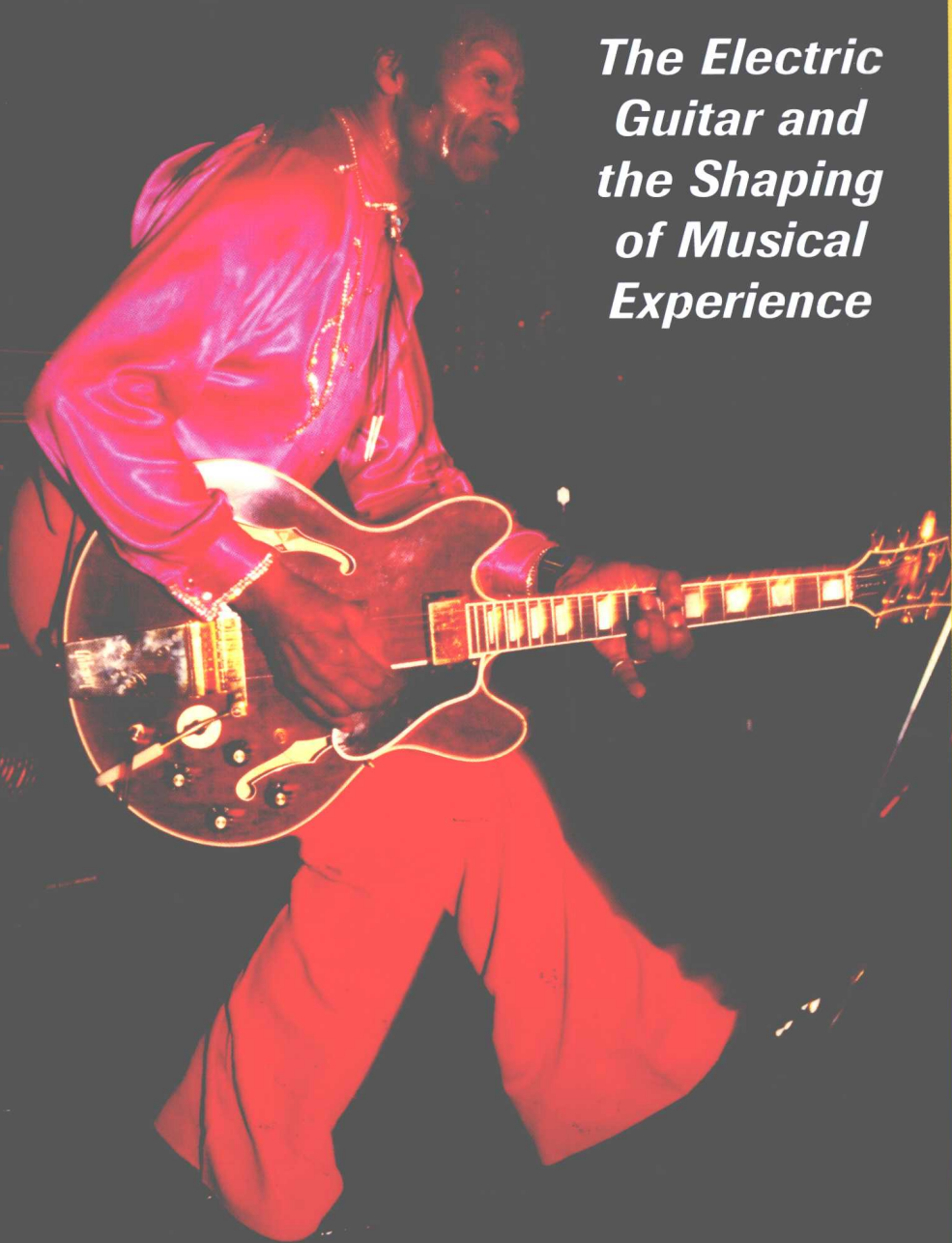


INSTRUMENTS OF DESIRE

*The Electric
Guitar and
the Shaping
of Musical
Experience*



STEVE WAKSMAN

Instruments of Desire

**The Electric Guitar and the
Shaping of Musical Experience**

Steve Waksman

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Introduction

Going Electric

Within the mythology that often stands in for the history of rock 'n' roll, one of the key turning points is Bob Dylan's performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, the performance during which the singer went electric. There is a lack of agreement as to the uniformity of the outrage that Dylan's use of electric instruments generated, but his performance had at the least a divisive effect upon the attending crowd and upon the subsequent history of the folk movement. Indeed, Robert Cantwell began his recent study of the folk revival by referring to Dylan as a figure who "personally terminated the popular folksong revival, some thought, by picking up an electric guitar and sending his message around the world with it."¹ Brandishing an electric guitar, Dylan assaulted the ideal of an authentic musical community held by the most devoted folk enthusiasts, within which acoustic instruments were valued for the intimacy they promoted as people gathered around to hear the musician. An acoustic guitar was just loud enough to make music, but not so loud as to drown out the voice of the singer, or of any in the audience who wanted to sing along. An electric guitar, by contrast, made too much noise, and in so doing converted an audience comprised of individuals into a mass whose attention was overwhelmed by the sound of it all.

Cantwell is only the most recent in a long line of music critics and historians who have pointed out that the ideal of the people and of people's music held by folk music enthusiasts was an ideal rooted in social privilege and in the belief that they existed above the mass of listeners who were drawn to musical forms like rock 'n' roll.² However, I am less interested in what Dylan's performance at Newport suggests about the folk music constituency, or about Dylan himself, than I am in what it

