

TURN UP THAT RACKET: A HISTORY OF THE GUITAR'S MUSIC AND CULTURE

By

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Exhibition Design

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TURN UP THAT RACKET: A HISTORY OF THE GUITAR'S MUSIC AND CULTURE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts at Corcoran College of Art and Design

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## ABSTRACT

TURN UP THAT RACKET: A HISTORY OF THE GUITAR'S MUSIC AND CULTURE  
Christopher Karlas, Master of Arts Exhibition Design  
Corcoran College of Art +Design, May 2013  
Thesis Advisor: Selma Thomas

Turn Up That Racket: A History of the Guitar's music and culture is located at the Peter Jay Sharp and Fisher buildings at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. The exhibit will make use of interactive displays, live performances, workshops, seminars, and various media to communicate the importance of the guitar. Notable performers, inventors, and composers of the guitar will be on display, along with examples of guitars and related equipment. Experiential environments are to be integrated to compliment the exhibit's theme and to more actively involve the visitor. Genres ranging from classical to experimental rock will be showcased to give credence to the diversity of the guitar. The range of programming, accessible location, intriguing objects, and engaging information will ensure that this exhibit will become a favorite among its visitors.

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## **Introduction**

This exhibition focuses on the history and development of the guitar, and the impact it has made on musical form, composition, and culture.

## **Hook/Overarching Point**

The guitar is an instrument with a long history and a rich legacy. It relates to a multitude of musical cultures across the globe, and will continue to impact music and culture for many more years to come.

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## **Mission Statement**

This exhibition will explore and expand upon humans' relationship with music; specifically with one instrument - the guitar. Since its creation, the guitar has been a key tool in the development of various musical genres throughout the ages and the world over. This exhibition will inform visitors of the guitar's role in music over the years, and will help to foster an appreciation for the impact it has made and continues to make on musical form and construction.

## Target Audience

The target audience for this exhibition are people who have an interest in guitars and guitar based music. While this is the main group that will be attracted to the exhibit, people with a general interest in music's history, instruments, or other related subjects will also find something to capture their interest.

## Educational Objectives

Main objective - the visitor will leave the exhibit with a basic understanding and/or appreciation of the guitar as an instrument and musical cultural force

Secondary objectives:

- > exposing visitors to musical genres they may not have encountered before via the guitar
- > the guitar is more than just an instrument; it is a cultural force and an entire medium of creating music
- > teaching visitors basics in guitar playing and composition



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## Visitor experience, site, and context

The venue of this exhibition shall be the Brooklyn Academy of Music. As its name indicates, the space is located in Brooklyn, New York – in the Fort Greene community specifically. There are actually three separate buildings which make up the BAM. Two of the three buildings will be used; the Peter Jay Sharp building and the Fisher building. The Fisher building will house the main and special exhibitions, and the Peter Jay Sharp building will host performances, workshops, and seminars.

Why hold this exhibition in Brooklyn? Since the theme is music based, somewhere that has a strong history and culture of music would be ideal to situate the exhibit in. An urban area also helps to allow more people access. Brooklyn is both of these things, and it is also a borough with many more teenagers and young adults, who would likely be more interested in a guitar themed exhibit. So many different genres which utilize the guitar have been formed in or been influenced by Brooklyn, from hardcore punk to jazz due to the varying degree of cultures located in and around the borough. With Brooklyn's location, ease of access from multiple areas via multiple methods, local population, and notoriety, this exhibition could not have found a more appropriate home.

There will options for visitors, so the exhibit layout will be a semi-free roaming experience, with loose, open but clearly defined sections. The buildings are next to each other, making access to both simple and convenient. Visitors are free to attend

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workshops, demonstrations, and performances in the Peter Jay Sharp Building, or browse the displays of the Fisher building. The Fisher building's layout will be free flowing, but there will be a distinct beginning and end. There will be one area near the entrance which would be a basic display, with introductory text panels summing up the content of the exhibit in a concise (but not too revealing) fashion. This area would inform the visitor of the guitar's lineage, but also will communicate that the exhibition starts at a certain time period, and this is when/what the visitors will expect to learn of. From the entryway guests would then be free to roam the corridors of the exhibition space, with separate displays devoted to different countries, genres, styles, famous performers, and other content.

