still be found occasionally today, was by far the largest guitar to date; it set the size for the modern instrument. Though it used gut strings, it was the first instrument to consistently be played with six courses. It was also played with a pick, unlike the very early guitar forms, which were bowed. Several soundholes were inset into the top of the guitar. As one can clearly see, this guitar very closely resembled the twelve-string guitar played currently. In fact, the Viheula came to America through Mexico and into Louisiana and Texas, where it evolved directly into the twelve string. The first actual publication of music for the guitar, "Tres Libros de Musica en Cifras para Vihuela," published in 1564, was intended for this guitar.

At this point, the development of the guitar diverged to create the several different forms we know today. The four-course guitar began a movement towards single strings, and was the first to attempt a slightly rounded back still visible in Ovation brand guitars. It retained the size of the Vihuela, cementing what was a trend into a dogma. From this, two new forms of guitar evolved: the five course and the English Guitar. Each of them adopted one extra course from the four-course guitar, and action credited to

Vicente Espinel. In 1551, Adrian Le Roy published nine books of tablature for these five-course instruments, reflecting the English Guitar's growing popularity outside of Spain. A piece dedicated to Louis XIV, "Guitarre Royale," increased the popularity of the guitar to the point where it superceded the lute as the predominant string instrument of the day. By the early 17th century, the Baroque Guitar had originated nylon strings and thinned the body of the guitar slightly. It too adopted permanent frets. Only shortly afterwards, in 1750, the six string guitar became a reality. Courses had been almost entirely replaced by single strings, and many prominent composers such as Fernando Sor, Mauro Guiliani, Matteo Carcassi, and Dioniso Aguado not only performed but instructed students in the art of guitar playing. During the mid 1800s, the classical guitar emerged from Spain and moved to America, where in 1915 the X-bracing still used today was invented. Simultaneously, Manuel Torres discovered new methods to increase the resonance of the acoustic guitar, finalizing its progression to the modern guitar. By 1946, nylon had entirely replaced gut strings and the transformation of the acoustic guitar was complete.

At about the same time, a new breed of guitar was being born. The acoustic's popularity had risen to such an extent that the industry began to innovate new ways to capitalize upon this popular instrument, and musicians actively sought out new improvements and ideas. However, as Big Band and Swing styles grew in popularity, even an acoustic fitted with steel strings simply could not produce the necessary volume to be heard in amongst a large group of players. Noting this, two young blues musicians in Los Angeles, George Beauchamp and John Dopyera, began to seek out a way to create

a louder guitar. After several attempts and failures, they pioneered the idea of placing aluminum disks in a metal body. The resultant guitar could produce a volume 3 to 5 times greater than the existing acoustic, and thus the two men patented the design and opened the National String Instrument Company. This model proved especially popular with slide guitarists; however, it fell into disuse when the two inventors had a falling out and sold the company.

Beauchamp, however, did not cease his study of the guitar. Having experimented with electricity in his youth, he was quite familiar with the theory that a wire passed through a magnetic field could create a change in the intensity of that field which could in turn create an electrical current in a couple wire coil. From this, he formed the idea that a device could be developed which, when attached to a single string, would convert the resultant vibrations into a proportional variation in electrical current. This could then be amplified in the same manner as the radio and loudspeaker systems of that day and age. After months of experimentation, Beauchamp, in conjunction with his friend Paul Barth, created the original “pickup” out of two horseshoe magnets and six pieces of pole. The original wire coiling was done with motors cannibalized from the creators’ washing and sewing machines.

All the effort proved worthwhile after Beauchamp contacted Harry Watson, the plant superintendent of the National String Instrument Co. and skilled craftsman. He handmade the neck and body of the first electric guitar, dubbed “The Frying Pan” because of its small, flat, circular body and long neck. This was then taken to Adolph

Rickenbacher, a young man with name recognition due to his famous cousin and considerable financial resources. The Rickenbacher, as the guitar was thereby named, became an instant hit with Hawaiian and slide guitarists.

