

# *From "YOUNG at HEART": LES PAUL*

By Anne Snowden Crosman

At 88, he is a pop music icon. Decades ago, Les invented the electric guitar and still plays weekly to standing-room-only crowds.

Every Monday night, he drives into New York City and takes the stage at the Iridium, a Broadway nightclub. He and his trio—“kids half my age,” he jokes—play two sets of mellow, jazzy music, including his signature piece, “How High the Moon.”

The fans love his intricate improvisations. Between sets, they line up for autographs, which he signs enthusiastically, on napkins and items presented to him: postcards, photos, sheet music, record albums, even a T-shirt worn by a comely young woman.

**Born: June 9, 1915,  
Waukesha, WI  
Profession: Musician, song  
writer, inventor  
Home: Mahwah, NJ**

A consummate gentleman, Les asks her to turn around and signs his name on her back. They both laugh.

“Hey, how’re you doing?” he gives a hearty handshake to a German tourist. “What kind of guitar do you play?” The young man, clearly thrilled, replies, “A Les Paul electric.” Les smiles warmly. “Gee, that’s nice. Enjoy it.”

He jokes and banters with the crowd during sets. “You want to hear THAT old tune?” he laughs. Then he invites anyone to come on stage and perform a piece. “You’re something else!” he tells a young man after his lively guitar rock number.

“I’d hate to follow your act.” The youth blushes and grins.

After the show, Les invites me to his tiny dressing room.

He sips beer from a bottle, leans back in his chair, and asks me about myself and the book. We have a mutual friend and an interest in music, so talk comes easily. I say I’ve always enjoyed his music. He laughs in appreciation.

“I can’t express how much I look forward to WORKING every week,” he says. “I can’t express how much my trio means to me. They are so much younger than I am! The bass player is quite young and the guitar player is half my age. We all look forward to Monday night. It’s almost like we’re being GIVEN something, rather than working a job.”

Quiet and well-spoken, Les is a slight man with fair skin, freckles, and light blue eyes that dance when he gets excited.

Wispy red hair combed straight back gives him an elfish look.

He wears a royal blue turtleneck and pressed, faded jeans.

“I never at one moment EVER stopped being grateful for all the people who like what I’ve done, or like me or my music,” he goes on. “I love to be with the people. I love to hear their negative comments or their constructive criticisms. I LOOK for ‘em.”

“Yes, I look for ‘em!” he says. “My son Les, Jr. is my engineer. He videotapes each set and I watch the videos at home.”

“Every week I come down here and say, ‘I’m gonna try again. I didn’t get it right last week, so I’m down here this week to get it right.’ And I enjoy it.”

He plays guitar despite gnarled fingers. Diagnosed with arthritis 20 years ago, he despaired of ever playing again. Then he hit on a new method.

“I jam the pick between two fingers of my right hand,” he demonstrates. “Then I use two, not the usual four fingers, on my left hand. Those two left fingers are my only good fingers now. In some ways, I play better than when I had use of all my fingers.”

He looks up and shrugs his skinny shoulders. Les also survived advanced heart disease. In 1980, he had quintuple-bypass surgery, a new technique at the time. On doctor’s orders, he stopped smoking and drinking. He radically changed his

diet and started to exercise. By the time he went for a post-surgery checkup, he’d lost 45 pounds.

“My doctor didn’t recognize me,” he laughs. “He really didn’t know me! I’ve kept to that health plan.”

Les did one more thing. Before he left the hospital, he made a list with two columns, labelled “positive” and “negative.”

He asked himself, “Where am I happiest?” With all the different hats I wear, where am I happiest? And I was surprised to find out it was playing in nightclubs.

“NOT playing for presidents, or the Queen of England, or 50,000 people at a slug,” he tells me. “Those were not the important things. It’s playing in an intimate little nightclub, like this one, that I’m the happiest. I like playing the guitar with the real people, the rock people who have been loyal fans, the newcomers, and people coming in from different countries.”

