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How Tom Doyle
became Les Paul's
right-hand man

By Gil Roessner

Photographs by Rich Russo



PHOTO: TOM DOYLE COLLECTION

TECH





PHOTO: TOM DOYLE COLLECTION

"This was from 1974, not long after Les started performing again," Doyle says. "Les brought in a late 1920s Gibson L-5, a blonde D'Angelico, and in my right hand, one of the very first SG Les Pauls that Gibson gave to him. You can see that Les gouged out the SG for some of his pickup experiments."

HISTORY HAS A WAY OF OBSCURING unsung heroes: people in the background, often in the service of a celebrity, who play an important and vital role in the celebrity's career, but whose name and significance remain largely overlooked. This article is about one of those figures, Tom Doyle.

Doyle was Les Paul's assistant and friend for over 45 years. He first met the guitar icon in 1959, and from 1966–1983, he worked with him (and for him), restoring and repairing guitars and working on electronics. Beginning in 1983, Les asked Tom to work the soundboard at his gigs at Fat Tuesday's and Iridium in New York City. Tom worked every show as the announcer, producer, and sound and recording engineer until Les' passing in 2009.

Bergen County, New Jersey in the late '50s and '60s was a choice location for show business celebrities and their families to reside, primarily

due to its close proximity to New York. Most towns were just a short drive from the George Washington Bridge, which leads directly into Manhattan. Al Caiola, Tony Mattola, Vinnie Bell, Bucky Pizzarelli and Al Dimeola all called Bergen County home, as did television and music celebrities such as Leslie Gore, Ed Ames and Bob Gaudio, who went on to greater fame as a founding member of the Four Seasons.

Previous page: "This is me in my home studio," Doyle says. "Les told me that he always felt that his best recordings were done on the road in hotel rooms, so when I set my place up, I decided to try and emulate the simplicity of that. My wife, Sandy, and I record in much the same way Les and Mary Ford did, down to using the same style RCA 44 microphone they did."

Previous page inset: "This photo was taken in Les' studio not long after I met him," Doyle says. "Les is adjusting a power supply he had hooked up to an Ampex PR10 tape recorder. He would use the power supply to 'tune' the tape machine, making sure it ran at 15 ips or whatever so that when he did the double tracking, everything sounded in tune."



PHOTO: TOM DOYLE COLLECTION

Tom Doyle came from a musical family and got his first guitar when he was 12. He listened to records by Merle Travis, Chet Atkins and Les Paul and learned to play fingerstyle with a thumb pick. From frequent viewings of the '50s television show *The Les Paul and Mary Ford at Home Show*, Doyle knew Paul and Ford lived in nearby Mahwah, New Jersey. By the summer of 1959, just before his senior year at North Valley Regional High School, Tom was anxious to meet Les Paul, but couldn't figure out how to do it.

Tom knew the area in Mahwah where Les lived, but he was not sure exactly which house. So Tom and a friend staked out the area above and behind Les' neighborhood using binoculars to look down and see if they could spot someone carrying a guitar case. After several weekends, they were about to give up, when they finally spotted a man getting out of his car holding a guitar case. With great trepidation, Tom approached the house, walked up to the front door and knocked several times. The man

