

Les Paul at 91
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Abstract: Guitar legend Les Paul continues to perform to enthusiastic audiences as a nonagenarian whose age and impairments impact his playing technique. This essay describes the exemplary sociocultural relations that permit Paul, a person with disabilities largely a function of advanced age, to continue his career as a productive, respected, and affectionately esteemed member of a community.

Key Words: Les Paul, musicians with disabilities, aging

In August 2006, I caught guitarist Les Paul's regular Monday evening gig at the Iridium on Broadway in Manhattan. Ninety-one at the time, the legendary instrumentalist and inventor played two shows in short succession to packed houses. His weekly outings at this lovely New York club have welcomed such guests as Paul McCartney, Keith Richards, and Tony Bennett. He is the only member of both the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and National Inventors Hall of Fame, the latter for such modern musical marvels and necessities as the electric guitar (the Gibson "Les Paul" model remains an industry standard to this day) and multi-track recording.

While it's unlikely many of Paul's fans see it this way, his shows are exemplars of disability culture or, perhaps more accurately, the inclusion of disability in culture. Another of the guitarist's claims to fame is his mode of recovery from a serious auto accident in 1948, in which he broke his right elbow and faced the prospect of amputation. The limited orthopedic surgical technique of the time mandated that to save his arm at all required that it be set immobile. Paul opted for placing his arm permanently in playing position such that he could continue to perform. What is doubtless a serious mobility impairment with regard to many other activities – the injury turned Paul into a left-handed writer -- his locked arm appears to have had no permanent impact on his playing; indeed, many of his major recordings and performances lay ahead of him post-injury. What has affected his playing, though, is the arthritis that began later in life, and perhaps also additional aspects of aging. Particularly with regard to sheer velocity, a normative expectation of any jazz virtuoso and in his heyday one of the guitarist's fortes, Les Paul simply doesn't play as he once did; he doesn't even come close.

In some other musical idioms, notably Western classical music, Paul's now limited technical facility would have forced him into retirement, perhaps long ago. Classical music's requirement to perform a standard, canonic repertoire in a standardized, canonic manner, with a one-size-fits-all technique, would surely have had him drummed out of the business once he couldn't keep up with younger players. But, in all fairness, it's also unlikely that another jazz musician of less than Paul's iconic status would still be working if similarly impaired, devoid of Paul's legacy of earlier glory days, memories of which inform his current performances for his devotees every time he simply shows up, not unlike the performances of certain aging rockers who mostly fall back on the oldies they recorded before they became oldies themselves.

Still, that Paul is feted weekly by a prestigious club full of admirers in the jazz capital of the world is, especially from the perspective of disability culture, a thing of beauty and a joy for

the foreseeable future. Further, his performances backed by a broadly multigenerational trio of considerably younger players manifest many elements of a bold and optimistic paradigm for a new praxis of disability in music.

We live in a time when, virtually regardless of the nature of one's impairment, a combination of technology and the enlightened thinking of at least some communities make a rich participatory life in music possible. Unfortunately, mainstream values have thus far failed to keep pace with either technological or philosophical progress in music making. And while Les Paul is surely one of the greatest and most influential technological innovators in the history of music, it is not his or other's material inventions, but the attitude of great sophistication of the community comprised of all involved in his shows, that enlightens with regard to matters of disability and aging these weekly celebrations of his near century-long dedication to musical excellence.

If the guitarist's hands no longer move as fast or tirelessly as they once did, there is much that remains in his musicality to be enjoyed, as well as some elements that are better than ever which flow directly and unambiguously from his maturity. The younger players in his multigenerational quartet are there to pick up the technical slack by providing the stunningly fast barrages of notes that he no longer plays. While Paul is no longer a speed demon, his compositions, arrangements, interpretations, instrumental innovations, and the exquisitely unique sound of his guitar and amplification remain to spark these younger players to want to share his stage, along with the many jazz and rock legends who simply show up to pay homage. While playing less notes than in his youth, Paul sings and banters. No longer able to set his strings afire, his near-century of musical and life experience has only enhanced another of his artistic gifts; that of sharing stories. He is a spectacular raconteur, mostly hilarious, occasionally touching and wistful. Unlike the performances of some aging rockers, for whom maturity seems impossible simply to accept as natural, there is neither denial nor an excess of nostalgia.