Many fans are Japanese, who have followed his career and collected all his records and CDs. They tell him so when they shake his hand. Before the Iridium gig, Les played at Fat Tuesday’s downtown every Monday for eleven years. He loves his schedule.

“It gives me time to do creative work at home the rest of the week,” he says. He practices and experiments in a state-of-the-art studio that he built.

Where do you get this zest for life? I ask.

“Mother lived to be 101 1/2,” he says promptly. “She had all the get-up-and-go, all the energy, UNBELIEVABLE energy. When she had her one hundredth birthday party, she leaned over to me and said, ‘Lester, do I still have my marbles?’ Ha! I said, ‘Yep, you’ve got ‘em, Mom.’ She was just sharp as a tack, just like a lawyer. So quick.”

“I was always very enthusiastic about most everything I got into,” he continues. “I had to know why, when you throw the switch, that light LIGHTS! It’s a curiosity. It’s a curiosity where you not only want to know, but you CAN.”

Do you want to live to be 101 1/2, too? I ask.

“Absolutely,” he says, without hesitation. If you have all your marbles, I add.

“If I have all my marbles,” he laughs, “and if I’m enjoying myself fine. If it so be that things aren’t that fortunate, then I would like to check out. I don’t see any sense in being around if it’s just lingering on.” He sips his beer.

“I feel like a million bucks, better than I did before the surgery. I feel young, I feel real young. I smoked five packs of cigarettes a day for ten years, from the age of 65 to 75. I stopped that after the bypass. I stopped drinking. I’ll drink a little now, I allow myself two beers a week. I went on the Pritiken Diet. I’m very careful not to wander off on some flaky diet. I eat oatmeal, and a lot of popcorn! No saturated fats,” he says crisply.

What about plastic surgery? I ask.

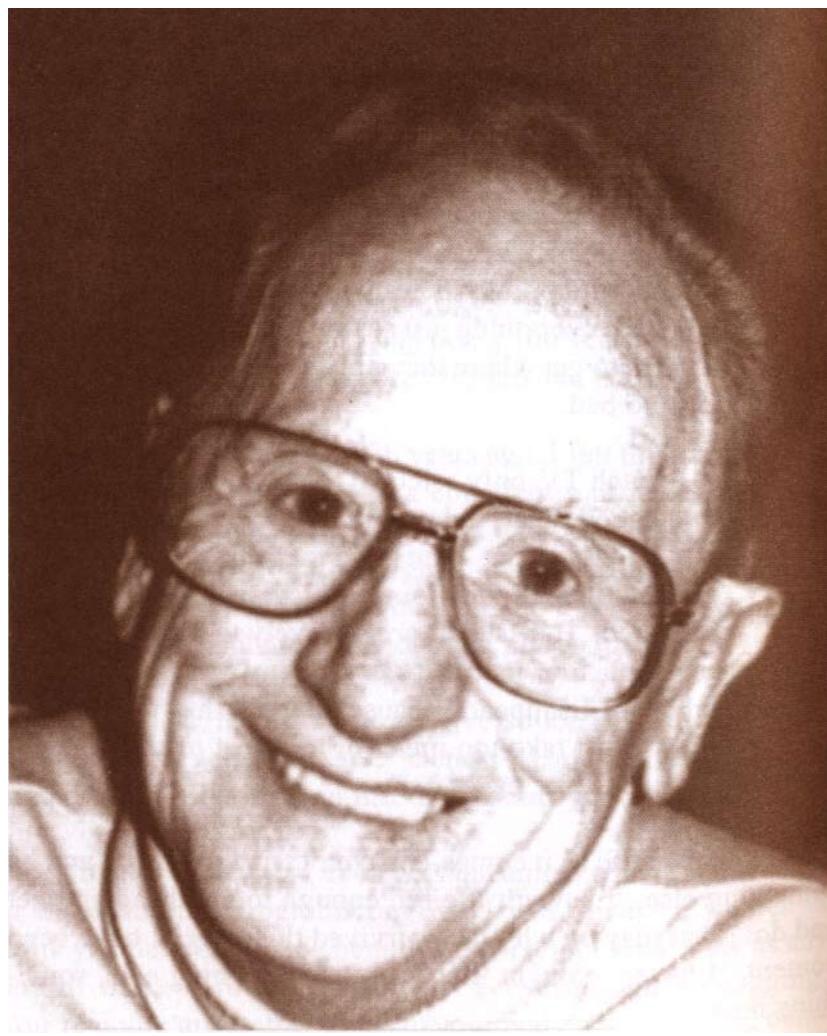
“I don’t believe in it,” he says. “I think that if the body is growing old, your face should go with it. I think the whole body should grow old together.” He smiles at me, eyes flashing.

