# Paul McCartney

**...and his guitars...**

# Paul McCartney and the instruments behind a lifetime of iconic songs...

*By Andy Owen*

*Paul with his Höfner violin bass, Blokker, June 1964.*
*Photograph: Jac. de Nijs / Anefo / Nationaal Archief (CC0).*

Picture Paul McCartney with a guitar.

There is a fair chance you have just pictured him with the violin-shaped Höfner bass, above.

That's because few musicians have ever become so closely associated with an instrument, as Paul has with this particular bass. They are inseparable.

But, Paul used many other guitars, too on many of the iconic Beatles songs. Think about 'Yesterday'. Then "Blackbird". Now think about the guitar solo in 'Taxman'. Yes, that was Paul.

Three very different musical experiences. Each one a reason to look beyond the famous bass and give his other guitars the attention they deserve.

I have no hesitation in saying The Beatles changed my life, as they did many others of my generation. I became a musician to try and be like them. I wasn't good enough. But, as an ardent music lover and somebody who has spent a lifetime being inspired by songs, sounds and artists, I find the breadth of Paul's contribution quite extraordinary.

He is, unquestionably, a genius.

He could hold a band together underneath a vocal, sit alone with an acoustic and break your heart - or pick up an electric and produce a solo that made you wonder who had just walked into the room. And he made so much of it sound effortless.

The instruments he selected and used on the band's legendary recordings, help tell us how he did it. They also take us back to a time when a young man from Liverpool was working out how to play a right-handed guitar the other way around.

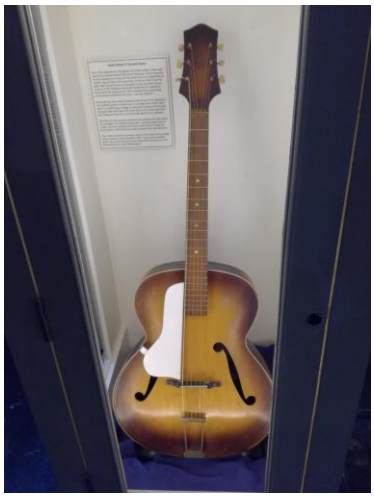
**Even geniuses have to start somewhere…**

For his 14th birthday, Paul's father gave him a trumpet.

But Paul wanted to sing, which presented a fairly obvious problem. So, the trumpet gave way to a Zenith Model 17 acoustic, made by Framus.

Paul then had another problem to solve - the guitar was arranged for a right-handed player - and he was left-handed. Seeing a photograph of Slim Whitman helped him realise that he could reverse things.

He restrung the instrument and set about learning how to play it. There is something fascinating about these early days. The music that came to mean so much to the world, grew out of ordinary practical decisions, a bit of ingenuity and the desire to keep going.



*A Zenith Model 17 at The Beatles Story, Liverpool: an example donated by Rod Davis, rather than Paul's own guitar.*

"I Lost My Little Girl" belongs to Paul's earliest writing around this period. It was not a song on an original-sixties Beatles album, but it gives us a glimpse of the young writer before the partnership and the group changed everything.

For the early Hamburg period in 1960, Paul bought a Rosetti Solid 7, an inexpensive Dutch-made electric built by Egmond. He did not remember it fondly. It looked better than it played.

At one point, while the bass position in the group was being sorted out, he even experimented with using it as a makeshift bass. He also borrowed John's Höfner Club 40 and restrung that for left-handed playing.

*A Höfner Club 40 John Lennon Edition, illustrating the model Paul borrowed from John. This is a later commemorative instrument.*

The Rosetti eventually suffered damage and, in Paul's recollection, was finished off rather enthusiastically instead of being repaired.

There are no neat rows of famous EMI recordings to place beside it. Its story belongs to the Beatles getting through the work, adapting whatever was available and finding out what they needed next. In Paul's case, that turned out to be a bass.

**Thirty pounds and an unmistakable shape**

When Stuart Sutcliffe left the bass role in 1961, Paul took it on. In Hamburg, he bought his first Höfner 500/1 violin bass. His recollection puts the cost at about £30.

*Paul with his first Höfner violin bass in the early Beatles years.*

It was affordable, light and symmetrical. Played left-handed, it still looked as though it belonged that way round.  It was a practical choice and became one of the most recognisable images in popular music.

This was the bass used in the early breakthrough.

“Love Me Do”, “P.S. I Love You”, “Please Please Me”, “I Saw Her Standing There” and the rest of that first album’s songs belong to its story. “She Loves You” followed, before the later Höfner took over as Paul’s main instrument.