Visitors will journey through the space, learning about the instruments which predated the modern guitar and inspired its creation, as well as some of the forms of music which these instruments were utilized in. From there a section of examples of early models of the modern acoustic and electric guitar would help to illustrate the instrument's metamorphosis. Further through the exhibit, visitors will see how diverse the guitar's applications have become with regards to music. There will be plenty of media, both audio and visual, for visitors to enjoy. As a precursor to each section, there will be a text panel with a brief summary of relevant human history at the time of the section's content. This helps to give the visitor some context as to why musical styles evolved as they did. People in the Fisher building will be able to find about shows happening that day at the PJS building; a show schedule will be provided upon admission. Each visitor could pick it up at the same place they get pamphlets, maps and other information. The conclusion of the exhibit would be dedicated area of reflection with displays; re-emphasizing the exhibit's theme with a look towards the future of the guitar's role in music.

## Content description

This exhibition focuses on the history and evolution of the guitar. As such, it will be a music centered exhibit, however there will also be small tidbits of human history information to give some of the musical eras context. However, the guitar will not be the only focus here. Secondary elements, such as notable guitar players, innovators in technique and design, and equipment used by guitar players will be present throughout to give additional context and information.

Before the guitar as it is known today was developed, there were other instruments that foreshadowed its creation. Similar instruments have been used in European and Asian cultures for centuries. The word 'guitar' has dubious origins, some believe it came from the Greek word 'kithara', others believe the Greek word is an appropriation of the Persian word 'chartar', and still others think that it came from the ancient Sanskrit word 'tar' - which means 'string' - and had a prefix added to it<sup>1</sup>. Regardless of the word's origins, the instrument has a long and colorful history.

The earliest ancestors to the modern guitar come from Arabic and Asiatic instruments. The sitar, the oud, and the tanbur were all crucial to the evolution of the guitar. Each had characteristics which are commonplace on guitars today; tightly fixed strings that produced different tones when plucked, a neck connected to a body, and pegs to tune the strings. These instruments eventually found their way to

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Guy. "A Brief History of the Guitar". 2001-2007. <http://www.guyguitars.com/eng/handbook/BriefHistory.html>

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Europe<sup>2</sup>, and from there European musicians developed different takes on them. The medieval lute was created by adding frets to the oud, and became a widely used instrument in early folk music from various European countries.

Of all of the nations of Europe, Spain was the country in which the guitar saw its greatest development. After the arrival of Arabic instruments around the time of the Moors (800s BCE), Spanish guitar minstrels – traveling musicians – became more and more common. Though Arabic and Asian music were prevalent within Spanish music at first, eventually musicians in Spain fused their own country's music and other European music with them. Flamenco arose out of this in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, and would help to give rise to another stepping stone in the guitar's evolution.

Guitars before the 1800s were generally smaller, had fewer strings than today's guitars, were more brittle, and could not really be played to a concert hall; hence why most guitar players of the period in Europe were minstrels. In the later half of the 1800s, a man from Almería, Spain, by the name of Antonio Torres Jurado would change all of this. He took the design of existing guitars and made incredible improvements. The body of the guitar was made larger; into a sort of figure eight shape. It was also made thicker, with higher quality wood from Spanish trees. The

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2 Paul Guy. "A Brief History of the Guitar". 2001-2007. <http://www.guyguitars.com/eng/handbook/BriefHistory.html>

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neck was extended to allow for more hand room on the fretboard<sup>3</sup>. The inner body of the guitar was reinforced with wood braces. These design changes allowed the guitar to project a louder, fuller sound, as well as made it more durable. What is most remarkable about Jurado's changes is that they are still largely present on modern day acoustic and classical guitars, even though Jurado first made them in 1852 - his modifications have remained virtually unchanged for over 150 years.

The acoustic guitar made its way to the Americas, where its European settlers played traditional folk songs on them. Hearing these, African slaves brought to the New World in the mid 1800s picked up the guitar, took the folk music overheard from their masters and merged it with their own cultural music. This led to what became known as "slave songs" - simple, poignant compositions describing the hardships of slavery and the longing for freedom. Gospel music soon followed, and while this is not a guitar centered genre, it is important due to what it influenced.

