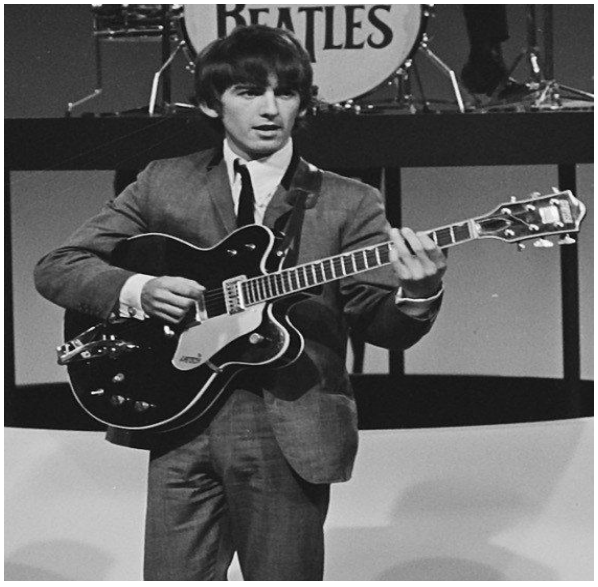
George Harrison – and the guitars that found their way into our hearts...

By Andy Owen



George with his Gretsch Country Gentleman, Hillegom, June 1964.
Photograph: Eric Koch / Anefo / Nationaal Archief (CC0).

A few notes...

Sometimes that was all George Harrison needed.

The beginning of "And I Love Her". The lovely, chiming figure in "If I Needed Someone". The sound of "Here Comes the Sun" opening a door and letting the light in.

I can hear them as I write this.

That is an extraordinary thing to have left behind. A phrase played on a guitar, more than six decades ago, that still arrives in somebody's mind, fully formed.

The Beatles had a life-changing effect on me.

George's playing is a large part of the reason their music has stayed there.

I played in a band myself, and I have enormous respect for guitarists who listen to a song, understand what it needs and then creates it.

A solo can be technically impressive, but leave you cold. A small, beautifully judged passage, can stay with you for the rest of your life.

George gave us plenty of those.

His guitars tell the story of a young musician gradually discovering how much he had to say. There were cheap beginnings, American instruments he longed to own, a Spanish guitar from a friend and a twelve-string that helped change the sound of popular music.

There was also a guitar he painted himself. You have to like a man who could get almost anything he wanted, yet still fancied doing that.

A few pounds and a very long road ahead

George's first guitar was a Dutch-made Egmond, bought for only a few pounds in the mid-1950's.

George at the beginning, with his first Egmond guitar.

Accounts vary over the precise circumstances. About £3 is the figure most often repeated. What matters is that a boy in Liverpool had a guitar and wanted to learn.

It is easy to lose sight of that beginning when looking at instruments now valued in hundreds of thousands of pounds. Before the photographs, the crowds and the famous songs, there were fingers trying to make unfamiliar shapes and strings that would not necessarily co-operate.

That is where most of us started.

There is no great Beatles recording to attach to the Egmond. Its place in the story comes before all that. It was one of the things that made the rest possible.

George subsequently moved through a Höfner President acoustic and a Höfner Club 40 electric. The Club 40 came through fellow Liverpool musician Ray Ennis of The Swinging Blue Jeans.

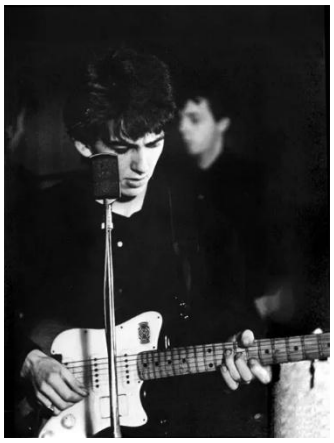
George's Höfner Club 40, photographed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2019.

In those days, an improvement might arrive through a local contact, a trade or a family's willingness to find the money.

The guitar standing in for a dream

By 1959, George wanted something more modern. Ideally, a Fender Stratocaster.