suggests about the position of the electric guitar in the popular music of the 1960s. If Dylan, by incorporating the electric guitar, gestured toward a new hybrid of folk and rock sensibilities, the controversy stirred by his use of the instrument also indicated the extent to which the electric guitar by 1965 had become an object invested with deep significance among certain segments of the pop music audience.

That year was a turning point in the history of the electric guitar, but not only or even primarily because of Dylan's new musical direction. Before Dylan's turn to electricity, before even the Beatles' ascent to pop music megastardom, the sales figures for guitars, and for electric guitars in particular, began to skyrocket in the United States. For the Gibson company, one of the leading names in guitar manufacturing, electric guitars had come to dominate sales figures by the mid-1950s, when the first stirrings of rock 'n' roll were met with a surge in electric guitar manufacturing.³ The upstart Fender company first issued its innovative Stratocaster in 1954, which has since become one of the most enduring icons of late twentieth-century popular culture. The real peak of activity, though, began around 1963, when total sales figures for all guitars almost doubled from the previous year, from just over 300,000 to over 600,000.⁴ By 1965, total guitar sales had jumped to 1.5 million; the Fender company alone was producing 1,500 guitars a week, most of them electric models.⁵ Complementing and in some ways motivating this wave of production was the heightened popularity of guitar-based music, not only the oft-noted folk revival and British invasion but the earlier and less recognized trend of electric guitar-driven instrumentals by the likes of Duane Eddy, Dick Dale, Link Wray, and the Ventures (and in England, the Shadows).

By the middle of the 1960s, then, as rock 'n' roll historian Philip Ennis noted, "the boy with his guitar became a national phenomenon."⁶ The situation was notable enough for *Life* magazine to feature a full-color two-page spread on the rising popularity of electric guitars in 1966, with an array of guitars laid out dramatically across the pages and grouped according to price. This was no consumer's guide, but an attempt to reduce a wide-ranging cultural phenomenon to the bottom line. "It's Money Music," ran the headline, and the accompanying text told a tale of the electric guitar's new ubiquity that stressed the instrument's role as a commodity.