Electricity would help to expand the capabilities of the guitar. Invented in the late 1800s, by the 1920s it had become more widespread. Around this time, musicians began experimenting with ways to amplify the guitar's sound via electricity. Microphones and telephone transmitters had been hooked up to violins, violas, banjos, and other stringed instruments for this effect; the guitar was no

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<sup>3</sup> "Flamenco guitar history". 2012. Accessed November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012. <http://www.flamenco->

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exception. Early on, amplification was rather weak and inconsistent. In order to partially amend this, the capability for amplification needed to be integrated into the instrument itself.

From gospel, folk music, and slave songs emerged the blues. Following the Civil War, freed blacks congregated at clubs referred to as “juke joints”, which is where the earliest blues artists were born. Artists such as Robert Johnson, Muddy Waters, and John Lee Hooker were prominent in the early days of the blues. The electric guitar became prevalent in blues at the start of the 1920s, with guitarists experimenting with techniques to alter the sound and tone of their instruments. The slide was invented during this time – first by using a beer or whiskey bottle, or a knife handle. Never before had a genre so utilized the electric guitar, in so many ways. It was a sign of things to come.

Eventually, people started to refine and patent their electric guitar designs. In 1931, the Rickenbacker Electro Stringed Instrument Company (formerly called the Ro-Pat-In Corporation) patented the first electric guitar. Previously, electric guitars had largely been homemade experiments by musicians. But the “Frying Pan” started to change that. It was a steel lap guitar, which was used for Hawaiian and other Pacific island folk music in its traditional form. The guitar became known as the “Frying Pan”, due to its long neck and circular body shape, which very much

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resembled a pan. Its design which incorporated amplification capabilities would prove to be a milestone for future guitar concepts. Leo Fender, founder of the Fender brand of musical instruments, designed and patented his first electric guitars in the 1940s and 1950s. His innovations included the widely known and used Stratocaster and Telecaster models. Both of these models worked very well for rock music, and were able to project sound clearly through amplification. Lester William Polsfuss, now more known as Les Paul, was responsible for one of the earliest solid body electric guitars<sup>4</sup>.

Jazz, which came from a fusion of blues, ragtime, European folk, and other early twentieth century music was a genre which adopted amplification early. Though acoustic jazz guitarists like Django Rheinart were crucial for developing different playing techniques, the electric guitar would claim its place within the genre. Charlie Christian was one of the earliest electric jazz guitarists, and his work in the late 1930s and early 1940s is considered an important benchmark not just for jazz, but for the style of jazz guitar<sup>5</sup>.

Though the electric guitar was present in the early part of the twentieth century, it became ubiquitous with the advent of rock and roll, which emerged in the 1950s. Famous figures such as Chuck Berry and Keith Richards became household

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4 Wisconsin Historical Society. "Les Paul - The Wizard of Waukesha". Accessed November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2012. <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/topics/paul/>.

5 Dan Cross. "Top Five Jazz Guitar Albums". <http://guitar.about.com/od/jazzguitar/tp/aatp061802.htm>.

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names and idols to many young kids picking up the guitar. By this time, amplification technology had advanced enough to the point where amps were much easier to transport, had better sound quality, and were loud enough to be heard over drums, horns, and other blaring instruments. The electric guitar would become the staple instrument of the rock and roll explosion in the 1950s; it was rare to see any band on television or hear one on the radio without one. Blues and jazz musicians also incorporated elements of rock music into their lexicon.

In the 1960s, rock and roll musicians started breaking the mold of the traditional rock song, and in the process, the electric guitar's capacities were further expanded. Progressive rock guitarists such as Robert Fripp of King Crimson came up with long, melodically complex arrangements that combined classical and jazz elements with rock. Jimmy Hendrix became known for heavy use of effects, particularly fuzz and distortion, the likes of which had not really been present before. Lou Reed, with the Velvet Underground and later in his solo career, started to use the guitar as a combination instrument and noise maker; toying with odd effects, and using the guitar to create harsh and abrasive sounds.