What he got was a Czech-made Resonet Grazioso, sold in Britain as a Futurama.



The Futurama: the guitar George took to Hamburg.

Its three pickups and futuristic appearance promised a great deal. Playing it could be rather less inviting. George later remembered a difficult action, although he liked its sound.

His mother signed the purchase agreement.

I like finding details like that. The history of an enormously successful band can become so polished, that the family sitting behind an early purchase, disappears from view.

The Futurama went to Hamburg. In June 1961, it was part of the Beatles' recording work there, including "Cry for a Shadow", the instrumental credited to Harrison and Lennon.

Give that a listen. There is a particular pleasure in hearing George at that stage, still developing, with the future waiting beyond the next few years.

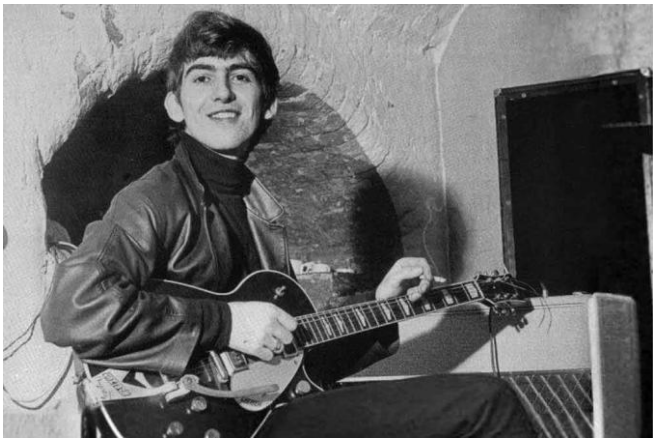
He eventually offered the guitar as a magazine competition prize. The winner chose money instead, and the publisher kept the instrument. In November 2024, it sold for $1.27 million.

That is quite a journey for a guitar that was hard work to play.

And it was. I know, because I played a Futurama in the 60's.

Seventy-five pounds for something special

In 1961, George found the guitar he would remember as his first really good one.
A black 1957 Gretsch Duo Jet.



George with his black Gretsch Duo Jet in the early Beatles years.

The seller, former merchant seaman Ivan Hayward, had brought it from America. The price was £75. George had £70 and left an IOU for the remaining fiver. Here's a young musician, a guitar he desperately wanted and not quite enough money in his pocket.

A familiar story…

The Duo Jet took him through the early singles and the Please Please Me album. "I Saw Her Standing There" and "Twist and Shout" are wonderful examples of its quality.

Listen to the energy. That's what set them apart. The songs exploded out of our record player's small speakers.

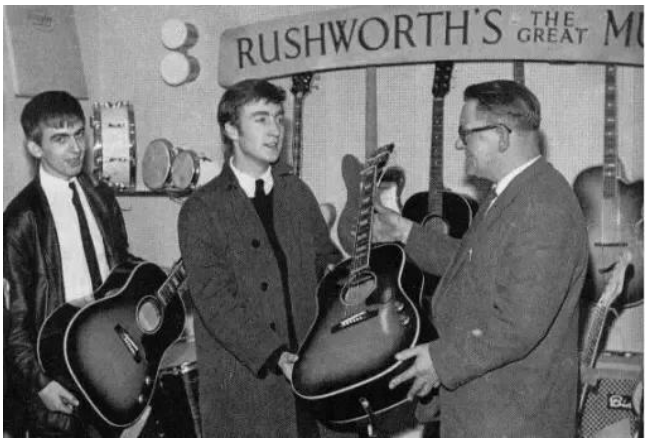
George's parts belonged inside it all. The fills, the little answers, the solo that arrived and got out of the way before the next vocal.

The Gretsch later went to Klaus Voormann and eventually came back to George. Some instruments seem to keep a place in a musician's affections, whatever else comes along.

Two Gibsons and the practical business of making records

In September 1962, George and John each acquired a Gibson J-160E through Rushworth and Dreaper in Liverpool. These were acoustics with an electric pickup, useful to musicians moving between writing, recording and performing.