Listen carefully to what is going on underneath the vocals. Even on the early records, the bass makes the performance move. It is functional playing at this early stage, but it still drives along, dovetails nicely with Ringo’s drumming - and gives the songs a solid platform.

The original 1961 Höfner has its two pickups close together near the neck. That detail becomes important, because Paul acquired another violin bass and the two are very often confused. Then the first one went missing.

For years, people thought it had disappeared during the Beatles’ final period. The eventual investigation established that it was stolen in 1972.

*The original Höfner reappears during the January 1969 sessions.*

Its return was publicly announced in February 2024.

More than half a century gone. Then it was back with the man who had bought it as a young musician in Hamburg. I’m sure it was very emotional for Paul to have it back in his hands. Some stories are satisfying because the missing thing comes home. With this one, millions of people understood why its return mattered.

**The other Höfner**

Paul’s second Höfner arrived in 1963. Its pickups were more widely spaced, and it became the familiar bass of the great touring years.

*Paul with his second Höfner violin bass, Hillegom, June 1964. Its more widely spaced pickups distinguish it from his first bass.*

The Ed Sullivan Show. The crowds. The photographs that seemed to be everywhere.

"I Want to Hold Your Hand", "All My Loving", "Can't Buy Me Love" and "A Hard Day's Night" were among the songs it carried through the Beatles' live years. It is also the Höfner Paul played on the Apple rooftop in January 1969.

"Get Back". "Don't Let Me Down". "I've Got a Feeling". "One After 909". "Dig a Pony".

Of course, by then, he had other basses available. But for that memorable performance, he returned to the little violin shape. I love seeing the familiarity between a musician and an instrument he has used for years. Willie Nelson and that battered guitar he uses, is a great example. The way he holds it. The ease of finding his place. The relationship is there.

It was the same with Paul. Two Höfners. Two separate histories. An enormous amount of music between them.

**The Rickenbacker and a more adventurous bass player**

Paul's left-handed Rickenbacker 4001S was made in 1964 and presented to him in Los Angeles in August 1965.

*Paul with his psychedelically painted Rickenbacker 4001S during the Sgt. Pepper recording period.*

Some say the handover was at the house the Beatles had rented, rather than on the Hollywood Bowl stage, as the story is sometimes told.

Its stronger, more assertive voice became an important part of Paul's studio sound.

"Think for Yourself" is an early connection. Then came "Paperback Writer", "Rain", "Penny Lane", "Strawberry Fields Forever" and the Sgt. Pepper period. What a collection of titles to place beside one instrument.

"Rain" is a particularly rewarding listen if you usually follow the vocal and leave the bass somewhere in the background. Give Paul your attention for a change. The bass line drives the song and is stunning.  That became one of his great gifts. You could remember a Beatles bass part almost as readily as a melody.

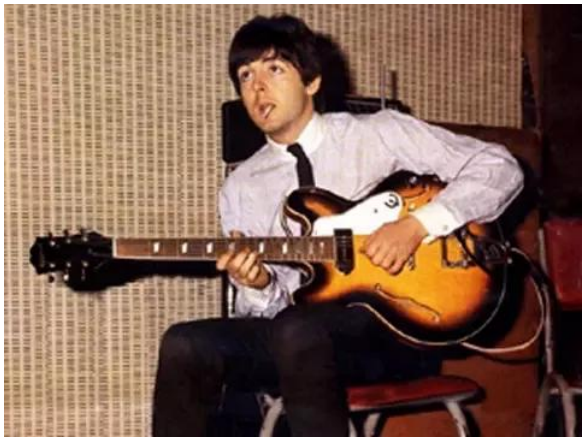
The Rickenbacker changed appearance too. Originally Fireglo, it acquired psychedelic decoration in 1967 and was later stripped to a natural finish.

The photographs can make it look as though several different instruments passed through his hands. Underneath the changing colours, was the same increasingly well-used bass.

**The Casino came to Paul first**

Paul was the first Beatle to buy an Epiphone Casino. The guitar subsequently became so strongly associated with John that it is easy to forget who introduced it to the group.

Paul acquired his in late 1964, after listening to blues records with John Mayall - and became interested in that kind of electric-guitar sound.



*Paul with his Epiphone Casino: he was the first Beatle to buy one.*

It was a right-handed sunburst instrument, restrung and played the other way around. A Bigsby vibrato completed the picture.

