

LES PAUL...continued

aspirin. There are days when you just feel extra, extra good."

His eyes flash and he smiles broadly.

"Most of the time it's hard to beat me down, because in about two minutes, I'm up fightin' again!"

That bulldog look returns. He tells me that he was a serious child. At nine, he decided he wanted to be a musician and mapped out a career. At eleven, he began studying guitar. He persuaded his school principal to advance him two grades at a time and he attended summer school.

By 13, he had acquired the equivalent of a high school education. He left home to take a radio job, moved to New York, then to Hollywood, where his career took off. He wrote lyrics, composed music, invented the technique of over-dubbing, played nightclubs, and made records and movies with his wife Mary.



"Being happy is not having nine of everything," he goes on enthusiastically. "It's not having four cars in the driveway."

"I said to Mary once, 'Work is the most helpful equalizer in the world.' I'm a worker. So was she."

Les shakes his head sadly. Their marriage ended after 14 years.

"She said she couldn't keep doing the very hard work, the strain of singing and performing, the strain that especially a female can be under. It's very tough," he says softly.

"It means you have to look right, ALWAYS. You have to climb four flights of stairs at 6 o'clock in the morning, with no rest. You have to forfeit so much and have to give so much, just to stay on top. It's rough for any female. It's tough for a male.

"We had five children, four are still living, and five grandchildren. All of them live nearby," he says. "They come to see me perform. I wish they'd come more often to the house for holidays. It's hard for my children even to get the wives

together. In the old days, it was sort of an unwritten rule. I'm very old-fashioned that way."

Mary and Les stayed close friends until she died in 1977. He retired for ten years, but got bored and returned to music at age 65.

"It's the best thing I ever did, because it kept me alive and perking, in touch with young people. There are some great young players out there. I don't always agree with their new music, but young people have to have artistic freedom, the freedom to choose their own music."

Most of the young people he meets impress him. "Very few people you interview stress this point," he sits up in his chair and jabs a finger at me. "About how much GOOD the young generation has done.

"When rock 'n' roll music came in, the older generation said, 'That trash, that junk!' I looked at it entirely different. I said 'They're on MY side. They're taking my toys, my electric guitar that I developed starting back in 1927, 28, and they're playing with them.

"Thank God, they are!" he laughs happily. "I'm proud of that. I'm grateful that I was the one lucky enough to think of 'em and bring 'em about, so they can play with 'em. The kind of music that comes out today is something else. But that's up to you. I say if the shoes fit, put 'em on. But if they're not your shoes, they're gonna hurt your feet. You've got a knob on the radio, turn it off." He tilts his head and smiles.

"I think YOUNG and I understand where these kids are coming from," he says. "I'm genuinely interested in them. It's when you turn off, when you turn 'em off—then you're done."

He is emphatic.

"Young and old, from nine to 90, come to the club to hear my music. A nine-year-old kid sits here and I say, 'Hey, fella, what are you doing here?' He says, 'I'm studying guitar.' I say,

'Do you have one?' He says, 'Yes, sir.' I say, 'What kind do you have?' He says, 'What else? A Les Paul guitar.' I say, 'Bless your heart. You know, you study and someday you'll be great.' He says, 'That's why I'm here. I wanted to come and see the master.' I say, 'I don't know if this is the right place to see that, but I'll do the best I can.'

"I'm a role model for them," he says matter-of-factly.

With all his work, Les keeps up with hobbies. He's a longtime ham radio operator with the handle "Red," and enjoys talking to people all over the world.

"I love to read and listen to books on tape. I'll read a book on Einstein, something by Joseph Campbell, the Bible, anything about Major Armstrong, he's the man who invented FM. And Norman Vincent Peale, his book The Power of Positive Thinking. Brilliant man, brilliant man.

"In life, there are two things that make me tick. You've got to BELIEVE, and you've got to be in love. If you don't have those two things, you don't have much to live for. I don't care what you believe in. But you'd better believe in SOMETHING.

"Being happy is not having nine of everything," he goes on enthusiastically. "It's not having four cars in the driveway. Being active and being excited over something new, and appreciating what you have—THAT'S it!" he cries. "I could



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be happy if I had a cave in New Mexico and I pulled that rope up after me with a girl and a bucket of water, with no electricity.

"I'd be happy," he repeats. "I can be happy anywhere

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