The price was about £161 each. A substantial commitment before the rewards of Beatlemania. The familiar shop photographs show two young men with new guitars and an astonishing amount still to happen.



Two new Gibsons and two young Beatles, Liverpool, September 1962.

They borrowed each other's Gibsons and apparently got them mixed up. One disappeared in December 1963. George continued using the surviving 1962 instrument.

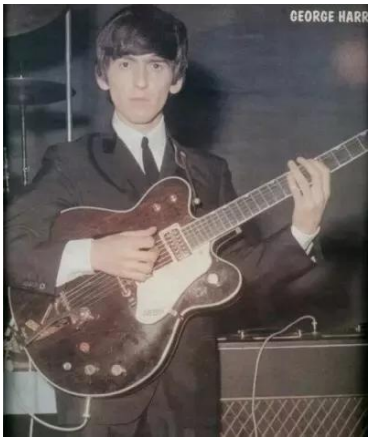
Their early EMI albums, including 'Please Please Me' and 'With the Beatles', belong to the story of these guitars, although linking every borrowed instrument on every song is not always possible.

What comes through clearly, is how practical they were about it. A guitar was there to help make the record. Ownership could be sorted out afterwards.

The Country Gentleman and the night America watched

George acquired two Gretsch Country Gentlemen during 1963.

The dark walnut finish, double cutaways and gold hardware, gave them a wonderfully elegant look.



George with a Gretsch Country Gentleman.

It was the first thing I saw, when the curtain opened at The Birmingham Odeon in 1963 and my world exploded. George in the middle with his Country Gentleman.

Just writing about it, makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand to attention. It is a moment I will NEVER forget.

And then came American television. On 9 February 1964, George stood on The Ed Sullivan Show with the second of those guitars. Millions watched the Beatles play "All My Loving", "Till There Was You", "She Loves You", "I Saw Her Standing There" and "I Want to Hold Your Hand".

Think of the young guitarists seeing that instrument for the first time. The shape. The name. The man playing it. I understand the fascination completely. When a musician means something to you, even the outline of his guitar can make your heart beat faster.

"She Loves You" and the 'With the Beatles' recordings are important parts of the Country Gentleman's studio story too. It belongs to that extraordinary moment, when the band's success suddenly became much bigger than anyone could comfortably explain.

There is a much-repeated tale of one of George's Gretsches falling from a vehicle and being crushed on the road in December 1965. Which guitar actually suffered that fate remains disputed. It makes a dramatic story, but the surviving evidence is less tidy than the telling.

The Tennessean and a touch of country

The Gretsch 6119 Tennessean joined George's instruments around the end of 1963 and became a favourite during 1964 and 1965.

George with the Gretsch 6119 Tennessean.

It had a different voice from the Country Gentleman, with pickups that suited the country flavour George brought to some of the Beatles' music.

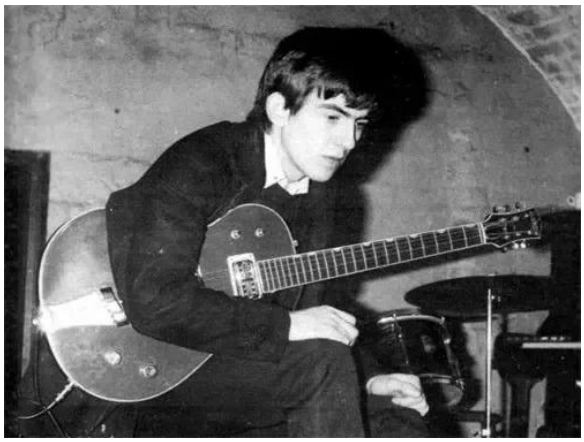
"Honey Don't" and "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby", from Beatles for Sale, are frequently associated with it. The latter also gives us George at the microphone, paying tribute to the music that had helped set him on his way.

It is a lovely reminder that the Beatles' developing sound still had deep roots. They were moving quickly, but their affection for the records they had grown up with, remained audible.

The Tennessean also appears in the Help! period and at Shea Stadium in 1965. It was a working guitar in a world getting louder by the day.

