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A-HED

How to Tell a Real 1959 Gibson Les Paul Guitar From a Fake: A Missing Notebook Holds the Key

Guitar-maker Gibson is launching a hunt to find vanished ledger, with a \$59,000 reward

By [Lukas I. Alpert](#)

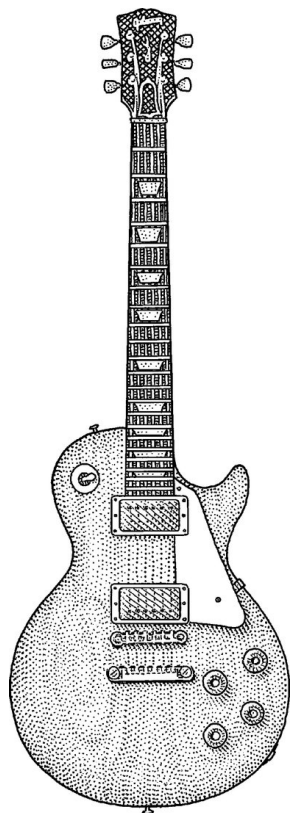
July 10, 2020 4:26 pm ET



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The 1959 Gibson Les Paul is the world's most expensive guitar. It can also be one of the hardest to authenticate.



Some of the most famous guitar players, including Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, Billy Gibbons of ZZ Top and Slash of Guns N' Roses, are avid collectors. Only 643 were produced and they routinely sell for as much as \$500,000, according to dealers and experts.

Buyers and sellers of the guitars have long struggled confirming their history and authenticity because of a missing piece of crucial information: A ledger in which Gibson listed all manufacturing and the original sales details, which mysteriously disappeared about 40 years ago when the company moved from Kalamazoo, Mich., to Nashville.

This has made forgeries a lot easier. Gibson estimates there are as many as 200 bogus models circulating among collectors, leading to at least one lawsuit, in which a major collector accused a prominent dealer of selling bogus guitars.

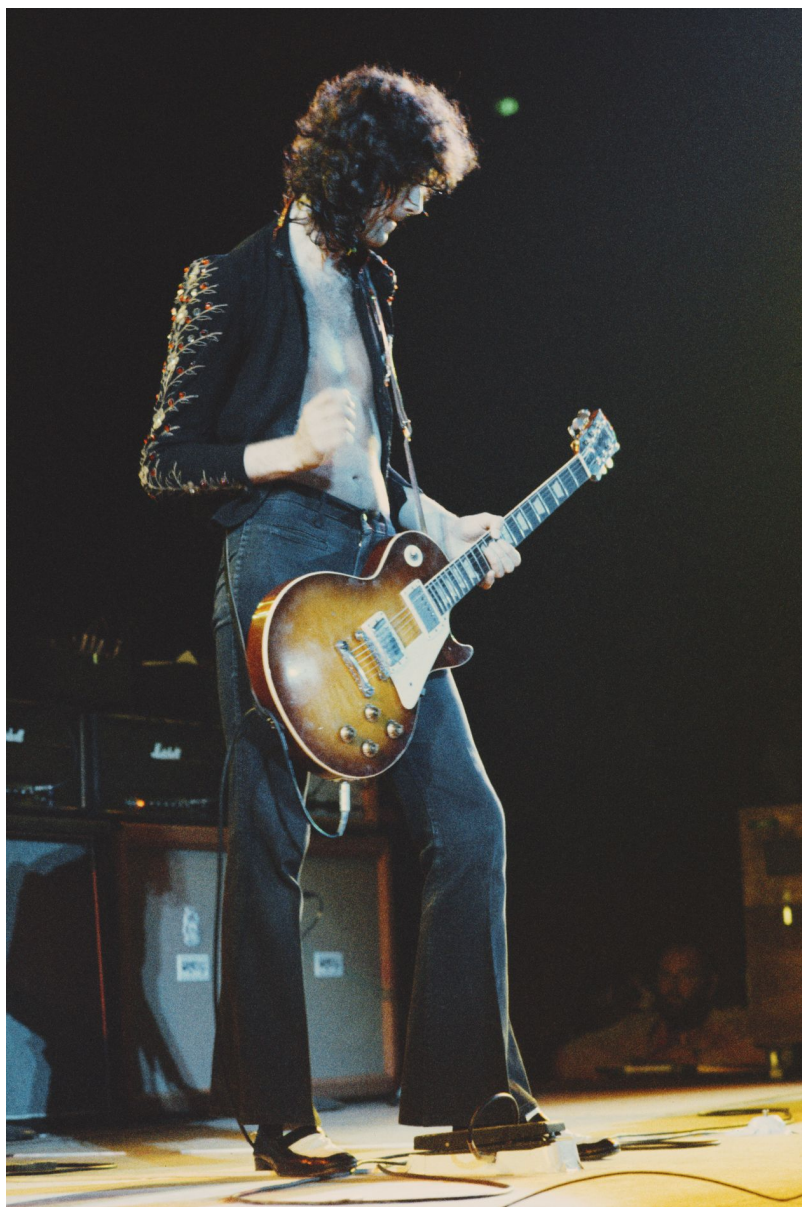
Real deal?

