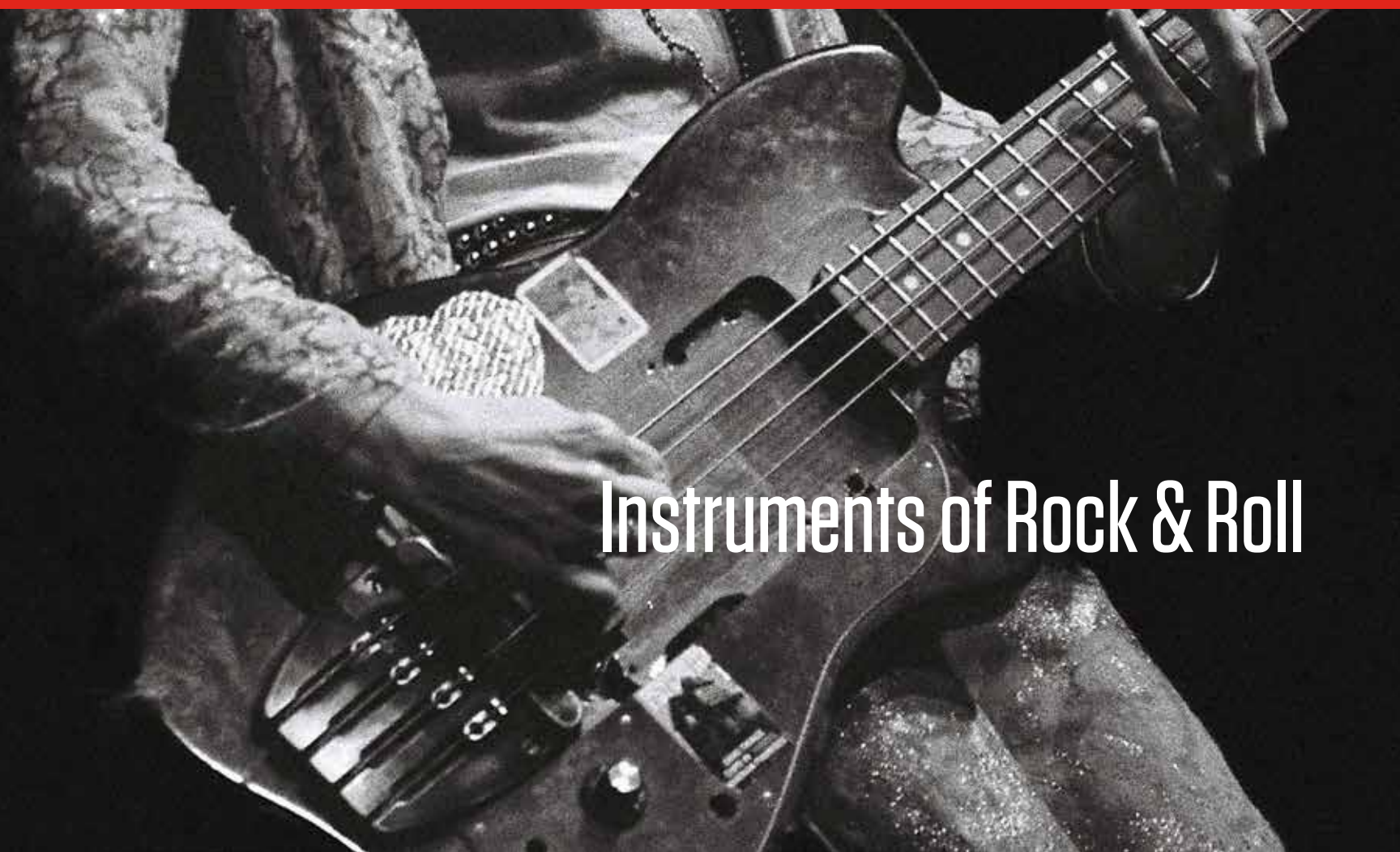




# PLAY IT LOUD



Instruments of Rock & Roll



**PLAY IT LOUD**



# PLAY IT LOUD

## Instruments of Rock & Roll

Jayson Kerr Dobney and Craig J. Inciardi

with Anthony DeCurtis, Alan di Perna, David Fricke,

Holly George-Warren, and Matthew W. Hill

**THE  
MET**

**The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York**

DISTRIBUTED BY YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, NEW HAVEN AND LONDON



