

*A Shower of Brilliance:  
Leo Fender and His Electric Guitars*

May, 2000 - January, 2003  
Fullerton Museum Center



**A Discovery Guide for Families**

Welcome to the Fullerton Museum Center! This Discovery Guide is designed to help you and your family have a fun and informative time with this special museum exhibit. Questions and activities to do in the gallery are printed in **bold**, while background information is in plain type. Look for the blue dots on the floor to guide you to the pieces discussed. Enjoy your visit!

**About this exhibit**

Many people don't realize that a revolution started right here in Fullerton, CA! In the 1940s, a creative radio repairman named Leo Fender started experimenting with electronic musical instruments at his shop in downtown Fullerton. Over the next 30 years, his inventions led to profound changes in popular music, and the perfection of the world's most popular musical instrument: the solid body electric guitar!

Throughout his life, Leo Fender was an avid supporter of Fullerton. All of his guitars, basses, and amps were proudly marked "Made in Fullerton, California." The Fullerton Museum Center is honored to recognize the accomplishments of this famous Fullertonian in this two-year exhibit "*A Shower of Brilliance: Leo Fender and His Electric Guitars.*"

Find the old radio. How old is this piece? How is this different from radios today? This radio illustrates the fact that Leo Fender got his start in radio repair during the 1940s.



What was going on in the 1940s? What connection did this have with Fullerton? With radio repair? With Leo Fender?

World War II was, obviously, the "big event" of the decade. The war and its aftermath touched every area of American life in one way or another, even something as un-warlike as the electric guitar! Leo Fender was not able to enlist in the armed forces because of a physical disability: he was missing his left eye. Since all of American industry was pulled into the war effort, the manufacture of consumer goods, like radios, was virtually halted during the war years. Consumers needed to repair old radios and electronics instead of buying new ones, because new ones were not available. Because of the shortage, Leo Fender's radio repair shop on Spadra Rd. (now Harbor Blvd.) was successful throughout the war years, and helped launch Fender's career.

Find an early photograph of Leo Fender with his mobile P.A. unit. Does the location look familiar?

This photograph, from 1942, shows Leo Fender providing sound for the dedication of Fullerton's brand new City Hall, now the Fullerton Police Station.

Find Leo Fender's first electric guitar, dated 1943. Do you think this guitar was designed for performances? Why or why not? This test guitar is Leo Fender and, then partner, Doc Kauffman's earliest solid body electric guitar. Although it was designed for testing, this guitar was actually used by performers curious to try out the new technology in live performances.

Some of his critics called Fender's invention a "canoe paddle." Fender was not discouraged, and continued his experiments until he produced a commercially viable electric guitar. Who are some other famous people in history who have made important contributions despite criticism? What can we learn from their experiences?

Find the two metal lap guitars labeled K&F Lap Steel Guitar and 1955 Champ Steel Guitar. How are they different from other guitars you may have seen?

These pieces are known as "Hawaiian" guitars, or Lap Steel guitars. They are played on the player's lap, rather than propped up against his body like a standard, or "Spanish" guitar. Although Leo Fender made a huge contribution to rock and roll music, he actually didn't care too much for it! His favorite music was Hawaiian popular music, and Western Swing, both of which used these Lap Steel guitars. A picture of one of Fender's favorite western swing artists, Speedy West, can be seen above.

How are the Champ and the K&F different from each other? What do you think might account for these differences?

Find the Broadcaster and Telecaster electric guitars

These pieces are examples of Fender's first commercially successful electric guitars. How many years passed from Fender's first experiments to the manufacture of these instruments? What do you think might have been some of the challenges Fender faced along the way? One of Fender's challenges was creating a neck that could withstand the high pressure of the strings. The pressure caused the necks to warp on some of the early guitars. Read the label text to learn how

Fender solved this problem. Can you see any evidence of this improvement in the later Telecaster?

Find the 1952 Precision Bass. If you didn't know this was a bass guitar, could you tell by the size and the strings? Why or why not? How is this different than the bass in the picture above? There is a saying that "Necessity is the mother of invention." What necessities prodded Fender to invent the Precision Bass? What do you think some of the advantages of this instrument might be? What about the drawbacks?

Find the 1954 Stratocaster in the display case.

Although Fender's Broadcaster and Telecaster guitars were very popular, the Stratocaster, premiered in 1954, proved to be the most successful electric guitar design in history. How is the Stratocaster different from the Telecaster?

Many musicians have personalized their Fender Stratocasters to express their own musical style visually. You can look at some of the album covers posted on the west wall of the gallery for inspiration. Use the picture below as your blank guitar "canvas" for a custom Strat of your own!

