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Gibson L-5 Lloyd Loar's Timeless Masterpiece



By ERIC C. SHOAF



Timeless elegance. A jazz icon. The inspirational archtop guitar. These are just a few of the descriptions that fit Gibson's L-5. Add to those a historical antecedent: the L-5 in various forms has been in constant production since late 1922, longer than any Martin, Gretsch, Epiphone, or National model. But a VG Hall of Fame guitar needs to be more than just popular; it must represent innovation and be influential to both manufacturers and musicians. The Gibson L-5 is all this and more.

Originally conceived by acoustic engineer Lloyd Loar, the L-5 was the first guitar with design principles incorporated from carved instruments of the cello family. It represented a complete break from existing guitar design. Sporting simple appointments such as dot fingerboard inlays and a dark sunburst finish, the guitar was elegantly finished with a pearl "flower pot" inlaid in the headstock below the Gibson logo, and a karat at the end of the fingerboard. The timing of the L-5's introduction was nearly perfect since the guitar at that time was growing in popularity, but had yet to graduate from being just an instrument of vocal accompaniment to use in ensemble and orchestra settings.

The 16" wide L-5 provided volume lacking in Gibson's roundhole archtop guitars, and by the early 1930s the instrument had grown in popularity and sales enough to cause rivals Epiphone and Gretsch to introduce their own carved top/back instruments. In '34, Gibson upped the ante by introducing "advanced" versions of the L-5, which increased the width of both the upper and lower bouts. While the advanced version was a little fancier, with larger fingerboard inlays and more binding, there was still an elegance to the details that made the instrument stand out. Certainly by the early '40s the L-5 was a staple in jazz band and orchestral settings. At 17" across the lower bout, it was a perfectly sized instrument. Loud enough for orchestral use, but not so large and difficult to handle as Gibson's Super 400 or the Epiphone Emperor, the L-5 was extremely popular among musicians in jazz, country and western, and large orchestras. Demand for the guitar was such that after World War II it was one of the first models rushed back into production, even though some materials were in short supply.

There were other detail changes along the way; a natural-finish option, a cutaway option, fancier tailpiece, and better tuners, but the instrument was otherwise unchanged until the original non-cutaway model was discontinued in 1958, bowing to poor sales. The cutaway model soldiered on until '82 when it was supplanted by the L-5CES. But the original acoustic L-5 was resurrected in the early '90s, when the Gibson Custom Shop began reissuing models from the golden age.

Today, the L-5 is one of the most collectible guitars from Gibson's pre-war period. It is sought not only for its historical importance, but also for sound and playability, for its elegant design, and for its influence on the music of yesterday and today.

A 1940 example of the L-5 Premier, which became the L-5C (cutaway) in '48.

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