A couple of temporary visitors

Not every instrument stayed for years. George briefly used a red Gretsch Jet Fire Bird in the early Cavern period, apparently as a temporary loan. Later, when his Country Gentleman needed attention in Manchester in July 1963, a Maton MS500 Mastersound came into his hands as a spare.



The borrowed Gretsch Jet Fire Bird in George's early electric-guitar story.

The Australian guitar stayed around for several weeks, appearing during that summer's performances, including dates in Margate and the Channel Islands.

George, at the right, with the temporary Maton Mastersound.

Their Beatles lives are easier to follow in photographs of performances than on the studio recordings. Even a rapidly successful band needed something to play when the usual instrument was unavailable.

George also appeared with a Gibson ES-345 in the 1965 promotional films for "Day Tripper" and "We Can Work It Out". Its exact studio history is less clear. Those images nevertheless give us another glimpse of his willingness to try a different guitar.

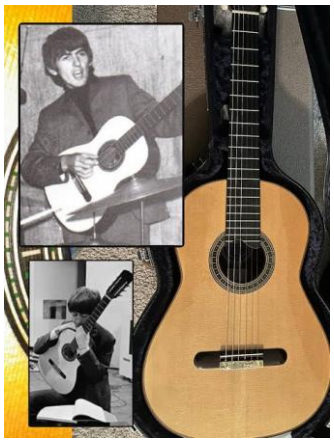
A cherry-red 1960 Gibson ES-345: a model illustration. George's Beatles-era example had a sunburst finish.

A gift from Klaus and a song transformed

For me, the José Ramírez guitar carries one of the most affecting stories in the collection. Klaus Voormann bought it in Madrid after studying classical guitar in Tenerife.

Later, while living with George and Ringo in London, he gave it to George.

A postcard Klaus sent in July 1964 confirms the gift.



The José Ramírez, with photographs of George playing it.

And the song that makes the connection immediate, is "And I Love Her".

That gentle nylon-string sound. The figure that introduces the song and returns throughout it. It showcased the lovely simplicity of George's playing.

You do not have to know the maker's name to feel what it has contributed.

"Till There Was You" is also often associated with the Ramírez in guitar histories, though the exact instrument on that recording is less certain. What moves me, is that a friend's guitar found its way into music that became intensely personal to hundreds of millions of strangers.

A private act of generosity that travelled a very long way.

Two Rickenbackers with very different stories

George's first Rickenbacker was the 425 he bought while visiting his sister Louise in Illinois in September 1963. Before the Beatles conquered America, he was over there visiting family and looking at guitars.

He sat in and played with a local band while he was there. No one knew who he was, of course, but just imagine their reaction when they saw him on the Ed Sullivan show the following year. *"That's the English guy that played with us last year. We played with a Beatle!*

Fenton's Music Store in Mount Vernon supplied the guitar.

Originally red Fireglo, it was refinished black at George's request, to resemble John's Rickenbacker. It appeared on television and during the Beatles' autumn travels that year.

George with the black Rickenbacker 425.

"I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "This Boy" have been linked to it in auction accounts, although the stage and television appearances are easier to pin down than those studio claims.

Then, in February 1964, came the twelve-string. George was unwell at the Plaza Hotel during the Beatles' American visit. Rickenbacker president F C Hall brought a new 360/12 for him to try.

The sound that followed, became part of the musical landscape. "A Hard Day's Night". "You Can't Do That". "I Should Have Known Better". "I Call Your Name". "Eight Days a Week".

The first Rickenbacker twelve-string is associated with that run of records. Its doubled strings gave familiar guitar shapes a wonderful shimmer, and George found musical uses for the sound almost immediately. Listen again to "A Hard Day's Night". There is excitement and energy in that guitar sound, before you have had time to think about why.

A second, rounded-body Rickenbacker twelve-string arrived in Minneapolis in August 1965. Its best-known recording connection is "If I Needed Someone".

George with the later, rounded-body Rickenbacker twelve-string.

