John Lennon

...and his guitars...

The guitars that helped John Lennon influence us - and change our lives...

By Andy Owen

John with his Rickenbacker, Hillegom, June 1964.
Photograph: Eric Koch / Anefo / Nationaal Archief (CC0).

The Beatles changed my life.

I suspect a good many people reading this, could say the same thing. I heard Billy Joel say exactly this, recently. And the late great Tom Petty also admitted he embarked on a musical career, because of these four boys from Liverpool.

There were many, many others.

It was the music, of course. But also the possibilities. The Beatles made the world feel a better place. They were exciting. They gave us something meaningful, a direction forward - and something we felt part of.

And for those of us who picked up a guitar ourselves, there was another fascination. What WERE they playing? What was making THAT sound?

I played in a band myself. I know how much a guitar can mean to the person holding it.

You learn its awkward bits. You find the sounds you like. You become attached to it. And somewhere along the way, a piece of wood with strings, starts to feel like part of you. John Lennon's guitars carry some extraordinary stories.

One travelled from the clubs of Hamburg to the television screens of America. Another disappeared for half a century. A third ended up in an attic, while millions of us went on listening to the records it had helped to make.

I wanted to look more closely at them. Because when I see these instruments, I hear the songs. And the songs still get to me.

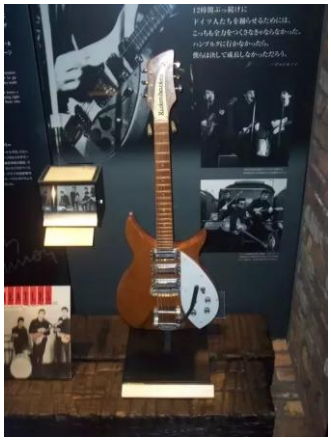
They always will, of course.

The little Rickenbacker that went a very long way

Just imagine buying a guitar in Hamburg in 1960 and still having it in your hands when you appear before millions of Americans, less than four years later.

John did *exactly* that.

His 1958 Rickenbacker 325 Capri was a compact guitar, with a short neck and a natural wood finish. It became his companion through the hard work of the early Beatles years, when the glamour was a long way off and they were learning how to hold an audience, night after night.



The 1958 Rickenbacker 325 Capri, back in its natural-finish appearance.

He altered it as he went.

A different vibrato. Different knobs.

Then, in 1962, black paint.

A black Rickenbacker 325 with gold pickguard on display in Paris, illustrating the appearance John adopted in 1962. This is a display example, not a 1962 performance photograph.

It is correct to look at these guitars today as sacred objects, because that's what they were. John was quite happy to have his changed to suit him.

Put on "All My Loving" and listen underneath Paul's vocal. Those driving, rapid-fire rhythm chords are John. Keeping that going cleanly, takes some doing. It is a wonderful piece of playing, hiding in plain hearing.

"Please Please Me", "I Saw Her Standing There" and "Twist and Shout" belong to the same little Rickenbacker's working life. These were the years when the Beatles were turning the energy of their live performances into records that seemed to leap out of the speakers.

Then came 9th February 1964. The Ed Sullivan Show.

There was John, with the Hamburg guitar. The clubs had become a national television audience. The battered instrument had made the journey with him.

I find that rather moving.

Another black guitar and a world going mad

During that American visit, Rickenbacker supplied John with a new 325. He was playing it by the time the Miami Sullivan second broadcast was aired, a week later on 16th February.

To a casual observer, it looked much the same. Black guitar. Small body.

John Lennon.

But this one had white pickguards, rather than the gold guard on the older instrument - and it took over much of the relentless work of being a Beatle.

The newer black 1964 Rickenbacker 325, with white pickguards.

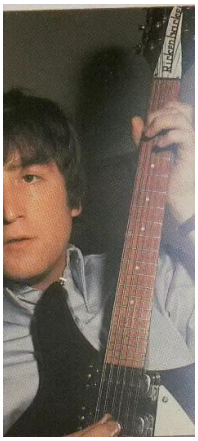
Its arrival coincided with the A Hard Day's Night period: "You Can't Do That", "If I Fell", "I'm Happy Just to Dance with You" and the title song itself.

The newer 325 belongs to that glorious rush of recording and performing, although the guitars were sometimes swapped and the precise instrument on every part is not always settled.

"You Can't Do That" is a useful reminder that John could step forward as a lead guitarist too. There was more to his playing than standing at the microphone and hammering out the chords.

The songs came so quickly that we can forget how little time separated one musical world from the next.

John also had a twelve-string version of his small Rickenbacker. You can see him with it on Dutch television in 1964. "Every Little Thing", from Beatles for Sale, is often linked to it, although accounts differ over exactly which Rickenbacker supplied the part.



John with his Rickenbacker twelve-string.