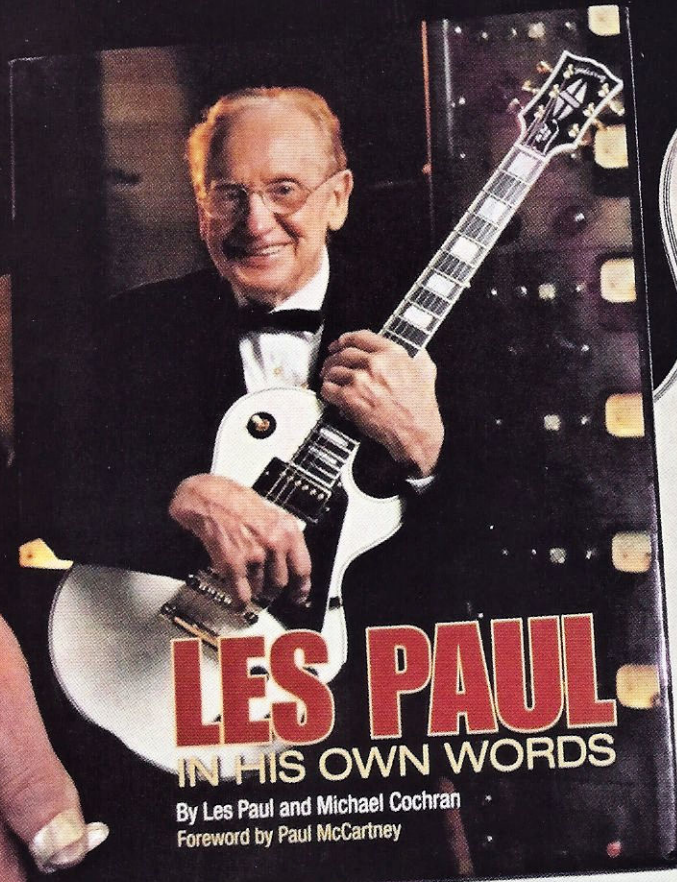
who answered the front door looked like a construction worker. "He wore a T-shirt, blue jeans, a pair of loafers, and he had a hammer in his hand," Doyle says with a laugh.

The dialogue went something like this:
Hi, I just wanted Les Paul to know that I stopped by.
What's your name?
It's Tom Doyle. He knows me.
He does? What do you do?
Well, I'm a guitar player.
Well, that makes sense. What was your name again?
Tom Doyle.
Well, he's not here right now.
Well, would you tell him I'm just passing through town and stopped by to say hello.
I'll tell him.

"So, he closed the door and that was the first time I met Les Paul," Doyle explains. "Except I wasn't sure it was really him. This was a perfect example of Les Paul's sense

"In 1975 I helped set up this dot-neck L-5, which Les thought might have been the guitar he played back when he was playing country music under the name of Rhubarb Red," Doyle explains. "At the time, Les didn't have the block neck L-5 he's holding, so I had no template for the pickguard I made for it, so the shape is not quite right."

"This white Les Paul Custom might be the only guitar Les owned that he didn't modify," Doyle says. "I remember Gibson gave it to him after one of his Iridium shows. Les kept it as a reference guitar so that he could compare the tone of the new Gibson pickups against his own inventions. He did have it refretted, not by me, to remove the little binding nubs that Gibson left next the fret ends. When we were getting ready to shoot the cover of this book, he thought the white body looked nice against his tux, so he chose it from all of the other guitars he owned."



of humor, being a practical joker and always pulling someone's leg."

Doyle graduated from high school in 1960 and worked at a nearby stained glass studio. In early '64, he received his draft notice and was inducted into the Army. He did his basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and then was sent to Germany to learn helicopter maintenance.

"When I got home from the Army in 1966, I'm thinking, do I go back to Lamb Studios or not?" he remembers. "My sister, Susan, was with Capitol Records and she was doing quite well recording demos of other people's songs as well as her own. She recorded demos for Sandy Shaw and also did the demo for 'Cloudy' by Simon and Garfunkel.

"Susan and I had a duo act doing some Les Paul & Mary Ford songs," Doyle continues. "We played gigs all around the Tri-State area. A friend of my mother's invited Les to come hear Tom & Susan at an upcoming gig, which he did. He heard us do 'Bye Bye Blues' with Susan's voice multi tracked, and he was evidently impressed. After the gig, Les came up and introduced himself, and that's when I realized he was the same guy I met at his front door with a hammer in his hand!"

Around this time, Les Paul was at a low point in his career. Mary Ford, the love of his life, had left in '61 and their divorce was finalized in 1964. Although his finances were strong, primarily from their hits in the '50s, a new popular sound in music was emerging. He may have felt the times had passed him by and he was searching for a new way to get back into music. Tom says Les often remarked, "I spent my whole life trying to clean up the sound. Now kids want to use distortion and a fuzz tone." When he heard Tom & Susan emulating the sound of Les Paul and Mary Ford, something clicked.

"Les liked our sound," says Doyle. "I had set up a sound system with JBL monitors, McIntosh and Dynakit amps, and tri-amped the woofers, tweeters and horns."

Tom was invited to Les' house in 1966, and started hanging out there on weekends working on guitars, pickups and recording gear. Tom's electronics training in the Army was coming in handy, and Les saw in Tom a kindred spirit: a self-taught, accomplished guitarist, tinkerer/problem solver, and a kid 20 years younger who had what Les called "a good ear."