Les is rarely idle. He needs only five hours of sleep every night, sometimes less. “Just this last week I didn’t sleep for two days, because I was busy,” he says nonchalantly. “At home, I’m building a second recording studio, writing my memoirs, and always practicing to keep up my musical skills.

“I surround myself with young guys like Jimmy Page, Billy Joel, and George Benson,” he explains. “I’m in a studio with all young players. I’ve done a country album, a jazz album, a rock ‘n’ roll album, and a blues album. They’re all with young guys, except the jazz album.”

“I learn from the young guys,” he says excitedly. “I learn from my son Les, Jr. He’s divorced, has three children, but lives with me. He’ll ask me something, some advice, and I’ll take a deep breath. Because I want to tell him, ‘Look, I tried that 40 years ago, it don’t work.’ But it will work NOW, see, because he does it a little different.”

His passion for work can take over, and Les has to watch it. “I get terribly busy, which is selfish,” he admits. “Which is selfish,” he repeats gently.



Does your current lady love understand?

"Oh, I make sure she understands," he replies, not unkindly.

"We've been together 20 years. She understands."

Arlene is a little younger than Les and lives down the street from him. "She has a home and I have my home and we just see each other," he says. "Never get married! Never get married. It spoils everything."

He and Arlene like to take motor trips, often spontaneous.

"Once we drove to the Pennsylvania Amish country. It was a beautiful autumn day and we stopped to get some food at a store and have a picnic by the highway." He warms to his story.

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"We saw a young Amish guy, this red-faced, healthy looking young person, trying to make out with a little Amish girl." He grins. "We saw these young people all jump into a car. All the rules they make—these kids were breaking them."

He laughs delightedly.

"Another time we were on a trip and all of a sudden, I said to her, 'Hey, I need to get my exercise.' I walk a lot and ride a bike three or four times a week."

I said, 'I'll tell you what. I'll take my walkie-talkie with me and I'll talk to you.'

"She let me walk two miles. A trucker came by and said, 'Can I help you? You got a problem?' I said, 'No, I don't have a problem, I'm just out hiking.' Then another person stopped, because she got the car parked two miles down the road and she was sitting there. 'Do you need help?' he asked. 'No, I'm fine, thank you,' she said. That's what we do. We have a wonderful time."

"If you're lucky enough to find somebody, you can share and enjoy yourself and be happy around 'em. You can benefit by your life in the past, too, and do the things that you didn't do. If you're fortunate enough to figure that out, you can actually be terribly happy." He leans back and takes another sip of beer.

So love and sex exist in old age? I ask.

"They're anything but over. As of last night, anyway," he laughs lightly. "I'll tell you something about love. My late wife Mary told me once that she was stunned at how many things came to my mind and were successful, whether it was writing a song or inventing something. 'Where in the world do these things come from?' she asked me."

"I thought about it perhaps two seconds and just blurted out, 'First you have to be in love. And second, you'd better believe in God.' And that's the truth," he says firmly.

"Being in love is a lot more than having someone around to sew a button on your shirt. I had a girlfriend that I used to hang out with, and we had two things that she just didn't understand. One was that pride was almost a disease. It's something that you have to be careful about, because pride is not always beneficial."