“About half of the ones I see are fake,” said Eric Ernest, a vintage guitar broker and authenticator from Lexington, S.C., who specializes in 1950s Gibsons.

To settle the confusion, Gibson wants its ledger back. The company next week plans to offer a \$59,000 reward for the ledger, which lists information about Les Pauls made between July 1958 and early 1960.

Gibson said that ledger was the only one to be lost during the move from Michigan to Tennessee.

“It does not seem a coincidence that that’s the only one to disappear,” said Cesar Gueikian, Gibson’s chief merchant officer. He said he thinks the book was probably stolen.



Guitarist Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin, performing with a 1959 Gibson Les Paul standard guitar in England in 1972.

PHOTO: MICHAEL PUTLAND/HULTON ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES

The company didn't notice the book had gone missing for several years, he said. At the time, the guitars sold for a few thousand dollars, so the significance of their loss wasn't immediately felt. That changed as prices shot up.

Among aficionados, the missing ledger became a particularly vexing issue and eventually took on a kind of totemic status. The subject often comes up on Les Paul fan chat boards, where some posit that the book was destroyed in a fire, while others say it was stolen.

Some collectors have even offered their own, smaller, rewards in the hopes of better authenticating their instruments. Over the years, Gibson also has launched periodic efforts to find the book, although Mr. Gueikian described them as "half-hearted."

This time, on top of the \$59,000 reward, the company plans to circulate pictures of its ledgers from other years to show what the missing one looked like. They also plan a media blitz in the Kalamazoo area, where the book was last seen. Mr. Gueikian said he hoped the new effort would bring the ledger back and make it easier to identify fakes.

Some of the frauds are copies made by skilled luthiers, Mr. Ernest said, while others are Frankenstein monsters cobbled together from parts of Les Pauls manufactured in other years and passed off as real 1959s. Even parts from a 1959 can sell for as much as \$50,000, he said.

Because of the difficulty in authenticating real 1959 Les Pauls, most sales are done privately, which only exacerbates the problem.

“The people who get scammed are often very wealthy and don’t want people to know they were taken advantage of, so they often settle out of court or just take their lumps,” Mr. Ernest said. “The fakes always come with some back story of how a guy found it under his late great uncle’s bed.”

Even major collectors have gotten burned. In 2007, Melvyn Franks, whose \$17 million collection included nearly a dozen 1959 Les Pauls, sued Phil Winfield, a well-known seller of vintage guitars, claiming he had been sold several fakes. The case was later settled out of court. Mr. Franks declined to comment, while Mr. Winfield didn’t respond to messages seeking comment.