Tom started working on, and repairing, Les' guitars because, as Tom says, "Les, with tools, was like a bull in a

FROM
THE GENIUS OF
A MASTER LUTHIER,
ARTIST AND MUSICIAN

'THE SYSTEM'

TOM DOYLE HAS CREATED
A REVOLUTIONARY NEW
PICKUP SYSTEM
THAT YOU MUST
HEAR.

Tom Doyle is an artist, an engineer and a guitar master. And like so many of the industry's leaders, Tom was an active performer, which helps to explain how he came to appreciate the magnificent sounds of quality-built guitars.

After retiring from club work and a decade of being a master stained glass artist - Tom has restorations in St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City and Chagal Windows in the United

Nations among his credits. He began to develop his craft as a Master Luthier restoring and refurbishing antique and vintage guitars and manufacturing custom made guitars.

As a performer Tom was constantly searching for a distinct, clean sound. He realized that the heart of an electric guitar is its pick-up, so he tried every pick-up he could find and not one was satisfactory, so he set out to design his own. After

almost 20 years of experimenting, he developed the T.W. Doyle D-1 low impedance-high output pick-up. He needed low impedance to get the distinct sound he wanted and he needed high output so that he could produce that sound out on the stage as well as in the studio.

The first prototype D-1's were in an old beat-up Gibson Les Paul Custom.* A lot of Tom's best customers asked what that *crazy looking guitar* sounded like (the guitar looked like a road manager's nightmare, wires hanging out from everywhere and tape all over the place to keep the electronics from falling out). Every one of his customers who tried the crazy looking thing wanted a set of the pick-ups. The problem was that, like other low imped-

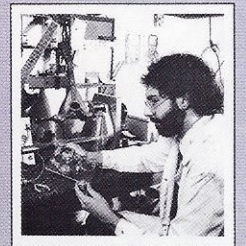
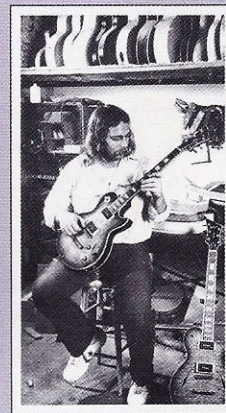
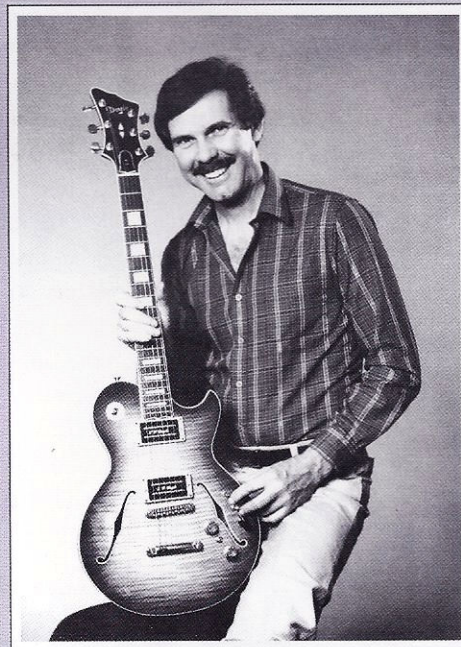
ance pick-ups, they were too big to replace the existing pick-ups without milling out the pick-up holes.

Tom finally decided that the demand was so great that he should put the time aside to conquer the problem and finally evolved the D-1 from the *crazy looking guitar*. The front volume and tone pots were now master tone and volume and the rear pick-up's volume and tone control were removed. In place of the volume pot there was a two position toggle switch. In place of the tone pot was a six position rotary switch. Everyone was amazed that *each* pick-up was capable of providing not one, not two, but *twelve distinct sounds*.

Tom continued to hand-craft his D-1 pickup and, finally, obtained a short-term loan to manufacture 250. They were a hit.

Today, in a new custom-built shop that houses the T.W. Doyle guitar manufacturing operation, Tom and his expanding staff are into full production of the D-1 System, the Super Tom and pickups for jazz and blues musicians.

