

PRESENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE GUITAR THROUGH THE 20TH  
CENTURY

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In today's world, the guitar is recognized as one of the most popular instruments for people new to learning music, instrument sales, and in popular music. The modern guitar is a fretted musical instrument that is usually played by plucking or strumming the six strings while simultaneously pressing strings against the frets to make different sounds. It is a flexible instrument with a timbre and tone that can conform to countless different styles. Although there is much dispute as to the exact origins of this instrument, most agree that the most definable guitar emerged from Spain in the early 16th century.<sup>1</sup> This first "guitar" was a 4-string object with just enough similarity to the modern day guitar that could create sound. From that point, the guitar underwent countless different changes to its composition to be where it is today.

Throughout history, the guitar also earned a spot as a crucial aspect of popular music and even led to the creation of an entire genre of music. From the first recorded mention of the guitar, all the way to modern guitar playing, the importance of the guitar is undeniable. By examining the history of the guitar and how it has been used and studied throughout history, one can gain a better understanding of the instrument and the influence that it has had on today's music and world as a whole. In this paper, the development, literature, and use of the guitar will be explored dating back to the early 20th century.

The 20th century was an exciting time for the world as a whole. The time period brought the invention of the radio, television, airplane, internet, personal computers, telephones and countless other discoveries that would prove to fast-track the world to modern times.

Simultaneously, popular music was also undergoing a drastic change. With new technology and

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<sup>1</sup>Adam Augustyn, "Guitar," Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., 2019), <https://www.britannica.com/art/guitar>.

recording techniques that began to bring music in the home, music that was once only heard by only a live audience was beginning to become increasingly more popular.<sup>2</sup> Classical music that was intended for an elite group of people began to take a side seat as a modern, fresh sound emerged that appealed to a great number of people. During the early 20th century, the public enjoyed songs by Sousa, Scott Joplin, the Original Dixieland Band, George Gershwin, and many other artists in their playing styles of marches, ragtime, jazz, folk, and blues.

Meanwhile, over in Spain, Antonio de Torres Jurardo was perfecting his invention of the modern classical guitar. He had eloquently created a guitar with a thinner belly, broader body, increased curve at the waist, utilized wooden struts inside the instrument, and overall perfected the instrument.<sup>3</sup> The talented Spanish musician, Andres Segovia, established Torres's design as a concert instrument and wrote complex musical compositions for it, thereby creating "classical guitar" music. Segovia took classical music for the piano and wrote it on the guitar.

In 1935, Segovia debuted his transcription of the "Violin Partita No. 2 BWV 1004 in D minor" and received international recognition. The reactions to this piece varied dramatically. Wade Graham, author of "The Guitarist's Guide to Bach" wrote,

"The Chaconne is one of the most well-known solo works for violin which caused a strong divide when this piece was first performed on the concert stage. While there were those who applauded the success of the piece on the guitar, there were those that were offended and proclaimed is blasphemy to be played on any instrument other than the violin"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Hans T. Zeiner-Henriksen, "A Brief History of Music in the 20th Century," FutureLearn, 2018, <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/music-moves/0/steps/12666>.

<sup>3</sup> Online MI, "Guitar History: How the Guitar Has Evolved: Musicians Institute," Musicians Institute Hollywood, April 11, 2022, <https://www.mi.edu/education/guitar-history-how-the-guitar-has-evolved/>.

<sup>4</sup> Graham Wade and Elizabeth Altman, "The Guitarist's Guide to Bach," in *The Guitarist's Guide to Bach* (Gortnacloona, CA: Wise Owl Music, 1985), pp. 68-69.

Despite the backlash, Segovia was ultimately victorious in his writing and went to play guitar for many more years. Many even refer to him as the father of classical guitar. It is because of Segovia's efforts that it is common to find Bach's music arranged for classical guitar.

After the end of World War 1, America was in an era of prosperity. "The Roaring 20's," as it was called, was a time of economic health and progressivism. The early progressive movement was in full swing, women's suffrage began over a century of activism for women's rights, and the people were rallying to take power back from large corporations. Because of this progressivism, heavily African American influenced music such as jazz began to gain popularity with America's white middle class. This is what made the 1920s-1930s known as the "Jazz Age" as the music allowed many cultures and even genders to express themselves. They began to express themselves through different styles of music as well!

Blues music can be defined as a "vocal and instrumental musical form which evolved from African American spirituals, shouts, work songs, and chants..."<sup>5</sup> It is a fundamental part of music of which its influence reaches deep into ragtime, jazz, rock and roll, country, pop, and even classical music. The blues' origin story is poorly documented, but it is a simplistic but expressive form of music written by enslaved black people.

