

“How High The Moon” –Les Paul & Mary Ford (1951)

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Essay by Dave Hunter (guest post)*



Les Paul and Mary Ford



Original label

American popular culture was bopping along at a fast pace by the mid to late 1940s, with the World War over and both industry and entertainment on the home front booming from an influx of new energy and inspiration. The decade proved a hotbed of innovation as the arts and the artisans that equipped them joined forces to advance the means by which their diversions were delivered to the masses. Popular music embraced such progress even more than most realms of popular culture, and no work better exhibits the confluence of musical and technical artistry than Les Paul & Mary Ford’s 1951 recording of “How High The Moon.” A massive hit in its day, it was also a milestone in the evolution of popular music, and one that set a course that we are still navigating.

Perhaps he is best known today for the Gibson electric guitar that carries his name, but Les Paul was one of popular music’s biggest stars of the early part of the mid-20th century, and he and Mary Ford (to whom he was married for 15 years) formed a superstar pairing to rival any for hits and popular recognition. Paul and Ford met in 1946—introduced by Gene Autry, as legend has it, for whom she was working as a back-up singer—and through the late ’40s developed a close relationship that was both personal and professional, marrying in 1949. In addition to hosting nationally syndicated radio and TV shows, they scored 28 hits for Capitol Records between 1950 and 1957, including 16 Top Tens in the first four years of that stretch alone, including 1951’s “How High The Moon,” a “Billboard” #1 for nine weeks.

Alongside his considerable success as a performer, however, Paul was also an innovator and an inventor, and was either directly or partly responsible for many advances in musical instrument and recording technologies that are still very much standards in these fields today. As a pioneer of multi-track recording and tape delay (echo), the inventor of sound-on-sound recording, and a collaborator in the development of one of the world’s most significant electric guitars, Paul himself was behind an impressive array of developments that enabled groundbreaking recordings in the late 1940s and early ’50s, and which continue to define how popular music is performed and recorded.

Les Paul was born Lester William Polsfuss (some sources spell it “Polfuss”) in Waukesha, Wisconsin, in 1915, and learned to play the guitar, the banjo, and the harmonica at a young age. The ginger-haired Polsfuss performed professionally while still in his teens, and cycled through the stage names Wizard of Waukesha, Hot Rod Red, and Rhubarb Red before landing on the more dignified Les Paul, some time after his mother had also officially changed the family’s surname from Polsfuss to Paul. As a child, Paul had built a PA system out of a telephone and his mom’s radio and used it to perform for tips outside a BBQ stand near his home. As a professional musician who was gaining recognition in the early 1940s, he continued to tinker and create, constantly seeking to improve both the instrument itself and the ways in which it was amplified and recorded.

Born Iris Colleen Summers in El Monte, California, in 1924, Mary Ford received her better-known stage name from Les Paul in the late 1940s, who purportedly picked it out of the phone book while seeking to give his partner a moniker as short and catchy as his own. Still known as Colleen Summers early in her career, she formed the western swing vocal trio the Sunshine Girls with Vivian Earles and June Widener. The Sunshine Girls backed up country & western artist Jimmy Wakely, as well as appearing on several prominent musical radio shows—including Autry’s—before Summers’s departure to join the Les Paul Trio as lead singer and rhythm guitarist.

In addition to his quest to design and manufacture a solid-bodied electric guitar (an idea he had proposed to Gibson at least half a decade before the company eventually ran with the Les Paul Model in 1952), Paul was an enthusiastic pioneer of multi-track recording by the late 1940s, and he brought his best efforts to date to the recording of “How High The Moon.” He would develop an eight-track reel-to-reel tape recorder a few years later, finally taken up for commercial production by Ampex in 1957, but in 1951 Les Paul was still achieving his lush layering of instrumental and vocal parts by bouncing tracks back and forth between two monophonic recording decks to overdub part on top of part. In the late 1930s and 1940s, Paul’s efforts were restricted to using a pair of cumbersome disc recorders, but he had been given one of the first professional Ampex reel-to-reel tape recorders by singer Bing Crosby in 1949, and a pair of these were behind the impressive production of the couple’s massive hits of the 1950s.