## Creating an Image

HOLLY GEORGE-WARREN

**“WE WON’T LET OUR MUSIC stand in the way of our visual act!”** proclaimed the Who’s guitarist Pete Townshend in 1967, underscoring the importance of image to rock.<sup>1</sup> Though by then acclaimed in Great Britain for his hook-laden songcraft and Rickenbacker fretwork, Townshend had originally distinguished his band in London clubs with eye-catching stage wear and incendiary live shows. The tall, thin guitarist would leap into the air, windmilling his right arm as he attacked his instrument, while Keith Moon flailed at his colossal drum kit, the set climaxing with “My Generation” (1965) and Townshend smashing his guitar into a massive amplifier and mic stand. No one had seen anything like it.

Townshend was one of several guitar-playing showmen who evolved from art-school students to become visually exciting performers in the 1960s. Onstage, guitars and drums became their paint and brushes. Through their performative expression, dress, and choice of instrumentation, these musicians created self-images that became their trademarks. “The instrument is used to invest the body of the performer with meaning, to confer upon it a unique identity,” as scholar Steve Waksman noted.<sup>2</sup> And what on the surface might seem to be merely a flashy branding device or well-executed stagecraft could also be an expression of the artist’s individuality, socioeconomic

The destructive climax of the Who’s set at the Monterey Pop Festival, Monterey, Calif., June 18, 1967



Jerry Lee Lewis and band perform "Great Balls of Fire" in the film *Jamboree*, 1957.

Baby grand piano, George Steck, ca. 1955. Lewis kept and used this piano in his Nashville home for more than fifty years.

in early rock and roll, as both a solo instrument and part of the horn sections that embellished many early rock and roll hits. Berry's hit references the horns in a band "blowin' like a hurricane," but, again, does not mention picking or strumming.

These instrumental choices were a reflection of rock and roll's roots in African American rhythm and blues, jump blues, and boogie-woogie. Consider, for instance, Jackie Brenston and Ike Turner's 1951 recording "Rocket 88," which is often cited as the first rock and roll record, or at least as a disc that was pivotal in rock and roll's emergence. The track is primarily

driven by Turner's rollicking, eight-to-the-bar piano work. Frenetic solo sections are performed by Turner on piano and Raymond Hill on soprano sax. Electric guitar is present as well, played by Willie Kizart, but only as an accompanying instrument, reinforcing the song's boogie-woogie bass line. The guitar tone is notably distorted. This has been attributed to the ripped speaker cone in Kizart's amplifier, which had been damaged en route to Sam Phillips's recording studio in Memphis, where "Rocket 88" was recorded prior to its release on the Chess Records label.

The misadventure of Willie Kizart's amp is one of many legendary tales of speaker cones



In a sense, the electric guitar had been waiting for rock and roll to fulfill its destiny. The instrument had been around since at least 1932, when the first commercially produced electric guitar, the Ro-Pat-In A-25 “Frying Pan,” made its modest debut. That model was designed for Hawaiian-style steel playing. By 1936 the market was flush with new electric guitars from Gibson, Epiphone, Volu-Tone, Dobro, Regal, Vega, Slingerland, and Sound Projects. These included both Hawaiian-style steel guitars and electrified Spanish models — the most familiar type of guitar today.

Despite the proliferation of six-string product, the electric guitar’s impact on mainstream popular music was marginal throughout the 1930s and 1940s. Steel guitars found a place in Hawaiian music and Western swing. The electric Spanish models, which were essentially jazz archtop guitars fitted with a pickup, were used in big band music, mainly in the rhythm section; indeed, the need for a guitar that could compete with big band decibel levels had been a driving force in the instrument’s electrification.

