

THE ELECTRIC GUITAR

Today the electric guitar is one of the most popular instruments available. Before the 1930s all guitars were acoustic. This means that the sound was amplified, or increased, by a hollow body. Electric guitars have a solid body. The sound is passed from pick-ups on this body, through an amplifier, to loud speakers. This process not only makes the guitar louder but also changes the type of sound produced.

In 1932 Adolph Rickenbacker fitted special microphones, called pick-ups, inside the body of a Spanish guitar. Soon afterwards, the American guitar manufacturers Gibson produced a similar guitar. This increased the volume of the guitar but otherwise the sound was not altered.

In 1944 Leo Fender built the first truly electric guitar. It had a solid body. Ten years later Fender produced the pioneering Stratocaster which is still made today. It had a double cut away body which made it easier to play the high notes. Thus high pitched guitar solos became the hall mark of the electric guitar sound. It had a tremolo arm which bent the notes and 3 pick-ups which changed the sound in other ways. Its clean, cutting sound made it popular with such rock guitarists as Jimi Hendrix.

In 1952 the guitarist Les Paul designed a solid bodied electric guitar for Gibson. Like the Fender Stratocaster, this model has proved so popular that it is still made today with very few changes in design. It produces a heavy sound, appreciated by blues based musicians such as Eric Clapton.

Gradually, the range of sounds that could be produced increased. During the 1960s guitars were made which could produce distortion, wah-wah and other sounds. Between 1977 and 1985 Roland, the Japanese synthesizer maker, built a number of guitar synthesizers which could produce many different sounds. However, these have not sold well. Most guitarists seem to prefer to produce complicated sounds from a relatively simple instrument by using their skill rather than advanced electronics.

From time to time unusually shaped guitars have been made. The most famous of these was the space age looking Gibson Flying V guitar. However, these odd shaped guitars have not been popular with musicians because they were so awkward to play.

Exercises

1. What is an acoustic guitar?
2. Sort out the following letters to spell the names of 2 famous guitarists mentioned in the passage:
I I J M O T P C N A L R H D X N I E C R I E.
3. Match up these sounds with the correct guitar: Clean sound, heavy sound, Gibson, Stratocaster.
4. Write a paragraph describing some of the new sounds that were added to the electric guitar.
5. Why did unusual shaped guitars fail to become popular?
6. Why have guitar synthesizers failed to be accepted by guitarists?
7. Draw a labelled diagram to show how an electric guitar works.
8. Imagine you have just bought a Fender Stratocaster. Write a letter to a friend explaining why you prefer it to your old acoustic guitar.
9. Construct a time chart on the development of the electric guitar. Dates on the left hand side and important events on the other side.



Fender Stratocaster Guitar
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