

MUSIC REVIEW, Les is more than a guitarist, he's a hero; [ALL EDITIONS]

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Mark Twain had been dead roughly five years before Les Paul was born in Waukesha, Wis., in 1915. If the old man had hung around longer, he might have gotten around to creating Paul himself. Because Les Paul was Sam Clemens' kind of guy: a go-getting, imperturbable blend of tinker, showman and artist.

Paul invented the solid-body electric guitar, godfathered multitracking and reverb effects and helped establish the paradigm for what we've come to know throughout pop music history as the Guitar Hero – the swashbuckling virtuoso who could turn his guitar into a three-ring circus with strings complete with clowning riffs, high-wire phrasings and cannon-powered arpeggios.

Little wonder then that the JVC Jazz Festival's Sunday night all-star jam at Carnegie Hall celebrating Paul's 90th birthday (10 days after the actual date) was as much a tribute to a colorful state of being as it was to Paul himself, who was to be the indisputable star of his own party.

Because Paul's legacy is vast enough to cover blues, country, rock and jazz, any one-night tribute is bound to come off as unwieldy and uneven. (The stage looked nice, though, garlanded as it was with Gibson Les Paul guitars.) It was probably a good idea to let the rock hounds in the sold-out house blow off steam in the beginning with appearances by lifelong Paul protegee Steve Miller ("Fly Like an Eagle") and Kenny Wayne Shepherd, who was all roadhouse bravado and bluster.

The most chronic problems, ironically enough, were with the sound. Those of us in the nosebleed seats kept peppering the stage with pleas to crank up the guitars. The spotty acoustics made the effectiveness of Steve Lukather's rendition of Jimi Hendrix's "Little Wing" a matter of speculation. Peter Frampton and Edgar Winter more or less fulfilled the seemingly easy expectations of classic rock aficionados. But it was the flamboyant unaccompanied turns of Tommy Emmanuel and Stanley Jordan that proved most apropos to the guest of honor's flash and dash.

The second half switched to jazz – and to the birthday boy's jaunty appearance with his quartet and such guests as Jose Feliciano, Madeleine Peyroux and Bucky Pizzarelli. Paul's saunter through memory lane, stopping at such hits as "Blue Skies," "Over the Rainbow," "It's Been a Long, Long Time" (a reprise of his 1945 hit with Bing Crosby, with Peyroux filling in for Bing) and "How High the Moon" (with Feliciano riding shotgun), was executed with such jolly nonchalance that you didn't mind when Paul's stage patter got a little fuzzy.

He got off one good line early on when he'd picked up his guitar and, with a naughty wink to a Gibson executive onstage, said, "I knew I should've gotten a Fender." Someone who can fire that fast in his 90s is still worthy of being everybody's Guitar Hero.

ALL FOR PAUL: LES PAUL 90TH BIRTHDAY SALUTE. The JVC Jazz Festival salutes a quintessential American inventor–artist with an all–star guitar jam Sunday night at Carnegie Hall. The eclectic guest list includes Steve Miller, Peter Frampton, Edgar Winter, Bucky Pizzarelli, Madeleine Peyroux and Jose Feliciano.