That uncertainty does nothing to diminish the pleasure of listening again.

The red Rickenbacker and a gift to Ringo

Even having a personal relationship with a Beatle did not make a guitar immune to being dropped. When John damaged his newer black 325 during the Christmas shows at the Hammersmith Odeon in late 1964, British distributor Rose-Morris provided a replacement.

This one was red, with a traditional f-hole, and carried the model number 1996. That was its name in the catalogue, not a date from the future.

It saw John through the remaining shows, with songs including "I Feel Fine", "I'm a Loser", "Baby's in Black" and "Everybody's Trying to Be My Baby" in the programme. But the detail I like best, came later.

In 1968, after Ringo briefly walked out during the White Album sessions, John gave him this guitar to encourage his songwriting.

Much has been written about the tensions within the Beatles. Here was one friend giving another something he thought would help. A small red guitar. A lovely gesture.

The Gibson that went missing

In September 1962, John and George each acquired a Gibson J-160E through Rushworth and Dreaper in Liverpool.

About £161 apiece. Serious money then.

The photographs of the purchase have a particular charm. Two young musicians getting their hands-on instruments they wanted, with so much still ahead of them.

John and George collecting their Gibson J-160Es at Rushworth and Dreaper, Liverpool, 1962.

The Gibson looked like an acoustic, but could also be plugged into an amplifier.

It was a practical instrument for a group moving between live shows, writing and recording. “Love Me Do” and “P.S. I Love You” are among its early recording connections.

Its writing history is associated with “She Loves You” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand”, among other songs from those extraordinary first years.

John and George shared their almost identical Gibsons, which has made the ownership trail rather more complicated than a simple name on a receipt. But the instrument generally known as John’s lost J-160E, disappeared during the December 1963 Christmas engagements.

Eventually, it reached an American musician, John McCaw, who did not initially know what he had. For decades, the guitar’s history went unrecognised.

John’s recovered 1962 Gibson J-160E, displayed at the LBJ Presidential Library in 2015.

When it was finally identified and sold in 2015, it fetched $2.41 million.

The price makes the headlines. For me, the more powerful thought is that someone could sit with that guitar and play it, quite unaware of the place it had already earned in so many other people’s lives and, of course, in musical history.

The sound they decided to keep

John obtained a replacement J-160E in 1964. Later, it acquired psychedelic paintwork and was eventually stripped back to the wood.

A Gibson J-160E on display: the acoustic shape with an electric voice.

But the Gibson story also contains a sound that millions of Beatles fans will recognise immediately.

The opening of "I Feel Fine".

That strange, sustained feedback note before the riff begins.

A J-160E feeding back against an amplifier helped produce it. John and George borrowed each other's guitars, so pinning that moment to one particular Gibson is not possible.

The important thing is what they did with the noise. They kept it. This was a simple accident that became part of a huge record.

That's one of the things that set them apart – and kept them miles ahead of anyone else. The willingness to hear something unexpected and recognise a possibility in it.

They were constantly experimenting. In fact, they never stopped.

The twelve strings that disappeared into an attic

The Framus Hootenanny sounds as though it ought to belong to a travelling folk singer. In John's hands, the German-made twelve-string became part of the Beatles' changing acoustic sound in 1965.

Think of "Help!", "It's Only Love", "Norwegian Wood" and "Girl", all associated with the instrument in the later authentication and auction research.

George used it as well as John.

And if you remember John singing "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away" in the film Help!, you will remember the guitar, even if you never knew its name.

John with the Framus Hootenanny in Help! (1965).

There is such a contrast between the early Beatles' public exuberance and the vulnerability in some of these later songs.

You can feel the writing becoming more personal. The acoustic delivery gives the words room to breathe. John passed the Framus to Gordon Waller of Peter and Gordon. It subsequently went to their road manager and eventually spent decades out of sight.

In an attic…

All that history, sitting quietly above a family's day-to-day existence, alongside picture frames, carpet remnants and battered suitcases. If only that guitar could talk…

When it reappeared, Beatles equipment expert Andy Babiuk matched the grain of the wood, the decoration around the sound hole and the pattern of the pickguard with contemporary photographs.

The guitar sold in May 2024 for $2.85 million.

Its old case had also survived.

It was a Maton case, made in Australia, and was rescued from the rubbish.

A German guitar in an Australian case, helping four lads from Liverpool make music that changed the world.

The Blue Stratocaster

In early 1965, John and George sent Mal Evans out in London to get them a Fender Stratocaster each.

He returned with a matching pair in Sonic Blue.

John with his Sonic Blue Fender Stratocaster.

Two musicians wanted to try a different guitar. So, out went Mal with the cheque book.