The 1970s arrived, and with them came new genres that broadened the character of the guitar. Though punk music had started in the United States in the late 1960s, it was the UK movement in 1977 that really propelled punk into the



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public eye. Punk embraced effects full on; distortion was commonplace, while fuzz, delay, crunch, and a plethora of other sound alterations were employed by artists. The dingy, simplified riffs of punk music were evocative of garage rock bands of the 1950s; stripped down and streamlined to maximize the effect on the listener. In a similar vein, though musically sounding very different, heavy metal emerged at the beginning of the decade; a child of blues, psychedelic rock, classical, and progressive rock. It was less reactionary than punk, but still held an identity which was very different from most rock music. Heavy metal introduced guitar elements such as palm muting and turned up the general volume higher than rock had. Tony Iommi of Black Sabbath basically invented basic metal guitar technique on his own, using chromatic progressions and power chords heavily. Later, guitarists such as Eddie Van Halen, Adrian Smith and Glenn Tipton increased the melodic depth of their music, with Tipton's band Judas Priest and Smith's band Iron Maiden making heavy use of 'dueling guitars' – two guitars playing melodies with, and off of, one another. Funk music, which was a branch off of jazz and blues with an emphasis on dancing and groove, also emerged strongly in the 1970s. "Catfish" Collins and Eddie Hazel of Parliament Funkadelic were two of the early innovators of funk guitar. Guitarists in funk would often 'scratch' their guitar – by striking the guitar's strings quickly while muting them with their other hand, this produced a tinny, wonky sound that acted as

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a rhythmic counterpoint to the notes they played. It's a technique that would later influence hip hop.

Towards the end of the 1970s/early 1980s, jazz and blues began to see a resurgence in popularity - this time in the form of fusion genres. As the name implies, fusion music takes two or more genres and combines their individual elements. Stevie Ray Vaughan became one of the main figures of the fusion craze, with his style combining blues, rock and a bit of jazz to create a style that was familiar, yet distinct. Australian rock band AC/DC became internationally famous for their high energy combination of blues and rock, also due in part to the wild antics and style of their lead guitarist, Angus Young.

Around the same time, the guitar began to appear in electronic music. Ambient musician Brian Eno used the guitar his recordings to help give his 'soundscapes' depth and a different instrumental voice. Ambient music is not really a guitar based genre, coming into its own through the likes of minimalist classical composers, but it nevertheless became a new musical frontier for the guitar. Other electronic artists like Kraftwerk and Tangerine Dream began using guitars in tandem with their samplers and synthesizers.

The 1980s and early 1990s were a time where the guitar's potential was stretched even further. With more extreme genres such as hardcore punk, thrash,

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and death metal, guitarists strove to play faster, louder, and more intensely than ever before. Notably, Chuck Schuldiner and Trey Azagthoth were two metal guitarists that upped the speed, technicality, and intricacy of guitar playing. Tremolo picking, sweep picking, dissonant chord shapes, and alternate, lower pitch tunings were a part of both guitarists' repertoire. Dr. Know (real name Gary Miller) of Washington D.C.'s Bad Brains, and Greg Ginn of Los Angeles' Black Flag were two hardcore punk guitarists that really pushed the mold of what punk guitar could do. Dr. Know was notable for incorporating reggae, rock, and ska guitar parts into his style, which was previously unheard of in punk music. Ginn on the other hand became known more for his aggressive and peculiar style, which was noisy and often dissonant; occasionally even off key.

Today, the guitar is secure in the American lexicon. Guitars have made themselves known in genres that would not normally incorporate them, such as electronic music and hip hop. The guitar continues to demonstrate its relevance today – popular musicians and groups such as Coldplay, Radiohead, and Tim McGraw are top selling artists, all of whom use the guitar in their songwriting. Though many innovations in technology and design have advanced the guitar enormously, the instrument's time has not passed. As long as people continue to pick up and play, there will always be something to be discovered.

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## Research Plan

During the course of the year, a great deal of research has been conducted on my topic. Early on, I had hoped for my exhibit's theme to bridge the history of the guitar with human history. This proved to be a very broad topic, which was unfortunately too unrealistic to pull off within the time frame given. So, I decided to narrow it down to a focus on the guitar, and the impact it has had on musical culture and composition through the years.