At the tail end of the 1930s, the Kansas City jazz titan Charlie Christian harnessed the electric guitar’s revved-up volume to bring the exciting new sound to the forefront of Benny Goodman’s band, making the electric guitar a solo instrument alongside the ensemble’s saxes, trumpets, trombones, and Goodman’s own clarinet. With this, Christian laid the groundwork for jazz guitar playing and even rock guitar soloing. But at the time, he and a few other players were the exception rather than the rule. Most stayed in the background, providing rhythmic and chordal accompaniment.

Audience attention was focused on the big band vocalists and instrumentalist bandleaders such as Goodman, trombonist Glenn Miller, and trumpeter Harry James. The sound of the electric guitar was still strange to many ears; in fact, in the late 1930s listeners to the popular NBC radio program *The Chesterfield Hour*, on which Les Paul played with Fred Waring’s band,

wrote in to complain about his electric guitar. They demanded that the bandleader fire Paul or at least rein him in.

The innovative “New Sound” that Paul forged in the early 1950s deliberately played up the “strangeness” of the electric guitar’s tonality, exploiting the novelty value of modifying the instrument’s electrical signal via tape varispeeding to manipulate pitch, echo, and other feats of technological wizardry. A few decades later, rock guitarists such as Pete Townshend, Jimi Hendrix, and Jimmy Page would deploy similar techniques to more dramatic and even subversive ends. But Paul milked these resources primarily for their gag appeal. Ditto for another pioneering electric guitarist, Alvin Rey, whose so-called talking guitar was essentially a steel guitar processed through a voice box to make it appear that the instrument was speaking.

#### **A Voice for Outsiders**

Not until the rock era was the electric guitar liberated from supporting roles and comedic turns, becoming a star in its own right. As a relatively new instrument, it was ideally suited to becoming rock music’s heart, soul, and primary sex organ. The electric guitar didn’t come with a rule book or with the burden of a long tradition. For a fledgling pianist, by contrast, the intimidating specters of Beethoven, Chopin, and Debussy loom large, with the spirits of Vladimir Horowitz, Arthur Rubenstein, Bud Powell, and Fats Waller setting a benchmark hard to equal or exceed. The same goes for violinists, horn players, and other musicians who assay instruments with illustrious histories.

But for someone picking up an electric guitar at midcentury, the field was wide open. Few classical guitar playing techniques translate to electric guitar playing. And most of the steel string acoustic guitar antecedents came from self-taught folk idioms such as the blues or Appalachian string band music. Guitarists were free to invent their own approach to the instrument.



“Frying Pan” Electro  
Hawaiian guitar, Ricken-  
backer, ca. 1934



such as *The Girl Can't Help It* (1956), *Don't Knock the Rock* (1956), and *Mr. Rock and Roll* (1957). Their popularity touched off a racist backlash in the Deep South and other regions of America that feared the music would undermine morals. Flyers, such as one issued in 1960 by the Citizens Council of New Orleans, pleaded, "Save the Youth of America: Don't Buy Negro Records." Fortunately, the music prevailed over efforts such as these.

#### **A Brown-Eyed, Handsome Man**

Of all the early rock pioneers, the one who perhaps did the most to establish the electric guitar as the voice of rock and roll is Chuck Berry. An African American or "brown-eyed handsome man," in the words of one of his songs, Berry scored his first hit by putting his own distinctive touch on a 1938 Western swing song, "Ida Red," by Bob Wills and his Texas Playboys. It doesn't get much whiter than that. Yet Berry took possession of the song and transformed it into his 1955 hit "Maybellene"—a tale of fast cars and frustrated romance that set the template for so much rock to follow, both sonically and thematically. Berry's urgent guitar work on the track blends high-and-lonesome country string bends with grainy, gutbucket blue notes. Upright bassist Willie Dixon and pianist Johnny Johnson start to swing during the guitar solo sections, veering closer to R&B or jazz than country. Berry punctuates his vocals with country inflections, but his own style and African American identity burst through in full glory. His fast-action verses even presage the flow of rap. He crammed an average of forty-five words into each twelve-bar verse with 118 beats per minute and busted rhymes like