*Les Paul Custom is a trade mark of Gibson. T.W. Doyle Co. Inc. is not in any manner associated with Gibson or Novia Industries Inc.



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PHOTO: TOM DOYLE COLLECTION



china shop. He'd rather use a hammer and a hot screwdriver anytime." So Tom became, before the phrase was ever used, Les Paul's "guitar tech."

Doyle had his own workshop, and began doing repairs and restoration for the local guitar community in Bergen County. He opened his first official "Custom Shop" in Dumont in 1974. He worked on all of Les' guitars, as well as did repair and customization projects for George Benson, Jimmy Page, Phoebe Snow, Al Di Meola and many others.


Wally Kamin was Les' brother-in-law and a bass player whom Les often relied on to help with electronics and pickup design/assembly. They all worked together at Les' house, and this is where Tom was educated not only in Les' "School of Life and Guitars," but also the lore of Gibson, Les' main sponsor. Tom heard all about the company's main figureheads and engineers, from Orville Gibson to Lloyd Loar and Ted McCarty.

In the 1970s, Paul continued to bring guitars to Tom Doyle for repair, restoration and customization. They worked on many of Les' guitars, including two of the very first SGs, as well as many of the early original Gibson prototypes and experimental models. Tom & Susan continued to perform, playing at local colleges as

well as the Bitter End in New York City.

TW Doyle Custom Guitars became an early prototype for a high-end custom guitar shop. Doyle built a solid following with his meticulous fret jobs and wilder customization projects. Les even told Gibson they should have a custom shop modeled after Tom's. Doyle was beginning to design and build his own instruments under the TW Doyle brand. Starting in the mid-'70s, he turned out, on average, about 10 custom guitars a year. His current flagship model is the 1850 Supreme, a carved archtop, semi hollow body with handwound pickups, Bigsby tailpiece and open F-holes. The flame maple, which pops out of his "Sunblush" finish, is the result of 27 coats, with repeated sandings and polishings.

In the early 1980s, Les had decided that he wanted to start performing again. But rather than touring and the endless grind of the road, Les envisioned a more relaxed and reasonable gig: perform one night a week at the same place every week. That way, he could have it both ways: get back in the public eye, yet still enjoy the comforts of home. He searched for a venue and invited Tom to come see one of his first shows at a small club called Fat Tuesday's near New York's Greenwich Vil-



"This is a Gibson EB-1 bass that Les gave me," Doyle says. "Like most of his guitars, Les had carved it up for his experiments. It originally had one pickup in the neck position, but you can see he went a little crazy with it. I continued the tradition and set it up with one of my own pickups."



"I love building guitars and I love playing them," Doyle says. "There's no describing the feeling of satisfaction I get when I play one of the guitars I built onstage with my wife, Sandy."



lage. He performed alongside Wayne Wright and Gary Mazzaroppi as the Les Paul Trio. Shortly thereafter, Les replaced Wayne Wright with Lou Pallo. When Paul was unhappy with the sound of the rhythm guitar, Tom took it upon himself to create a low impedance system for Pallo's rhythm guitar, including his own custom-made pickups. This modification cemented the live onstage Les Paul sound for all the years to come.

And from there, the next phase of the Paul-Doyle collaboration came to pass. Les asked Tom to be his soundman, and for the next 27 years, Tom took care of all Les' guitars, recorded and produced the shows, and served as announcer.

Tom also served as Paul's chauffeur. Every Monday afternoon at 3:30, Tom would drive over to Les' house in Mahwah. He'd park his own car and come in and chat with Les, and they would select two particular guitars Les wanted to use that night. Then Tom would start up Les' big white Lincoln, load up the boss and his gear, and drive into Manhattan. Les would play two sets a night, one from 8:00–9:30 and a second from 10:00–11:15.

Les Paul was a frugal guy. And Doyle has fond

memories of their dinners together before the show. The guitar legend would sneak out some dinner rolls and keep them backstage for the ride home and breakfast the next morning. Tom recalls one particular gig where Les' son, Rusty, had been assigned the task of bringing home the dinner rolls. Unfortunately, he had left them in a bag in Les' dressing room. On the ride home, as they were approaching the George Washington Bridge, Les asked Rusty if he had the rolls with him. Suddenly, Rusty remembered he had left them back at the club. Les told Tom to turn the Lincoln around and they headed all the way back into Manhattan to fetch them!