With an electric guitar today, a teen-ager can make not only a big noise but he can also make money. Starting out with one of the modest instruments . . . to amuse himself, he soon finds that people—even friends—will pay to hear him play in a combo at their parties. So he moves up until he owns an electronic marvel costing hundreds of dollars . . . Teen combos are fast becoming the country's most popular form of musical entertainment, and sales of electric guitars—along with the nation's decibel level—have nearly doubled each year for the past three.⁷

Despite its condescending cheekiness, *Life's* brief account does highlight some unique features of the electric guitar's economic value. A commodity in its own right, the electric guitar also played an increasingly prominent role in the creation of a second product, pop music itself; and the music, in turn, served as the best vehicle for promoting the instrument. The *Life* account, however, misrepresents the motivation of the young guitarists who were bent on buying more and better gear. The amount of money to be made by the average "boy with his guitar" was rather dismal—certainly not enough to explain the intense growth in sales. There was something more to this phenomenon, something that was not strictly economic but that had to do with a different kind of investment in the electric guitar.

That "something more" is what this book is about—those qualities of the electric guitar that made it an outrageous presence at Newport, and that have made the electric guitarist into something of a culture hero among a significant segment of the audience for popular music. Attempting to explain this latter phenomenon, journalist and B. B. King biographer Charles Sawyer sought to capture the essence of the electric guitar's appeal to young white audiences of the 1960s. According to Sawyer, the public fascination with figures such as Michael Bloomfield, lead guitarist for the Butterfield Blues Band, had as much to do with the instrument as with the personality. The electric guitar was "ideal for representing the culture that embraced it," proclaimed Sawyer, who continued:

It is primitive in the extreme: six strings stretched on a board, hand picked and hand fretted; no moving parts; more rudimentary than a harpsichord; an ancient instrument. But, the instrument is also high technology: electro-

magnetic signals, generated by tiny magnets beneath the strings, amplified by electronics and fed to a bank of speaker cones. The sound it makes is full of urban clash and clang and has more percussion in it than the piano and vibraphone combined. It requires extreme dexterity and precision to play well. The electric guitar is the mediation between the two poles: the primitive hand-held harp and the highly technological synthesizer.⁸

The terms of Sawyer's description—extreme primitivism on the one hand, high technology on the other—play upon a set of cultural oppositions similar to those at work in the uproar over Dylan's performance at Newport.⁹ If folk music enthusiasts perceived the electric guitar to be a technological intrusion into their idealized, untouched community, adherents of the electric guitar saw the instrument as a means of reconciling these elements, of blending "primitive" simplicity with "technological" complexity.

There is also a racial subtext here within which the primitive stands for the African-American influence upon electric guitar performance, whereas the technological stands for white contributions. For it was during this period that the electric guitar came to embody a certain set of countercultural desires that hinged upon the transference of racial and sexual identity between African-American and white men. African-American bluesmen became the ideal type of electric guitarist after whom legions of young white musicians (like Michael Bloomfield) sought to pattern themselves; and the resulting "rebellion" reproduced patterns of racism and sexism even as it aimed to produce an effective model of resistance rooted in musical practice. The dynamic involved is similar to that described by Eric Lott in his study of blackface minstrelsy, *Love and Theft*, in which white efforts to mimic or appropriate elements of African-American musical traditions speak of a "profound white investment in black culture" born from the internalization of the color line among white performers and spectators.¹⁰ The putting on of blackness, or of elements of black style, is from this perspective an attempt to compensate for a perceived lack in the composition of whiteness; and this lack is, according to Lott, most often experienced in terms of gender and sexuality. Thus electric guitar performance in the 1960s, like blackface minstrelsy in the 1840s, followed a "gendered logic of exchange" within which white males sought to compensate for their supposed deficiency by drawing upon the sexual excess that African-American men were thought to embody.¹¹