*As I was motorvatin' over the hill  
I saw Maybellene in a Coupe de Ville  
A Cadillac a-rollin' on the open road  
Nothin' will outrun my V8 Ford*

Chuck Berry "duck walking" as he plays guitar at the TAMI Show, Santa Monica, Calif., December 29, 1964



Boxing-style poster for a concert at Memorial Auditorium in Chattanooga, Tenn., featuring a wide variety of musicians, mostly African Americans, including Chuck Berry, late 1950s

ES-350T hollow-body electric guitar, Gibson, 1957–58. Chuck Berry probably used this guitar to record “Johnny B. Goode.”

Stylistically, Berry refused to be contained by any one genre. He also embraced Latin rhythms, notably in the mambo-rock verses of his 1957 hit “Rock and Roll Music.” So rock and roll’s cultural borrowings flow in all directions; from its inception, it was a music of miscegenation. The whole genre was kick-started by Chuck Berry trying to sound like a white guy. A few years down the road, a white group, the Rolling Stones, would make its recording debut with a cover of one of Berry’s songs, “Come On.”

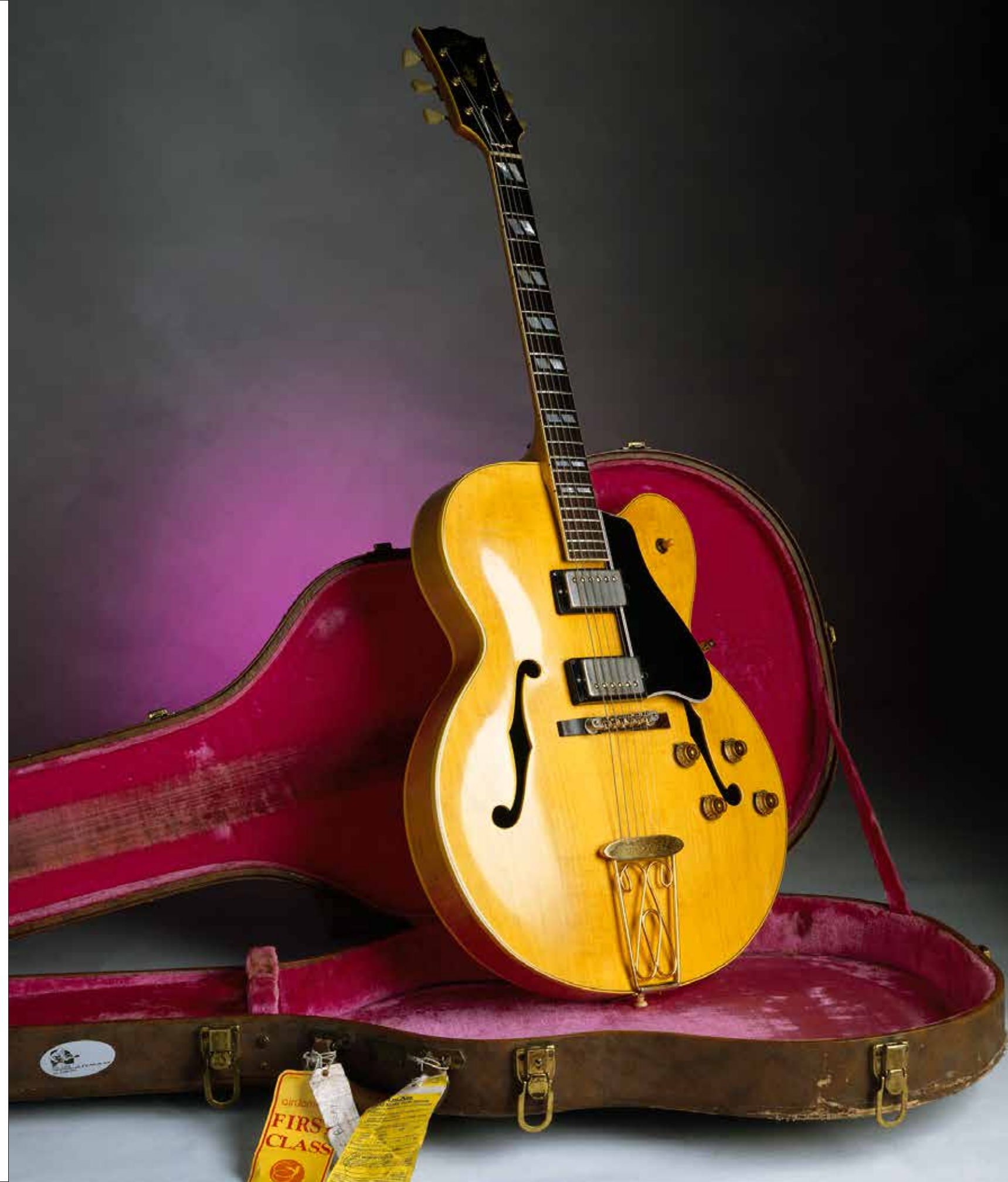
In virtually every aspect of rock composition and performance, Berry’s influence is indelible. As a lyricist, he forged the mythic figure of the guitar hero on his 1958 song “Johnny B. Goode.”