It helped that this topic was one of personal interest; I had a good base knowledge of the guitar and its history to start out with. This made it easier to hone in on details that I needed to fill in. First, I investigated the ancestry of the modern guitar. It is contested to this day where the exact origins of the guitar come from; even the word guitar has many etymologies which are claimed to be true. What is certain is that the guitar descended from instruments in the Middle East and Asia. I was able to find several instruments, including the oud, the sitar, and the tanbur which I decided to include as assets for historical context. From there, I traced the roots of the early acoustic guitar. The design was perfected in Spain, where acoustic guitars were in demand due to the popularity of flamenco music. Flamenco and other early folk music used the guitar heavily, but until the late 1800s few other genres did.

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The guitar owes a lot of its popularity to American musicians and genres.

African slaves who were brought to the New World picked up acoustic guitars, and from a combination of their own cultural music mixed in with the folk songs of their mostly European masters, 'slave songs' were born. This music would prove integral to the development of many various genres; but in terms of guitar based genres it laid the foundation for the blues. Slave songs were one of the key ingredients of the blues along with continued sonic input from the sounds of southern America, from varying cultures. The blues provided an essential step in the evolution of many genres to come.

From blues came jazz in the early 1900s. Jazz was one of the first genres to embrace electric guitars in its compositions. Though the acoustic guitar was quite adept at handling jazz arrangements, some musicians wished for more. I found that many early electric guitars were ramshackle inventions by lone musicians. They tried hooking up microphones to various parts of the guitar, with varying success. Towards the late 1930s, companies like Fender and Rickenbacker designed and patented archetypal electric guitars with bodies that could withstand amplification while still being able to resonate a powerful sound.

My research then led me to rock music, which was a mix of blues, folk, jazz, and some gospel. Rock music is almost ubiquitously associated with the guitar. The 1950s and 1960s were the golden age of rock music, and also the time period where some of its greatest players rose to fame. Rock music still holds a decent chunk of popular attention today, which really helps the guitar keep its relevance too.

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However, music and the guitar continued to evolve. The late 1960s and 1970s saw more great changes to both. Progressive rock, punk, heavy metal, and funk all emerged around this time period. Each of these genres added a new dimension to the guitar. Progressive rock would often use odd time signatures, strange tunings, and lengthy phrases of notes within complicated song structures. Songs in this genre lent themselves to be long, and musicians often incorporated jazz or classical inspired elements which displayed the range of tonality possible by the guitar. Punk upped the speed and ferocity of the guitar, as well as its volume, relying on sheer energy, bravado, and a few chords to make its statement. In a similar vein, heavy metal also turned up the volume (and eventually the speed in the 1980s), but came from a more structured, even classically tinted angle similar to prog rock - in contrast to punk's bare bones and gritty style (though elements of punk were and still are present in heavy metal). Funk utilized different strumming and picking patterns that were part jazz and part blues, but with an emphasis on groove and feel as opposed to technicality. Funk would find itself absorbed into heavy metal and punk before the close of the 1980s.

Picking guitarists to showcase from this plethora of genres proved very difficult. There are a multitude of factors to consider. In the end, my criteria not only took into account popularity, but musical legacy, innovation in technique, and compositional skill. People know who B.B. King is, as he not only is a trailblazer but is also quite popular. However, many may not know Greg Ginn or Thurston Moore, though both of these guitarists were massively prestigious within their genres and beyond.

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Along the way, I traced the development of guitar based technology. From early homemade amplifiers to the latest state of the art stacks made by Marshall and Line6, the technology surrounding guitars has advanced as much as the instrument. Whereas many early guitar strings were made from animal tendons, this was phased out with the introduction of nylon strings. These worked very well for acoustic guitars, Nylon did not really project sound well while amplified, so metal strings followed. Today there are countless varieties of strings, including ones that are coated with nickel or a colored solution.

Effects were another important element. Distortion was among the earliest effects developed, as the feedback from early amps made some guitars sound muddy. Naturally, some musicians and inventors enjoyed the way this sounded, and began harnessing distortion within foot pedals and even amplifiers themselves after a while. Fuzz, delay, wah, chorus, crunch, and a school of other effects pedals and processors followed. Today, there are even processors which make the guitar sound like a completely different instrument!