Here was George bringing that chime into one of his own songs. It is a beautiful fit, between writing and instrument.

The second guitar later disappeared. Precisely when, remains uncertain, but photographs show George still using it in 1966. It had already helped leave something permanent behind.

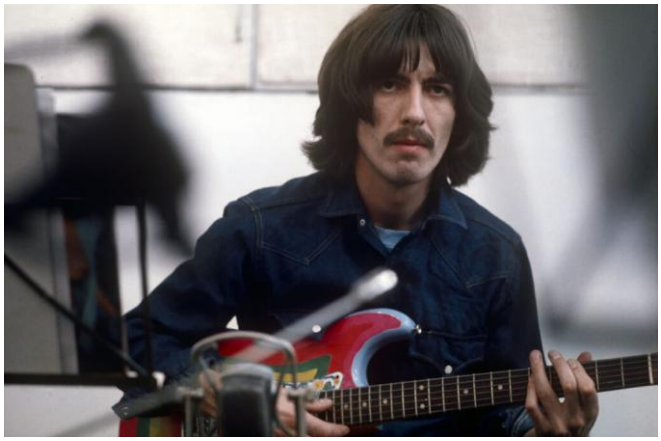
Finally, the Fender and then the paint

George eventually got his Stratocaster. In early 1965, Mal Evans obtained matching Sonic Blue instruments for him and John.

Fender's own account links George's guitar to the drone in "Ticket to Ride", the solo in "You're Going to Lose That Girl" and the pair's playing on "Nowhere Man".

Three songs worth putting on again for very different reasons.

In 1967, George gave his blue Strat a bright, psychedelic paint job himself. It became "Rocky", one of the most recognisable guitars in the Beatles' story.



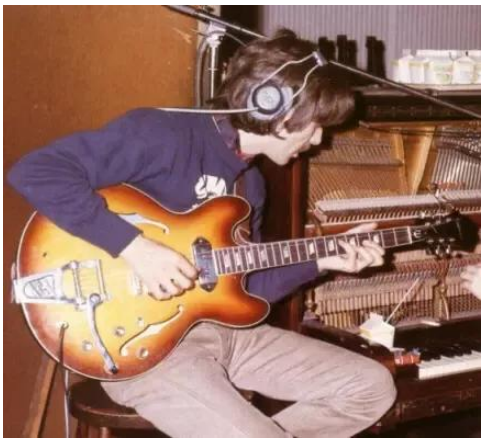
George with "Rocky", his hand-painted Fender Stratocaster.

You can see it in the "All You Need Is Love" broadcast and the "I Am the Walrus" sequence in Magical Mystery Tour.

I like the thought of George sitting down to paint it. After all the attention, all the photographs, all the people with opinions, here was something he could make his own.

The Casino and the red SG

Paul was the first Beatle to buy an Epiphone Casino. George and John followed in 1966.



George's Epiphone Casino, with its Bigsby vibrato.

George's had a Bigsby vibrato. It became a principal guitar for the final touring season and part of the Revolver-era studio collection.

The Casino also appears in the "Hello, Goodbye" promotional film.

He later stripped off the finish, believing the guitar sounded better. These instruments were still being changed by the men using them, however precious they might look to us now.

Another important arrival in 1966 was his cherry-red Gibson SG Standard.

The cherry-red Gibson SG Standard.

"Paperback Writer", "Rain" and "Hey Bulldog" are its key connections.

Session photographs and film, help place it there, although even the identity of the guitarist playing the "Hey Bulldog" solo has been debated. John handled George's SG during that session too. The record is still an absolute joy. The riff, the piano, the voices and that wonderful sense of a band enjoying the music they could make.

George gave the SG to Pete Ham of Badfinger in 1969. A working instrument moved on to another musician, carrying a remarkable few years with it.

Lucy and the friend invited to play

The red Les Paul called ‘Lucy’ had already passed through the hands of John Sebastian and Rick Derringer before Eric Clapton acquired it and gave it to George in 1968.

It began life as a 1957 gold top. The red finish came later.

“Lucy”, the red Les Paul. Photograph: Sbpawlguitr5 / Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0.