Now put on "Ticket to Ride" and listen for the lead fills. Then try "Another Girl". These are among the Beatles recordings associated with Paul's Casino playing.

And then there is "Taxman". As I have said earlier, George's song, but Paul's solo.

That sudden, fierce burst of guitar is breathtaking and one of the great surprises in the Beatles' recorded history, especially if you have always assumed the lead guitarist was George.

The Casino is widely identified with that solo. Its exact early-sixties manufacturing date is described differently in some accounts, but its place in Paul's Beatles work is clear enough.

"The End" provides another memorable connection. Paul, George and John trade short solos, each recognisably different in character. Paul's Casino is generally identified as his guitar for those exchanges.

I have always been fascinated listening to them take their turns on that track. All very different. The sound of three musicians answering one another still has plenty to offer.

**The Texan and a very brave change of scale**

If the Casino shows Paul's electric confidence, the Epiphone Texan takes us somewhere much more exposed.

"Yesterday".

*An Epiphone Texan on display: the model behind "Yesterday".*

One voice, an acoustic guitar and the string quartet George Martin arranged around them.

Within a Beatles record, the usual band sound was taken away. Paul had to carry the song on his own. He didn't do a bad job, did he?

His 1964 Texan was another right-handed guitar adapted for left-handed playing. For the recording, he tuned it down a whole tone and used G-position chord shapes, so the song sounded in F.

That is the practical explanation. The emotional effect is much harder to put into words.
The guitar moves so gently underneath him, they feel intertwined. The little changes and bass notes help the song breathe.

There is nowhere for the feeling to hide. I remember clearly, the first time I heard it.

It took me off at the knees.

The Beatles recorded it in June 1965. In September, American television viewers saw Paul perform it on The Ed Sullivan Show. A young man who had become one of the most famous people in the world, singing about something slipping away.

I think that is part of the power of "Yesterday". Success had not made loss or uncertainty irrelevant. The song belonged to anyone who had felt either. It still does.

**The Fender that could bite**

Paul's sunburst Fender Esquire is a less familiar instrument, but it belongs beside some wonderfully uncompromising Beatles guitar work.

He acquired it during the Revolver period and adapted it for left-handed use. Related to the Telecaster, it had a single pickup and very little fuss about it.

*A sunburst Fender Esquire, illustrating the single-pickup design. This is not Paul's own instrument; his had a rosewood fingerboard.*

Fender's own history associates it with his playing on "Good Morning Good Morning" and "Being for the Benefit of Mr. Kite!" during the Sgt. Pepper sessions. The company also links Paul's Esquire to "Helter Skelter".

You could hardly accuse those records of being overly polite. Especially the last one…

There is something enormously enjoyable about the distance between the Texan on "Yesterday" and an electric guitar being pushed through music like this.

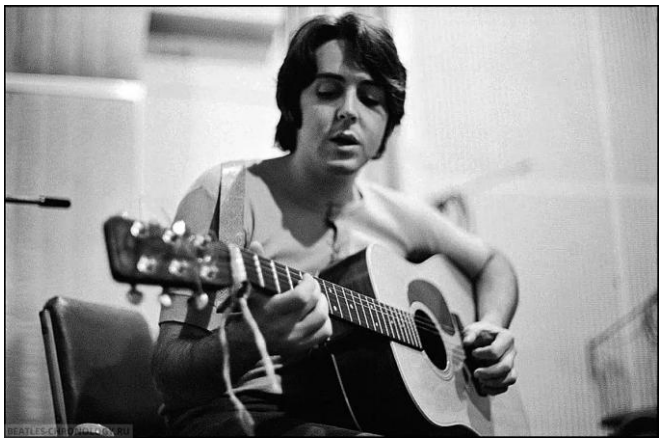
But, because of his talent, the same musician could make both convincing. Paul sometimes moved between the Esquire and the Casino during sessions, so every recorded phrase cannot always be assigned with absolute confidence.

But the larger point is unmistakable.

He was a hugely talented guitarist, with a taste for sounds that went well beyond his public image as the tuneful bass player.

**The Martin and a song you can hold close**

Paul's Martin D-28 was built in 1967 and became a major part of his Beatles acoustic work in 1968.



*Paul with a Martin D-28 during the White Album period, 1968.*

"Blackbird" is the essential connection.

Martin itself identifies the converted right-handed D-28 used for the recording. The guitar part has become so familiar that it is worth trying to listen as though you have never heard it before. It has moving shapes and spaces around the notes. A voice that seems close enough to be in the room.