"The other thing was sharing. There's SO much in sharing," he says.

"Yeah, hang onto love, because love is important. You can love your work and you can love your partner. You can love your parents. There are SO many things."

You can love music. You know, love is quite a word."

He grows pensive. Is love more valuable as you grow older? I ask.

"Sure, because you appreciate it more," he replies. "You don't know where you're going after you die. And I wish some son-of-a-bitch would come back and tell me!" He laughs. "But nobody comes back, you know." He wags his head at me.

"Although," he adds mischievously, "I beg God, Whoever, to let me come back and finish my job. You have so much to do and so little time to do it in. The days aren't long enough! Time seems to pass faster as I get older. I don't know why, it just does," he says softly.

He's not afraid of death. "When the time comes, I doubt if we're going to the pearly gate up there," he says. "I doubt that God's going to be sitting there, and that I'm going to have to meet some people that I'm so glad NEVER to see again. I don't think so!

"I do believe in a supreme being or power," he goes on.

"Einstein did. And Edison did. I believe everybody has to say, 'Hey, this much you know for sure: it started with NOTHING.'

Who made nothing and then put something in it?" He stares into space and falls quiet.

Les doesn't go to church, but prays privately and often gives thanks. It's part of life, he says. "I never ask God for help, but I'm always thanking Him for what I've got. I don't ask Him to help so the Yankees will win or something like that," he says quickly. "Although I was at a Catholic hospital once in Pittsburgh," he chuckles. "And the nuns were praying for the Pittsburgh Pirates to win. I told them, 'I'm a Yankees fan and you have the edge on me. I have to go around the hard way, you know?' But then the Yankees won! That was something."



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Les has cheated death more than once. "I had a bad car accident back in 1948," he recounts. "My chances of living were nil. Walter Winchell went on the air, saying I wasn't gonna make it. Others said I wasn't gonna make it. It didn't look good. At one point, I knew that I had a choice of letting go. My fingernails were hanging on the outside of the Empire State Building, and I said, 'All I've got to do is let go—and it's over.'

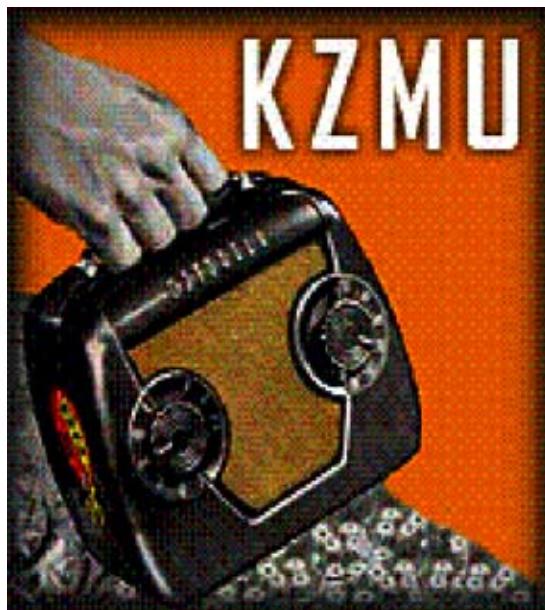
"Well, I didn't. I chose to fight." His face assumes a bulldog look.

"It's terribly important for a person, especially an older person, to want to live their life the most productive and happy they can. You've GOT to have a positive attitude. And you've got to be grateful for what you have, okay?" He raises his eyebrows.

"You've got to thank God for what you've got and quit complaining about what's wrong. If you don't believe in God, then thank WHOEVER."

Les acknowledges his old-age problems. "You live with 'em," he says briefly. "I have about a million of them! I wear a hearing aid. I take anti-inflammatory medicine for arthritis. I take a pill for gout, one for blood pressure, and I take

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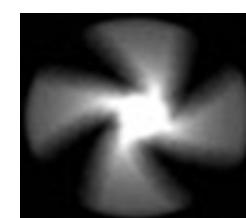
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