Then George invited Clapton to Abbey Road to play on “While My Guitar Gently Weeps”. Clapton used the guitar he had recently given him.

It is a rather wonderful arrangement. George’s song. George’s guitar. His friend’s playing. The result still carries an emotional weight that needs no explanation from anybody writing about it.

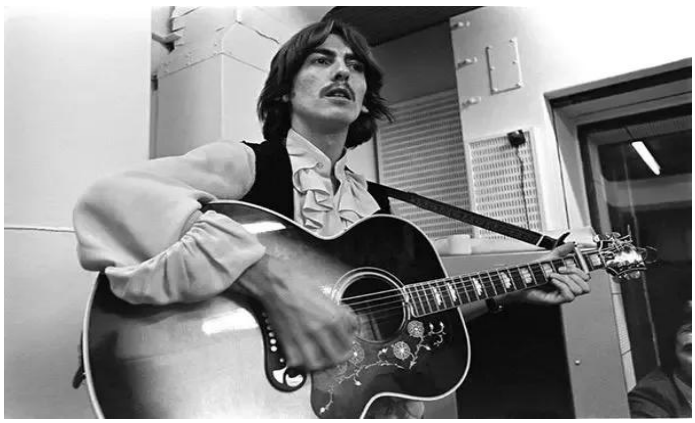
Put it on. Let it unfold. Let it affect you.

George also held ‘Lucy’ in the “Revolution” promotional film, and the guitar is often associated with his playing on “Something”. The film appearance alone, though, does not tell us what he used on the earlier “Revolution” recording.

With “Something”, the quality of George’s writing and the judgement of his playing, meet so beautifully. George’s incredible solo has now been recognised as one of the greatest ever.

The acoustic that let in the sunlight

George added a Gibson J-200 during 1968. A large, handsome acoustic with an ornate pickguard and a moustache-shaped bridge.



George with the Gibson J-200 during the later Beatles years.

It is associated with the acoustic rhythm on “While My Guitar Gently Weeps”, with “For You Blue” and, most memorably, with “Here Comes the Sun”.

John borrowed it for “Two of Us” during the January 1969 sessions.

“Here Comes the Sun” is one of those records that can change the feeling in a room. George found a way to put relief into music. The guitar carries it from the opening, and I feel it every time.

There are songs we admire and songs we reach for, when we need them. This has become both for a great many people.

The dark Telecaster on the roof

Fender made George a rosewood Telecaster in late 1968. Roger Rossmeisl conceived the instrument and Philip Kubicki built it.

It became his principal electric during the January 1969 sessions and the guitar he played on the Apple rooftop on 30th January.

George and the rosewood Telecaster on the Apple rooftop, January 1969.

“Get Back”, “Don’t Let Me Down”, “I’ve Got a Feeling”, “One After 909” and “Dig a Pony”.

You can watch him playing it. You can hear the band responding to one another.

After years of extraordinary studio invention, there they were in the cold, making music together in the open air. Whenever I watch that footage, I find myself following small moments.

A glance. A smile. Somebody listening for the next change.

For all that was happening between them, those connections were still there.

The notes we carry

George had plenty of guitars. Some stayed. Some were borrowed. Some disappeared. Some were given to friends.

Dhani and the Harrison estate at Friar Park, maintain a significant portion of them.

But, whatever happened to them, is secondary to what George did with them.

The little figure in "And I Love Her". The twelve-string in "If I Needed Someone". The extraordinary grace of "Something". The welcome intro to "Here Comes the Sun" and that famous opening chord to "Hard Day's Night".

They have accompanied us all, through falling in love, losing someone and starting again, medical issues, winning and losing, growing old and just trying to survive.

You cannot calculate the reach of that.

When I listen to George now, I still hear a musician who had incredible vision. He always seemed to find the right thing to play.

There are very few with that talent.

Thank you, George. We all owe you so much.

Every note was - and still is – a total joy.

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Duo Jet archive photograph.

Rocky archive photograph.

Rooftop Telecaster archive photograph.