How did the electric guitar come to figure so prominently within this dynamic of racial and sexual desire? The often-noted male bias of the instrument cannot be fully grasped without examining how the varieties of masculinity that have taken shape around the electric guitar have resulted from such a convergence of race, gender, and sexuality. The music of hard rock and heavy metal forebears such as the MC5 and Led Zeppelin provides perhaps the most explicit enactment of the racialized nature of rock's favored mode of phallocentric display, with the electric guitar as a privileged signifier of white male power and potency. Yet at issue is not a one-way line of transmission from black to white performers, but a system of racial, sexual, and musical meanings that have influenced both black and white musicians. Paul Gilroy thus noted the intermingling of sexuality and authenticity in the career of Jimi Hendrix, whose apparent adoption of the sexual codes inherited from minstrelsy dramatized the "antagonism between different local definitions of what blackness entailed" among the diverse audiences of 1960s popular music.¹²

For Hendrix, the electric guitar was crucial to the creation of a demonstrative sexual persona. Like the white guitarists who were his peers, he manipulated his instrument onstage to accentuate his physical presence. Unlike them, however, he was not seen to be aspiring toward some ideal of authentic musical performance rooted in race and sexuality, but was believed to personify that ideal by many of the whites in his audience. Among black onlookers he was more often criticized for his willingness to play to white expectations of how a black man should act. This division of judgment was not drawn so neatly along racial lines as I have made it sound. However, the discursive confusion over Hendrix's ultimate meaning as a black performer lays bare the extent to which he crossed easy lines of racial categorization through his distinctive style of electric guitar performance.

Viewed in this way, the electric guitar joins the history of the body as it has been formulated by Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, among others: the instrument is used to invest the body of the performer with meaning, to confer upon it a unique identity whose authentic, natural appearance works to conceal its reliance upon artifice and technology.¹³ Just how deep-rooted the assumption of the electric guitar as a male instrument can be, for instance, is revealed by Jennifer Batten, a guitarist who spent several years touring with Michael Jackson as his lead guitarist. Recount-

ing her experiences on tour, Batten noted that “it’s a shock for some people to see a woman playing the guitar. All over the world, on the Michael Jackson tour, people would ask me whether I was a man or a woman. Just because I played guitar, they assumed I was a guy.” Her interviewer, Joe Gore, responded astutely, “You mean it was easier for them to believe that the guitar player was a man who *looked* like a woman than that she was actually female?” “Yeah. It was a drag,” stated Batten, “I’d stand there with my blonde hair, red lipstick, and caked-on stage makeup, thinking, ‘Thank you, Poison! Thank you, Cinderella! You’ve confused the children of the world.’”¹⁴ Batten refers to the prevalence of a sort of gender ambiguity among male hard rock bands in the 1980s that was designed not to call masculinity into question so much as add an air of excitement to the proceedings, playing upon the sexually charged question of “is he or isn’t he.” Her observations are more valuable, though, for exposing the way the electric guitar is habitually read in the context of rock performance and the processes through which the instrument carries certain associations that are inscribed onto the body of the performer.

These points of intersection between the electric guitar and the history of the body are only part of the instrument’s significance. To return again to Dylan’s performance at Newport, amid the range of associations that contributed to the controversy, what stands out is that the electric guitar was offensive because of its *sound*. A similar incident at Newport just three years later demonstrates this matter. The incident is narrated by Ellen Willis, who sets the scene by noting the relative informality of it all. It was a Saturday afternoon in the summer of 1968, and the festival’s attendees were circulating among a number of folk music workshops designed to promote a more intimate brand of contact between performers and audiences than was available at the larger concert held during the evening. But, in Willis’s account, “into this pastoral carnival crashed the sound of—electric blues.”¹⁵ Willis goes on to explain that “the workshops were not supposed to use amplification, but for obvious reasons this rule could not apply to City Blues, so a minimum of sound equipment had been set up on the amphitheater stage” to be used by the featured performers, black Chicago blues performers Junior Wells and Buddy Guy.¹⁶ Even by the amplified standards of Chicago blues, Wells and Guy were

loud performers; at Newport, they were so loud as to interfere with the other workshops, prompting the festival's director to request that they turn it down—a proposition that both the performers and the assembled crowd soundly rejected. And so the music continued, with guitarist Guy announcing to the audience, "This is my first year at Newport, and now you people have to come to Chicago. We play *loud*! I'd like this mike even louder."¹⁷