“How High The Moon” was written by composer Morgan Lewis and lyricist Nancy Hamilton for the 1940 musical review “Two for the Money.” Les Paul and Mary Ford had performed it in their live set on the road for several weeks before deciding to commit it to record, field-testing the response to different arrangements in the process. Recording in the studio that Paul had configured in the couple’s apartment in Jackson Heights, Queens, New York, the couple attempted two failed renditions—one spoiled by sirens from the fire station across the street, another when an upstairs neighbor flushed the toilet—before successfully overdubbing the full 12 vocal tracks and 12 instrumental parts from one Ampex tape recorder to the other to create the lush, ethereal arrangement for which the song is famous. Once they got rolling, Paul told “Sound On Sound” magazine in January 2007, the entire effort took less than an hour. “I was so into it, and so free,

having played so much, that I'd just press the button and go," he recalled. "And Mary was absolutely super. I'd tell her what I wanted and that's what she'd put down." Prior to the release of "How High The Moon," the standard for studio recording involved capturing what was essentially a live performance, with all parts performed simultaneously by as many musicians as were required to fill out the arrangement; in truth, this was the way it was most often done for many years after, too. Les Paul's engineering artistry, in addition to the superb musicianship that both he and Mary Ford brought to the venture, pointed to a future where the musician-producer could create dense, multi-layered arrangements using very few players. The techniques used to create "How High The Moon" might have been seen as "novelties" by some traditionalists in the field, but Paul's use of multi-tracking to create layer upon layer of chorused sounds from the same instrument or vocalist, and the way it enabled just a few performers to produce the sound and feel of a large ensemble, would soon become the standard of the professional studio.

All of the instrumental parts were performed on Paul's electric guitar (a pre-Gibson creation of his own devising), which was plugged straight into the recording console. These included rhythmic "drumming" on the strings, chord accompaniment, a bass part, and layers of lead parts, all recorded in the reverse order of their prominence in the final mix (rhythm first, lead and bass later) to avoid too much dub-to-dub deterioration in the sound quality of the first tracks committed to tape. Similarly, Ford recorded her harmony and backing parts early in the session, topping them all off with the song's primary melodic vocal. Recorded on January 4, 1951, "How High The Moon" entered the charts on March 23rd of that same year, where it stayed for 25 weeks, including nine weeks at #1.

Rock and roll was not yet a household term in 1951, but the snappy rhythms and fleet riffing in this recording of "How High The Moon" (a song originally written as a slow fox-trot) clearly prefigured the new musical genre. Paul's own performance embodied the melting pot of jazz, western swing, country and western, and rhythm and blues that gave birth to this new musical force more fully by the middle part of the decade—by which point Les Paul and Mary Ford's popularity was waning in the face of the rock and roll boom. In a trenchant piece of situational irony, the Gibson electric guitars that bore his name—developed primarily for the jazz, swing, and popular music that Les Paul played himself—would become central not only to rock and roll, but to the heavy rock and metal styles of the 1960s and '70s.

After their divorce in 1963, Les Paul and Mary Ford pursued separate musical careers, both remaining successful in their own way, if not sustaining anything like the popularity they had experienced throughout much of their partnership. Ford died in Arcadia, California, in 1977 of complications from diabetes. Les Paul died in 2009, having continued both to perform his music and to pursue the innovations that helped him do so well into his 90s. Les Paul and Mary Ford's 1951 recording of "How High The Moon" was entered into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1979, and Les Paul himself was inducted into Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1988, and the National Inventors Hall of Fame in 2005.

Dave Hunter is a writer and musician whose books include “The Gibson Les Paul, The Guitar Amp Handbook,” “The Fender Telecaster,” “Guitar Effects Pedals: Updated & Expanded Edition,” and several others. A regular contributor to “Guitar Player” and “Vintage Guitar” magazines, Hunter lives in Portsmouth, NH, with his wife and their two children.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.