Every rock guitarist since then has striven to reenact the rags-to-riches journey of the song’s protagonist, from “a log cabin made of earth and wood” to the heights and bright lights of stardom. As a showman, Berry delineated the strutting, swaggering, sex-charged dynamics of rock guitar performance—channeling precursors like Guitar Slim and T-Bone Walker through his own absurdist barnyard choreography of duck walks and chicken pecks. And as an electric guitarist, Berry laid down a lexicon of licks and rhythmic tricks that still form the basis of rock guitar playing.

“I could never overstress how important he was in my development,” Keith Richards wrote of Chuck Berry in his 2010 autobiography, *Life*.<sup>1</sup> John Lennon went even further in 1972, telling television host Mike Douglas, “If you had to give rock and roll another name, you might call it Chuck Berry.”<sup>2</sup>

Throughout the latter half of the 1950s, Berry played a Gibson ES-350-T electric guitar, which was introduced in 1955, the very year Berry scored his first hit with “Maybellene” and in the process became one of the world’s first rock and roll stars. The guitar was one of many innovative designs that rolled out of the Gibson Guitar factory in Kalamazoo, Michigan, under the leadership of Ted McCarty. A tough-talking boss, McCarty brought Gibson out of the slump into which it had fallen during World War II’s years of austerity, raw material shortages, and repurposing of factories for munitions work. He helped restore the company to the prominence it had enjoyed prior to the war, when it was noted especially for its archtop jazz guitars. The ES-350-T is very much in that tradition, tracing its lineage to one of the primordial electric archtops, the ES-150 that Charlie Christian brought to prominence.

The innovative touch in the model Berry chose is its thin-line design (indicated by the “T” in the model number). The guitar’s body is significantly shallower than that of a traditional archtop, which required greater depth to project a big







Opposite: Bo Diddley with his signature Gretsch, Norma-Jean Wofford with her Gretsch Jupiter Thunderbird, and Jerome Green, ca. 1957

The “Twang Machine” electric guitar, Gretsch, ca. 1960. Bo Diddley took his name from the diddley bow, a simple, one-string instrument used by African Americans in the rural South. The body of the folk instrument was often a flat piece of wood or a cigar box. Bo Diddley made his own guitar with a cigar-box shape and later had Gretsch manufacture his “Twang Machine” with the same rectangular outline.