In this instance, the source of conflict was the "great divide" between acoustic and electric sound. Amplification represented a louder, more demonstrative style of musical performance that put the performer at the center of attention. For performers like Guy and Wells, the use of electric instruments was part of a musical strategy that stemmed from ghetto clubs in Chicago, where the attention of the audience could not be taken for granted but had to be won. A flamboyant performer, Guy, like Jimi Hendrix, used volume, feedback and other effects made possible by amplification to enhance his showmanship and draw attention to his mastery of his chosen instrument. Far from mere grandstanding, however, his use of such effects was the result of an aesthetic preference for sounds that cut against the grain of a smooth musical surface. At Newport, Guy's presence assumed the status of noise, of an approach to sound that could not be readily assimilated into the presiding social and aesthetic assumptions of the festival. In the broader world of American and British popular music during the 1960s, though, it was precisely this noise that guitarists used to forge new affective alliances between audiences and performers.

The line between acoustic and electric sound stands as a fundamental boundary in the recent history of popular music. Yet the electric guitar has a much broader importance with regard to sound than the electric/acoustic divide would suggest. Considered over the course of its history since its invention around 1930, the electric guitar is notable less for its connection to any one sound than for the general mutability of its sound. The distortion and excessive volume favored by musicians like Guy was but one possible set of sounds, and moreover one that gained currency only gradually over the course of the 1950s and 1960s, during which time it moved from African-American blues clubs to the broader national and international scene of popular music production. More influential during the early years of the instrument's career was the pure tone crafted by figures like Les Paul and Chet Atkins, guitarists who

combined their interest in the electric guitar with new recording techniques, and who sought to eliminate the unwanted resonances and excessive noise of improperly amplified guitars as a means of increasing overall sonic clarity. In contrast to the sonoric excesses that were favored in later years, the sound cultivated by Paul and Atkins was calculated not to disturb the existing conventions of pop, but to assimilate the electric guitar into those conventions. As such, their actions laid the groundwork for the subsequent mass acceptance of the instrument.

Electric guitarists have been notable for the attention they have devoted to the quality and the character of the sounds they produce, and for their creative use of electric technologies in the making of popular music. As a history of the electric guitar, then, this book is also a history of certain modes of musical practice and of the engagement of musicians with particular ways of shaping sound. Similarly, in his history of digital instruments, Paul Théberge situates digital sound technologies within the broader history of musical reproduction in the twentieth century, noting that such instruments are an outgrowth of the tendency to treat musical sound as an increasingly autonomous and manipulable element.¹⁸ This tendency resulted in large part from the advent and refinement of sound recording, which demonstrated that sound could be shaped in ways that were not systematically bound to the original act of musical performance. According to Théberge, digital instruments have blurred the line between recording and performance, between musical production and reproduction, by making available to musicians an array of sounds “already there,” prerecorded sounds that can be tapped as the source for a new musical performance.¹⁹ He goes on to observe that “musicians today . . . often speak of having a unique and personal ‘sound’ in the same manner in which another generation of musicians might have spoken of having developed a particular ‘style.’” For Théberge, this concept of a “sound” is irremediably tied to the development of recording technologies, which have conferred upon sound a new materiality.²⁰ The electric guitar stands as a product of an earlier era. Although Théberge recognizes the instrument’s flexibility in terms of sound, he also asserts that it cannot be considered a fully “electronic” musical device. The electric guitar retains too many of the features of traditional musical instruments, including a sound mechanism that relies on “a more-or-less direct relationship between player, technique, and instrument.” By contrast, digital synthesiz-