Amplification has come a long way, and is arguably the most essential advancement towards the guitar's success. From their humble beginnings as basement or garage modifications, amps today come in all shapes, sounds, and sizes. Some higher end amps have a huge variety of effects built into them, eliminating the need for pedals or processors altogether.

Overall, there has been extensive and in depth research on my part with regards to the guitar, its history, and its impact. Part of me wishes to include more, and I will likely fill in a few blanks as I progress towards the final product. There is much more that can be told, but I feel that my research has yielded assets, facts, and objects which best illustrate the chronicle and impact of the guitar.

## Bibliography

1. **Millard, André J. *The Electric Guitar: A History of an American Icon*. JHU Press, 2004.**

**Although this book is subtitled "*History of an American Icon*", it contains information which details the history of the guitar not just through the development of the instrument, but through the artists who used it, the producers who recorded it, electronic engineers who created amplifiers for it, and the effects it had on the collective culture of music and society. This should help to solidify the American perspective of the guitar in my story.**

2. **Turnbull, Harvey. *The Guitar from the Renaissance to the Present Day*. Westport, Connecticut: Bold Strummer, 1992.**

**This book was published a while ago, so for more recent history concerning the guitar I'll have to fill in the blanks. However, it's a comprehensive compendium of the guitar since the Renaissance period; when it was starting to take off in Western music.**

3. **The New York Times Company: About.com. "Styles of Guitar Playing: Blues, Jazz, Metal, & More". Accessed September 12, 2012.**

**[http://guitar.about.com/od/bluesjazzmetalmore/Styles\\_of\\_Guitar\\_Playing.htm](http://guitar.about.com/od/bluesjazzmetalmore/Styles_of_Guitar_Playing.htm)**

**About.com is a reliable website that boasts a lot of good general**



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**information on various topics. This directory of guitar playing styles will help to aid me in discussing the different techniques to the instrument in the exhibition.**

- 4. Wade, Graham. *A Concise History of the Classic Guitar*. Mel Bay Publications, Inc. Pacific, MO. 2001.**

**This book details the history of the instrument starting precisely when the modern origins of the instrument were being created. This is significant because I had planned on starting the exhibit story during this time period.**

- 5. Guy, Paul. "A Brief History of the Guitar". 2001-2007. Accessed September 12, 2012. <http://www.guyguitars.com/eng/handbook/BriefHistory.html>**

**Mr. Guy offers some pretty good concise information, that I can use to help me shorten details into manageable excerpts for text panels, labels, and such. There's also a lot of information on ancestor instruments to the guitar which will be useful.**

- 6. Brosnac, Donald. *Guitar History Volume #1: Guitars made by the Fender Company*". Bold Strummer. February 1987.**

**In the history of the guitar, several manufacturers of the instrument have risen to prominence for their craftsmanship and innovation. One of the**

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**most instantly recognizable brands of guitar is Fender. Known as the premiere rock guitar, its instruments have been used by many musicians, with notable examples like Jimi Hendrix, Jeff Beck, Bob Dylan, and Yngwie Malmsteen. It will be useful to provide a perspective from within the realms of guitar making, and will also help to draw in more visitors through interest in Fender's established brand and reputation.**

- 7. "Guitar History at Guitarra Magazine". Accessed September 13, 2012.**

**<http://www.guitarramagazine.com/GuitarHistory>**

**This section has an entire series of articles devoted to the guitar's development in Spain; which is where the instrument's modern incarnation comes from. I'll definitely cull a lot of useful facts from here.**

- 8. Wisconsin Historical Society. "Les Paul, 'The Wizard of Waukesha'". Accessed September 14, 2012. <http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/topics/paul/>**

**Lester William Polsfuss, better known as Les Paul, was one of the foremost innovators of the guitar's construction and sound during the height of rock 'n' roll in America, and years beyond. I'll have to find a bit more detailed facts on him, but this website is a good launching pad. It's important to highlight individuals who were instrumental (heh) in the evolution of the guitar, and mentioning Paul will help visitors understand the people behind the instrument.**