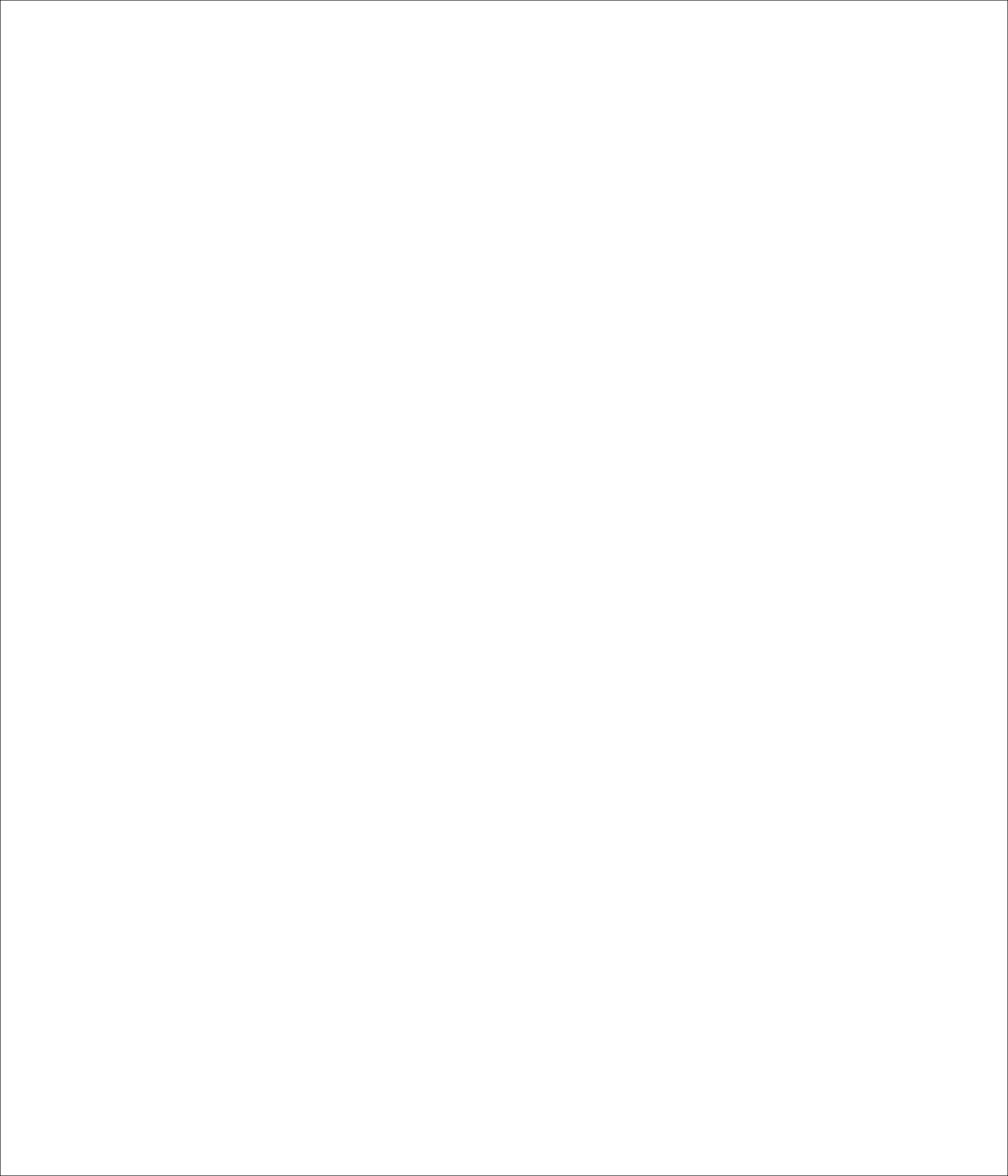


now. But perhaps the most adventurous guitarist of rock’s first wave was Bo Diddley (Elias McDaniel), who built a solid-body electric guitar on his own — one with a rectangular shape like that of a cigar box. This aggressively minimalist style came about when Bo decided that his amply proportioned Gibson L5 was cramping his style onstage. When the original cigar box guitar was stolen in 1958, he asked the Gretsch Company in Brooklyn, New York, to build him a new one.