Blues guitarist Joe Bonamassa, who owns 18 of the 1959 model, said he isn’t concerned any in his collection are fake. He said he had encountered a few fakes and they had been obvious. “The quality of these guitars is very consistent, so any flaw or questionable part stands out,” he said.

When the 1959 Les Paul was originally produced, it was considered a flop.



1952 Gibson guitar ledger book similar to the missing 1959 one.

PHOTO: GIBSON

The model—named after jazz legend and electric-guitar pioneer Les Paul, who consulted on its design—first hit the market in 1951. Featuring a gold face and made from solid mahogany, the guitars were both expensive and heavy, and found an audience among jazz musicians.

In mid-1958, the guitar was redesigned, with the most notable change being to its color, which now featured a “sunburst” finish, fading from light to dark around the edges with flame stippling in the grain of the wood. The neck of the instrument was also thicker.

The sunburst guitars began production in mid-1958 and continued through 1960 with some minor production changes throughout. But the 1959 versions are considered the most desirable because the necks for those instruments are a particular thickness often preferred by players.

The original price tag of \$450 with a case—approximately \$4,000 today when adjusted for inflation—proved too dear for most and the guitar didn’t sell well. As rock ‘n’ roll exploded, younger musicians gravitated to cheaper and lighter Fender Stratocasters and Telecasters. By 1961, Gibson ceased producing the traditional Les Paul, changing its main model to a double cutaway version that would later be called the SG.

The Les Paul in its original design returned in 1968, by which time the older model had seen a resurgence in popularity, with legends like Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jerry Garcia frequently playing them.

“By 1967-68, the word was out: this was the ultimate blues-rock guitar,” Mr. Bonamassa said. “Growing up listening to British blues or Southern rock bands like ZZ Top or the Allman Brothers, there was just this common tone and it was always this guitar.”



Slash plays a replica of a 1958 Gibson Les Paul. He is a major collector of Les Pauls and owns the original.

PHOTO: KAT BENZOVA

Since then, the resale market for the 1959s has boomed. While specific guitars connected to a famed musician—like the white Fender Stratocaster Jimi Hendrix played at Woodstock—will sometimes sell for millions, the 1959 Les Paul rarely changes hands for less than \$250,000.

“If you are a player, this is definitely one of the ones you want to own,” said Rick Nielsen of the band Cheap Trick, a major guitar collector who has owned a dozen 1959s over the years.

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Mr. Nielsen said he acquired his first in 1968 by trading an SG and \$25. He sold it later that year to Jeff Beck for \$350. His most recent acquisition—a 1959 that had once been owned by Rush’s Geddy Lee—cost him over \$200,000 at auction earlier this year, he said.

“That’s the most I’ve ever paid for a guitar,” said Mr. Nielsen, who estimates he has owned over 2,000 guitars in his life.

Some particularly notable 1959s have sold for far more. One that had been owned by Fleetwood Mac co-founder Peter Green and later Thin Lizzy’s Gary Moore sold for \$2 million to a private collector, according to reports of the deal. It is now owned by Metallica’s Kirk Hammett. Another that Keith Richards played during The Rolling Stones’ 1964 debut performance on “The Ed Sullivan Show” sold for \$1 million at auction in 2003, according to reports at the time.



Guitar pioneer Les Paul, left, with Paul McCartney trying out a custom-made left handed “Les Paul Lite” in 1988.

PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

Mr. Gueikian, Gibson’s chief merchant officer, said he thinks Jimmy Page’s 1959 Les Paul could fetch up to \$20 million if he ever sold it.

He said Gibson believes the \$59,000 reward is high enough to bring whoever has the ledger forward.

“My realistic expectation is that we have a 50-50 chance of finding it—if it still exists,” he said.

Mr. Bonamassa said he isn’t convinced the book is still around. “They threw a lot of stuff in the dumpster back then. It wasn’t like these were kept in a fire-proof gun safe. They were just laying on shelves.”

Write to Lukas I. Alpert at lukas.alpert@wsj.com

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