That Paul's ensemble is represented by four generations and includes both sexes -- the youngest member is Ms. Nikki Parrott, an Australian bassist -- is likely happenstance. Nonetheless, their unusual demographics feel like part of the celebration. Much of the humor is brazenly risqué, both gay and straight, uproariously funny, and always sex positive. Ms. Parrott, an obvious focus at times, gives even more than she gets.

The importance of this substantial component of the show -- whose comedic/theatrical element rivals the musical component in time allotted -- should not be underestimated as a manifestation of disability culture. It is a veritable orgy (in the best sense) of sex-positive banter in which a mobility-impaired nonagenarian's continued vitality and passion are fully acknowledged, essential, and accepted as utterly natural. It is not only that this elderly man, his impairment largely a function of his age, is fully supported in leading a rich life of culture, friendship, and honor by his community comprised of bandmates, the music industry (in the form of clubs, the Iridium and earlier Manhattan's Fat Tuesday, that have hosted Paul's weekly gigs since 1984), and his many fans. The technical musical limitations that have come with age have been replaced with a gigantic and growing capacity for humor and stories, which, like a good wine, doubtless improves over time.

What may be the greatest glory of this tableau, in which neither age nor impairment impede life's best (and bawdiest) joys, is its indigenous naturalness. Other cultural praxes in which the elderly and, much less often, people with disabilities, are awarded status of honor and engagement are well known. But these are mostly regarded in the West as exotic; the Confucianism of East and Southeast Asia may be most familiar. What happens at the Iridium on Monday nights, full of the signification of instrumental virtuosity and sexual boasting, is entirely a product of American vernacular sociomusical praxis. It is hardly a typical product – American popular culture is far from devoid of an obsession with callow youth – but it is nonetheless one whose elements derive from a rich tradition in which musical performance, in both its sounds and its staging, serve to display prowess, often by African-Americans who might otherwise be regarded as powerless. (Although Paul's group *du jour* was entirely white, the African-American origins of its jazz music and jazz humor are undeniable). At these Monday night gigs, power belongs to the old and impaired, whose breadth of experience has rendered wise (though also to the group's junior member and only woman Ms. Parrott, whose role in the banter is second only to Paul's and includes, "I Like Big Instruments," her erotically-charged encomium to her double bass and another type of large tool that remains unsung).

That there is this glorious weekly celebration of the genius of age and impairment by means of musical and sexual signification would mean little were the Iridium not wheelchair accessible, but it is, and this is noted prominently on their web page (<http://iridiumjazzclub.com/>). (The club is also smoke-free). Those who make the pilgrimage to hear this guitar legend get a great deal more and better than just a concert, in the form of a rare dialect of disability culture that also embraces the concerns of age. It is a must-see for New Yorkers and visitors. Do not hesitate, as Les Paul will be 92 by the time this essay makes print. Be there or be square.

Notes

While the biographical and other background information in this article is readily available from numerous sources on and doubtless beyond the Internet, likely the best and most enjoyable presentation is the 2007 DVD documentary *Les Paul – Chasing Sound!*, premiered on PBS in July 12, 2007, after this essay was completed. Among its many vignettes are those in which the guitarist/inventor speaks candidly about his impaired arm and his arthritis.

Directed by John Paulson and written and produced by John Arntz, *Les Paul – Chasing Sound!* is the work of John Paulson Productions of Falls Church, Virginia. At this writing, a ten-minute trailer and nearly three minutes of outtakes are available for viewing at <http://lespaulfilm.com/>.

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of Minnesota Press), and *Richard Wagner for the New Millennium: Essays in Music and Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan), edited by Lubet, Matthew Britzner-Stull, and Gottfried Wagner.