One of the most influential blues guitarists of the time was Robert Johnson. In regards to Robert Johnson's music, guitarist, Eric Clapton said it best,

"I don't think I'd even heard of Robert Johnson when I first found [King of the Delta Blues Singers 1961]; it was probably fresh out. I was around fifteen or sixteen, and it came as

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<sup>5</sup> New World Encyclopedia , "Twentieth-Century Music," New World Encyclopedia , 2019, [https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/twentieth-century\\_music](https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/twentieth-century_music).

something of a shock to me that there could be anything that powerful... It was almost as if he felt things so acutely that he found it almost unbearable... At first, it was almost too painful, but then after about six months I started listening, and then I didn't listen to anything else."<sup>6</sup>

Although instrumental accompaniment is almost universal in the blues, the blues is a vocal form. Throughout and during this time period, the blues changed from a varying 13-15 bar form that would follow the singer's mood to the 12-bar structure following the 1-4-5 chord progression which is now held as the standard today. This better appealed to white people, solved problems notating the blues, and established a form for the band to work with. The earliest blues guitarists would often not have access to the standard guitars made by Torres, Martin, and Gibson at the time, so they would often make their own out of any materials that they had available. Guitarists began to experiment with microtonality (the blues note), syncopation, bending the guitar strings, and adding a bottleneck to the fretboard to create a whining noise. These additions to music were a shock to early listeners and the Blues was often regarded as the "Devil's Music"<sup>7</sup>

In 1945, World War 2 came to an end. The war brought hurt to the entire world, and many of the soldiers were professional athletes or musicians. As they returned home, there was a birth of a new genre of music, rock and roll. Many people credit the rise of rock and roll to the end of jazz music as a popular genre. But, the rhythm of rock and roll was derived from early jazz music and without it, rock wouldn't have the roots that it has today<sup>8</sup>. While jazz was heavily

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<sup>6</sup> Lorre, Sean. 2012. "Constructing Robert Johnson." *Musicological Explorations* 13 (May): 127–54. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=85462178&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>7</sup> Augustyn, Adam. 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Nick Morrison and Robin Lloyd, "Post-War Rhythm and Blues: Bridging Jazz, Rock," NPR (NPR, May 11, 2010), <https://www.npr.org/2010/05/11/126607409/post-war-rhythm-and-blues-bridging-jazz-rock>.

popular in the African American community, many performers of other cultures took inspiration from it to create rock and roll. Eventual rock and roll artists such as Elvis Presley and Chuck Berry were heavily influenced by Postwar R&B.

This era was groundbreaking in the world of guitars as well. With the recent invention of flat-top guitars by Orville Gibson in 1896, Christian Frederick Martin's invention of the archtop guitar in 1929, and Leo Fender's invention of the Telecaster in 1951, the solid-body electric guitars that we know today were born.<sup>9</sup> This development aligned perfectly with the emergence of rock and roll. With influences from classical, jazz, blues, and country music, rock and roll music can be defined as "music usually played on electronically amplified instruments and characterized by a persistent, heavily accented beat and repetition of simple phrases."<sup>10</sup>

Rock and roll music was groundbreaking. During the chaos of World War II, black Americans were prospering in different union jobs. Upon the end of the war, many even had enough disposable income to underwrite black-oriented companies, clubs, and radios. Black music became increasingly popular among white teenagers, and societal change began. Mark Naison, professor of African-American history at Fordham University wrote,

"Looking back, it's hard to ignore the parallel tracks of the surge in rock music popularity and the growth of the civil rights movement. One was cultural and economic, the other was political and social. But in many ways they arrived at the same station at the same time. I

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<sup>9</sup> Online MI, "Guitar History: How the Guitar Has Evolved: Musicians Institute," Musicians Institute Hollywood, April 11, 2022, <https://www.mi.edu/education/guitar-history-how-the-guitar-has-evolved/>.

<sup>10</sup> Webster Merriam, "Rock and Roll Definition & Meaning," Merriam-Webster (Merriam-Webster, 2017), <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/rock%20and%20roll>.

wouldn't want to make it seem like this was part of the civil rights movement, because it was motivated by money, sex, and fun.”<sup>11</sup>

Not only did rock music change the music industry, but it changed the world as well. It quickly became one of the most popular genres of music and intertwined itself in the history of the world and music.

From the primal versions of guitars played in ancient times to the advanced, technological systems that we use as guitars in today's world, the relevance and importance of this instrument is undeniable. As one analyzes negative public reactions discussed in the invention of classical guitar, the blues, and rock and roll, the road to fame has not been easy for this instrument. These trials faced by years of countless musicians shaped music and the world into what we have today. In listening to popular music of the current time period, we can analyze and identify distinct connections to early classical music, the blues, and rock and roll. Each genre influenced the next, and one would assume that this would keep happening for centuries to come.

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<sup>11</sup> FREEDMAN, DAN. 2022. “WHO PUT THE BOMP (IN THE BOMPBAH-BOMPBAH-BOMP)? The Confluence of Events That Set Rock ‘n’ Roll in Motion - Most Significantly the Crossover of Black Music into White Culture - Took Place over Time. But What Was the First Rock Single?” Saturday Evening Post 294 (1): 38–42. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=154076542&site=ehost-live>.

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