The song to revisit here is "Nowhere Man". The two Strats are associated with its wonderfully bright guitar sound, including the closely matched playing of John and George. What a journey they had made from the first records. The confidence was still there, but the subjects were changing. Doubt, isolation and questions about who you were, had entered the songs.

George's blue Strat would acquire its famous psychedelic paintwork and become "Rocky". John's guitar never developed quite the same public identity.

His Rickenbacker and then his Casino, remained the guitars most people pictured him holding.

The quieter instruments

John also had a Höfner Senator, an early acoustic associated with his Liverpool years. George later supplied a letter recalling it among John's first guitars and it passed to Mal Evans.

The Höfner Senator

I cannot confidently put it on a famous Beatles master, but it still belongs in the story. The less celebrated guitars were there, while the boys were developing, writing and finding new ways to share their wonderful music with us. Then there was the Martin D-28, which John had acquired by late 1967 and took into the Beatles' later acoustic world.

A Martin D-28: a model illustration, rather than John's own guitar

"Julia" is the song most often associated with it.

John's fingerpicking had developed through his time with Donovan in India, and that approach helped shape "Julia" and the writing of "Dear Prudence". Writing a song on one guitar, of course, did not always mean using the same instrument for its finished recording.

Listen to "Julia" and it feels as though the distance between performer and listener has almost disappeared. After all the crowds and the noise, here is a man singing about someone he had lost, that he loved very much.

An orange Gretsch and a cousin with a question

John's orange Gretsch 6120 Chet Atkins, is a less familiar sight, but it appears in photographs from the April 1966 "Paperback Writer" sessions.

John trying the orange Gretsch 6120 during the 1966 recording period.

Here is one of those occasions when the pictures and the record need to be kept gently apart. John is photographed using the Gretsch at the sessions, but the Casino he holds in the promotional film, does not automatically tell us what he recorded beforehand.

In November 1967, his cousin David Birch visited and asked whether John had a spare guitar. David wanted to start a band. John gave him the Gretsch.

Imagine being able to say *that,* when somebody asked where you got your guitar.

The Casino and the sound of the later Beatles

For a lot of people, the natural-finish Epiphone Casino is the John Lennon guitar.

Paul bought a Casino first. John and George followed in 1966. John's was a 1965 instrument, originally finished in sunburst, which he had stripped back to the wood in 1968.

A natural-finish Epiphone Casino on display, like John's later Beatles guitar.

It was a hollow guitar with a formidable range of sounds. Clean and biting when required. Ferocious when pushed.

"Revolution" is the obvious place to hear the aggression. That guitar sound still has the power to make you sit up. "Yer Blues" and "The End" are also widely associated with John's Casino.

On "The End", the guitar solos move between Paul, George and John. After everything they had been through, you can still hear the pleasure of three guitarists answering one another.

Then watch the rooftop footage from January 1969.

"Get Back". "Don't Let Me Down". "I've Got a Feeling". "One After 909". "Dig a Pony". John and the stripped Casino, out in the London cold in Savile Row.

Listen particularly to “Get Back”. The lead breaks are John’s. The guitarist so often described simply as the rhythm player, is doing rather more than keeping time.

There is something deeply affecting about that rooftop performance now. The familiar faces. The jokes. The music holding together while the group itself was coming apart.

One last change of role

Those January sessions also show how freely they all moved between instruments. On “Two of Us”, John used George’s Gibson J-200 while Paul played his Martin. When Paul sat at the piano for songs such as “Let It Be” and “The Long and Winding Road”, John could take over on the Fender Bass VI, a six-string bass laid out like a guitar.

A 1974 Fender Bass VI on display in Montreal, illustrating the six-string bass John and George used during the Beatles’ later years. This is not their original instrument.

And on George’s “For You Blue”, he played a Höfner lap steel, using a cigarette lighter as a slide.

Yes, a cigarette lighter.

Amongst all the revered instruments and enormous auction prices, that detail makes me smile. They were still musicians in a room, trying things and getting on with making a record.

The part that stays with us

I have named the guitars because their stories deserve telling. But I keep coming back to the songs.

“All My Loving”. “I Feel Fine”. “Help!”. “Nowhere Man”. “Julia”. “Revolution”. “Don’t Let Me Down”.

You will have your own favourites. Some will belong to a person. Others to a place, a friendship, a first band, or a version of yourself you have not thought about for years.

A few seconds of music can bring it all back with an immediacy that still catches me unprepared.

These guitars helped make that possible.

John held them, changed them, lent them and sometimes gave them away. The records they helped create, became the soundtrack of our lives.

They certainly became part of mine.

After all these years, I can still put on a Beatles record and feel grateful that I was around to excitedly hear it for the very first time.

Plus, of course, I feel privileged to have seen them ‘live’.

Over 60 years on, I still get excited and moved by their music.

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