Shortly following this, an acoustical engineer for Gibson, Lloyd Loar, decided to switch his area of specialization from mandolin to guitar. He created Vivi-Tone, a subdivision of Gibson with one goal only: the creation of a Spanish-style electric guitar. Ironically enough, the company was a miserable failure. The poorly designed, special interest instrument could not yet single-handedly support a small company, and Vivi-Tone closed within the year. Though this might have been the death knell for the electric guitar, Gibson saw the potential for this instrument and worked with artist Alvino Rey and Chicago-based company Lyon and Healy to perfect it.

In 1936 Gibson unveiled the first Spanish Electric Guitar, the ES- 150 or the “Charlie Christian.” The first one ever was built by Gibson employee Walter Fuller and shipped on May 20 from Kalamazoo, Michigan. By 1937 the single-bar pickup instrument was being widely distributed at a price of \$150, including 15 foot cord and EH-150 amplifier. It strongly resembled an acoustic in appearance, but displayed the f-shaped sound holes, a trapeze tailpiece, and two knobs - one for tone, and one for volume. Its popularity prompted Gibson to create “the best electric guitar possible to make.” (Gibson AA Catalog, 1940) The ES-250 featured a bar pickup with individual miniature blades instead of a single, a larger body, and a deluxe fingerboard. The price rose to \$250, but the instrument remained en vogue and was played religiously by such

figures as T-Bone Walker and Tony Mottola. Next in the series came the ES-175, launched on August 1st of 1949. This was the first to begin to shape the electric guitar's body into the silhouette we see today, with the cutaway semicircle in the upper left creating the Florentine, or point. Its cousin, the ES-175D, which came out in 1953 with P-90 pickups, has to this day not been discontinued. As Gibson's first dual pickup guitar, it became the instrument of choice for giants and legends, including B.B King and Elvis himself.

The Gibson models did retain one major undesirable characteristic. Due to the vibrations within the hollow body of the guitar, distortion and feedback often interfered with the music when amplified. Searching for a response to this phenomena, jazz guitarist Les Paul invented "the log"- the first solid body electric guitar. Though it was later carved to resemble the shape of the current guitars, the original design was simply two pickups mounted to a piece of 4x4 pine. In 1946, he brought this design to Gibson. However, the company felt that this new model would not appeal to consumers and rejected it. At the same time, the owner of a radio repair shop in Anaheim released his own version of the solid-body guitar. His Esquire, released in 1949, and later renamed Telecaster, became the first successful model in this genre. Its lack of appeal to jazz guitarists, who preferred the more mellow tones of the hollow body, was balanced by the popularity it gained with blues, country, and, of course, rock and roll. The inventor was to become a household name for generations; Leo Fender began an era with his Fender Telecaster. Of course, after the success of the Fender became evident, Gibson reconsidered Les Paul's original design. After some improvements, they too released a

solid body guitar dubbed the Les Paul. With its historical value and versatile P-90 pickups from the mid-forties, the Les Paul today is extremely coveted and often sells for upwards of a thousand dollars.

After this final development, the electric guitar had more or less reached its final form. A few more innovations, such as the humbucking pickup, came to enrich the sound of the guitar without really altering its basic form. First incorporated into the Les Paul model, these two coils wrapped out of phase with each other eliminated the hum of the magnetic coils unavoidable in previous guitars. The semi-solid body of the ES-335 constituted another innovation, and grew popular with musicians such as Chuck Berry. Cosmetic changes graced the final stages of the guitar's development, eventually producing the Gibson SG and the Fender Stratocaster. By 1961, the electric guitar had reached full maturity.

The growth of the guitar throughout the ages has been on a twofold path. Of course, the technical developments have been fascinating and crucial. However, feeding that progression has been the social element of the instrument's popularity. Each major new mechanical change was prompted by some sort of social demand for better, louder, more pure-sounding instrumentation. Therefore, the documentation of the guitar's journey to the present day is far more than a compilation of details. It is an examination of how culture has changed over time, finally evolving, just as the guitar evolved, into the world we live in today.