



Riffs



In Les Paul's control room around 1965—"The famous original 8-track Ampex is behind me," says Doyle. "We're troubleshooting one of Les' 'funny boxes' as he would call them. He was always looking for that better sound."



Les' kitchen in the early '70s—"We were discussing an idea about a new pickup for banjos or drums," remembers Doyle. "You can see the popcorn in a bowl behind me. Les always loved his popped corn."

The Backstory

LES PAUL'S SECRET WEAPON

BY MICHAEL MOLEND A

LES PAUL CASTS SUCH A MAMMOTH shadow across all things guitar that it's easy to assume the man simply controlled all aspects of his myth and legend from his cramped home workshop in Mahwah, New Jersey. But that's not exactly true. In fact, as Paul started coming back from his "retirement" in the mid '60s, he found a sounding board, guitar tech, soundman, and general co-conspirator in a young man named Tom Doyle. In a life-changing twist

of fate, Doyle and his sister were actually doing a Les Paul and Mary Ford tribute act in 1965—presented with, for the time, state-of-the-art sound gear—and Paul happened to catch one of the shows.

"When he came to see us, he was completely taken aback by how the show sounded," remembers Doyle. "He said, 'Gee whiz, this sounds great. How are you doing it?' And I think he realized that I was a young guy who was similar to him in searching for sound, so he said, 'You've got to come up to the house.' Well, to be

invited to Les Paul's home—that was what I wanted to hear, but I had no idea it would happen, or that he would be such a huge part of my life for the next five decades."

But the invitation was a two-edged sword, as Paul started testing Doyle almost relentlessly by having him play his guitars and asking him what he thought about them, and whether he could improve them. Eventually, Paul was satisfied that Doyle had good ears and good ideas, and he asked the luthier and craftsman to work on his guitars.

"Les looked at guitars as tools, and

he'd do whatever he thought necessary to get them up to par so he could use them," says Doyle. "He had no tools to speak of, so he'd use a hot screwdriver and a hammer to chisel out the wood, and just go to work adding or subtracting electronics. He also stored his guitars in a damp cellar, and his active mind didn't allow him to take care of his own instruments. So most of his guitars were

he really got into what he was doing with you, he'd say, 'Now I'm going to make some popcorn.' And you'd sit in his kitchen for what seemed like forever. He was such a pisser. He'd never stop trying to figure out how to make everything better, and his commitment to quality was off the charts."

But even the days-long kitchen sessions couldn't match Paul's obsession with his

about the show again.' And we'd listen to it in the living room, the kitchen, and his bedroom because the tape sounded different in every room. He always wanted everything to be better, and he was just as hard on his own performances as he was on the sound."

Even though Paul passed away in 2009, Doyle is still "collaborating" with the man on what was one of the guitar great's last



Remastering one of Les' recordings, 1986—"Just to my left is the Stevens Coil [pickup] winder Les got from Gibson in Kalamazoo," says Doyle. "He gave it to me that night."



At the Iridium in the mid '90s—"I've always liked this picture of Les and me," says Doyle. "Les was having a good night playing—even with his arthritis."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MAX STAVRON/TOM DOYLE GUITARS

just wrecks—absolutely ruined. He'd give me one or two to work on, and I'd practically have to rebuild them. And I'm talking about a 1927 L5, or prototype Les Pauls—real valuable, historic instruments. Another challenge was that Les Paul was not patient. He wanted things when he wanted them. He'd say, 'This guitar needs a hysterectomy. Can you have it done next week?' I'd go, 'Les, the sides are broken out and there are holes everywhere. I have to resurrect it!'"

Soon, Doyle was invited to take part in almost every aspect of Paul's creative world, and the music legend came to trust and enjoy their brainstorming sessions. And, again, being brought into Paul's inner sanctum was not without risk.

"There was no day and night with Les," says Doyle. "He'd get wound up and stay awake for days on end. When

performances that started at Fat Tuesdays in Manhattan, and later moved to the Iridium. Not surprisingly, Doyle was commanded to help critique and improve Paul's live sound.

"He called me one day, and said, 'I'm picking you up, and we're going to Fat Tuesdays, and I want you to listen to the sound and tell me what you hear,'" says Doyle. "I did hear some problems, so all of a sudden I was his sound engineer. He said, 'You're doing the mixing, Tom. Go for blood.' And for 27 years, I drove him to the club and took him home. I'd tape each show, and we'd go into the car between sets and listen to what he just played. He'd say things like, 'Here's what you did wrong. Don't let me get buried. I want to be out there.' Then, we'd listen to the show on the drive home. Then, we'd get to his house, and he'd say, 'Let's break bread and talk

projects—giving high-impedance humbucker pickups more clarity and punch. Using the white 2002 Les Paul given to him as a 50th anniversary present by Gibson as a sonic foundation, Paul toiled obsessively on finding ways to improve current humbuckers. As a homage to his friend and mentor, Doyle is continuing the project, and recently released his Limited Edition Doyle Coil Tru-Clone PAF '57 Humbuckers.

"I was a very lucky man to work so closely with Les, but I was always very aware that if you didn't do the right thing for him, you were gone," says Doyle. "Sometimes, I'd even tell him that if I wasn't getting something right there were other guys who could come in and do it. He'd say, 'No. It's not that you're doing it wrong. It's just that I'm trying to make it better.' We had a great relationship, and Les was like my second father. We had a lot of fun together." ■