

The History of the Electric Guitar

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(Theremin sound clip – 3-4 seconds)

1932 is the year that marks the birth of the “electric guitar.” Its debut is attributed to two individuals: George Beauchamp of Los Angeles, California and Gage Brewer of Wichita, Kansas - George being the inventor, Gage the performer. We do not know when the two men first met. It might have been on the vaudeville circuit in the Midwest during the teens or 1920s, or it may have been later in the 1930s in Los Angeles, California.

George Beauchamp, a Texan, was a talented guitarist drawn to Los Angeles to further his career as a performing musician. There, he approached John Dopera who operated a business making and repairing stringed instruments. Together the two created acoustic guitars with increased volume and in 1926 developed a guitar with acoustic resonators and launched a new company: The National Stringed Instrument Corporation.

In 1931, Beauchamp left National and started a new company with the financial backing of business associate Adolph Rickenbacher. The new idea was to completely abandon the acoustic nature of musical instruments in favor of electronic technology’s ability to interpret and amplify sound. Beauchamp’s revolutionary design featured an electromagnet placed directly next to steel strings which produced a strong signal to be “picked-up” and sent to the amplifier and speaker. The new company was named “Ro-Pat-In Corporation” short for Rickenbacher Original Patent Instruments. Within two years the company would change its name to Rickenbacher Electro Instrument. It exists today as: Rickenbacker International.

Gage Brewer was a young guitarist and orchestra leader from Oklahoma who moved to Wichita in 1924 to begin a career in music. Within a decade he was a celebrity and traveled widely in performance. By the summer of 1932, Brewer who traveled to Los Angeles to be the first in line to receive prototypes. Once back to Wichita, he contacted the media.

The Wichita Beacon newspaper account from October 2, 1932 reads: “Gage Brewer, well known radio entertainer, who returned recently from the west coast, brought with him a new and revolutionary musical instrument, the electro steel guitar, which he is introducing at Shadowland Dance Hall at the city limits on South Lawrence Avenue – Highway. The new instrument involves a new principal in harmony and will undoubtedly open up a new field in musical instruments. The electro steel guitar has the same characteristics as the steel guitar, but with the same quality, fullness and harmony of a pipe organ.”

Mr. Brewer said it was the most wonderful instrument he had ever played. He is the third musician in the world to use one of these new instruments. The instrument is not in production yet but the inventor, George Beauchamp, has experimented several years with various models, bringing it up to a standard far surpassing the now old-fashioned steel guitar. One of the most remarkable things of the instrument is the tone quality of the bass, which might be compared with the bass of an

orthophonic speaker. From here, Brewer continued to promote electric guitars with a series of Halloween Concerts through-out the area.

In an open public letter (dated Oct. 28, 1932) advertising these performances Brewer states: “In the orchestra we are introducing two of the world’s newest and most sensational instruments. A new invention which is startling the music world, making possible a combination of natural technique and electrical perfection. We are indeed fortunate to be able to present these instruments to the public as they will not be on the market for several months, we assure you that if you have not already heard the remarkable instruments that we have a real treat in store for you.”

Initial reception of the electric guitar was as a novelty. Audiences were mystified, some asking, “How many songs does your electric guitar play?” or if heard on the radio, listeners commonly wrote in to learn “What kind of horn was being used to make such unusual sounds.” Guitarist themselves struggled to master the expanded sonic dimension of an essentially new yet familiar instrument. It would take two decades and the end of WWII before the electric guitar would begin to become familiar and widely accepted.

(sound clip from Brewer’s only record c. 1935: “now a little hot pickin’ from the old geetar” . . . electric guitar solos – 20-30 seconds)

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