Gretsch had entered the electric guitar market in 1939 with its first Electromatic model but had really come into its own during the 1950s with brash, blingy models like the Jet, White Falcon, Roundup, and 6120 Chet Atkins models. The company’s sparkly, in-your-face New York design aesthetic suited Bo Diddley’s extravagant sense of showmanship. He would play a number of streamlined Gretsch models down through the years, as would each of the co-guitarists he worked with in succession: Jody Williams, Lady Bo (Peggy Jones), and the Duchess (Norma Jean Wofford). As a pioneer of the two-guitar approach to rock and roll, Bo Diddley also notably forged a place for female guitarists in rock.

#### Surf’s Up

The genre that really helped standardize the band format with two guitars, bass, and drums was surf music. It was also an idiom that fully embraced the new solid-body designs, particularly Fender’s. It originated with the man known as the King of the Surf Guitar, Dick Dale (Richard Monsour), a Southern California surfer of Lebanese descent who forged a friendship with Leo Fender and was an early player of the Stratocaster. A left-handed guitarist, Dale simply flipped a standard guitar upside down and played it without bothering to restring the instrument for left-handed fingering. He became noted for lightning-fast double-picking on the low E string of his Stratocaster, as heard on the early 1960s singles “Let’s Go Trippin’” (1961) and “Miserlou” (1962). His maverick approach typifies the lawless, outsider aesthetic of rock guitar playing



## Play It Loud: Instruments of Rock & Roll

Jayson Kerr Dobney and Craig J. Inciardi; additional essays by Anthony DeCurtis, Alan di Perna, David Fricke, Holly George-Warren, and Matthew W. Hill

**A brash and dazzling celebration of the instruments that have created the sounds of rock and roll, from the 1940s to the present day**

*Play It Loud* celebrates the musical instruments that gave rock and roll its signature sound. Seven engrossing essays by veteran music journalists and scholars discuss the technical developments that fostered rock's seductive riffs and driving rhythms, the thrilling innovations musicians have devised to achieve unique effects, and the visual impact their instruments have had. Abundant photographs depict rock's most iconic instruments — including Jerry Lee Lewis's baby grand piano, Chuck Berry's Gibson ES-350T guitar, Bootsy Collins's star-shaped bass, Keith Moon's drum set, and the white Stratocaster Jimi Hendrix played at Woodstock — as works of art in their own right. Produced in collaboration with the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, this astounding book goes behind the music to offer a rare and in-depth look at the instruments that inspired the musicians and made possible the songs we know and love.

March 2019 | Hardcover, 9 × 10½ in. | 240 pp., 220 color illus.  
ISBN: 978-1-58839-666-2 | \$50

### EXHIBITION SCHEDULE

#### **The Met Fifth Avenue**

(April 1, 2019–September 15, 2019)

#### **The Rock & Roll Hall of Fame**

(November 20, 2019–September 13, 2020)

**THE MET** Published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Distributed to the trade by Yale University Press,  
New Haven and London

## Contents

**Introduction** | JAYSON KERR DOBNEY AND CRAIG J. INCIARDI

**The Quintessential Quartet** | ALAN DI PERNA

**Guitar Gods** | DAVID FRICKE

**The Rhythm Section** | MATTHEW W. HILL

**Expanding the Band** | JAYSON KERR DOBNEY

**Creating a Sound** | CRAIG J. INCIARDI

**Creating an Image** | HOLLY GEORGE-WARREN

**Iconic Moments** | ANTHONY DECURTIS

SUGGESTED READING

SUGGESTED LISTENING

INSTRUMENTS IN THE EXHIBITION

For information contact:

Rachel High

Publications and Editorial Department

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

1000 Fifth Avenue

New York, NY 10028

T: 212 650 2729

F: 212 396 5062

E: Rachel.High@metmuseum.org