As Les got older and arthritis began to take its toll on his hands (and his guitar-playing ability), he was still eager to keep up the gigs, because he enjoyed being onstage and bantering with the audience. He also enjoyed inviting special guests to come onstage to jam with him. The list of guests he played alongside is astounding: Steve Miller (Les' godson), Jeff Beck, Keith Richards, Paul McCartney, Bob Dylan, Jimmy Page, Johnny Winter, Billy Gibbons, Mark Knopfler, Phil Spector, David Bowie, Brian May, Danny Gatton, Slash, Kid Rock,





Richie Sambora and Skunk Baxter, to name a few. Each show was recorded by Tom and videotaped by Rusty and others. Rumor has it that some may be surfacing soon for broadcast.

Today, Tom lives with his wife, Sandy, in the northern New Jersey hills of Sussex County. The duo of Tom & Sandy Doyle play gigs in the northeast, Florida, and around the country where they re-create the sounds and style of Les Paul & Mary Ford. During these gigs, Tom also talks about the historical significance of Les Paul and shares numerous stories and anecdotes. In his spare time, he's been working on a book about his 45 years with Les, titled *In the Kitchen with Les Paul*. The memoir will have a lot more inside information about the legend and lore of Les Paul, his legacy, the guitars and much more.

Tom's Custom Guitar Shop is today housed in a two-story barn adjacent to their home. I stopped in

one Saturday to check out Tom's luthier class and was delighted to find a fully equipped guitar workshop on the first floor, with enough workbenches to accommodate 8–10 students, with all manner of guitar bodies, necks and carcasses hanging about in various stages of construction, repair or disassembly. On the lower level is the woodworking shop with all the power tools, lathes, band saws, buffing wheels and heat-bending equipment. Outside is the enclosed spray booth for color application and clear-coating.

As a longtime guitar player and collector, I was making my first foray into the world of luthiery. In the past, I had always taken my guitars to a local music store to have a wire resoldered or the frets polished. I was expecting a sit-down class with history books, note-taking and pop quizzes. Tom had told me it was nothing like that. "Bring one of your guitars, we'll show you how to do a set-up, and after that you can either start

"It's funny, but after all of those years of working with Les Paul and his guitars, the instruments I build are nothing like the instruments he used," Doyle says. "I build them with a chambered body and F-holes, not a solid body. Vic Juris has the fourth one I ever made, and even though it's really beat up these days, he doesn't want me to make him another one."



Doyle discusses archtop construction with his Saturday class.

building whatever you want, or you can start a restoration project.” The cost is \$150 per day (every other Saturday) from 9:30–5:00, with lunch supplied.

I showed up one Saturday and brought one of my acoustic guitars along. The group had about seven guys ranging in age from 14 to over 70, and being all nonprofessional musicians of various levels, there was an instant, easy camaraderie. Tom introduced everyone. Some had been coming for 10 years or more, others for one or two years, some for several months. I was the new guy. We reviewed what each was doing for a project, and I took out my Washburn Cumberland and placed it on the towel-covered bench.

Tom and his assistant, Paul, inspected my guitar, and asked if I had ever adjusted the truss rod. I said I had, but wasn't exactly sure what I was doing. I was rather proud of myself, however, when I was able to retrieve the little-used hex wrench from my guitar case. I was then told to remove the strings and wait for further instructions. Tom

came over to my bench carrying his well-worn leather tool satchel. He removed a long, heavy, straight metal bar and placed it on the frets, lengthwise along the fretboard. He gently tapped sideways on one end and the whole bar began to slowly rotate like a helicopter rotor.

“You have a high spot.” He asked for my hex-wrench and inserted it under the soundhole. “How do you know which way to turn it?” I asked. “Righty-tighty, lefty-loosey” was his response. He then had me carefully tape off the fretboard, leaving only the frets exposed (to prevent the wood from being scratched). He then showed me how to use a grinding block, and later, a U-file to “peak” the frets. We also removed the bridge and saddle and sanded each down to lower the action. It took all day, but when I cleaned it up and restrung it, it was a completely different instrument: The old one had a few buzzes at several frets, the harmonics were off, and the action was high. The “new” guitar played smooth, clean and pure, which is just how Les would have liked it. 