Paul learned a lot about the art of picking and bringing together bass notes and the higher strings from Donovan in 1968, when they were together when visiting the Maharishi in Rishikesh.

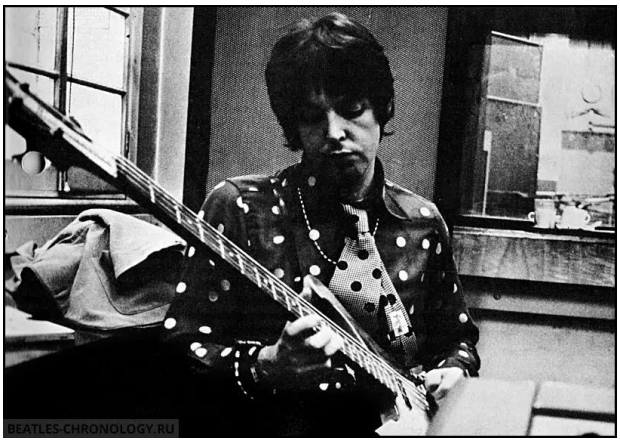
"Mother Nature's Son" is another well-established D-28 association. Again, the acoustic guitar gives the song its shape and its sense of ease.

Then, during the January 1969 sessions, Paul used the Martin on "Two of Us", with John borrowing George's Gibson J-200.

Two guitars. Three owners. Two familiar voices.

**The bass people tend to forget**

A left-handed Fender Jazz Bass also appears in photographs from the White Album sessions.




*Paul with the Fender Jazz Bass during the White Album sessions.*

It is generally identified as a 1966 instrument, although that does not establish the year Paul acquired it.

George had a separate right-handed Jazz Bass, which adds another opportunity for photographs and recollections to become confused.

"Yer Blues", "Glass Onion" and "While My Guitar Gently Weeps" are commonly attributed to Paul's Jazz Bass.

Some histories also include "Sun King" and "Mean Mr. Mustard". But, the exact instrument on some of those tracks remains debated. They are still rewarding songs to revisit with the bass in mind.

On an album as varied as the White Album, the instrument had to serve very different kinds of writing. A bass line underneath "Glass Onion" has a different job from one helping sustain the feeling of "While My Guitar Gently Weeps".

Paul's ability to recognise those differences is part of what makes his playing so absorbing.

**Sometimes the bass player was somebody else**

One of the pleasures of watching the January 1969 footage is seeing how freely the Beatles moved between instruments.

When Paul went to the piano, John or George could cover bass. The Fender Bass VI, tuned like a guitar an octave lower, helped make that possible.

Very, very talented individuals…

*A Fender Bass VI on display in Montreal. This 1974 example illustrates the model John and George used when Paul moved to piano.*

So, a Beatles bass part is not automatically Paul, any more than a Beatles guitar solo is automatically George.

"Let It Be" and "The Long and Winding Road" show Paul at the piano and John taking the bass role during those sessions. Other versions and later overdubs, have their own histories, but the working arrangement is there to see.

They were finding a way to play the song with the people in the room. For all the arguments and the weight of being The Beatles, that practical musical instinct had survived. I suspect it was honed in Hamburg.

**What the instruments cannot explain**

There are plenty of numbers in these stories. Model numbers. Dates. Purchase prices. Auction figures. They help us follow the instruments and the songs they helped create.

A £30 Höfner in Hamburg had no idea "I Saw Her Standing There" was coming. The Texan did not arrive with "Yesterday" inside it. A Martin D-28 did not create "Blackbird".

It was Paul who brought the songs, the judgement and the vision to create them. The guitars gave him the way to effectively deliver them to all of us to enjoy.

I have spent a lifetime being inspired by what the Beatles gave us. In fact, I am listening to the Giles Martin remastered 'Rubber Soul' album as I write this - and hearing new elements for the first time.

Looking more closely at these instruments has made me want to listen to the music again, particularly to the parts I sometimes take for granted, because I know the records so well.

The bass moving under "Rain". The solo in "Taxman". The acoustic in "Mother Nature's Son".

The familiar touch of "Two of Us".

And then, perhaps, “Yesterday”.

After all the years, all the performances and all the times we have heard it, a voice and a guitar can still reach something in us, that ordinary conversation never quite gets to.

That is a remarkable thing to have given the world.

I am very glad Paul dumped the trumpet and picked up the guitar.

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