Style Blog

Colts owner Jim Irsay spends \$335,500 to buy controversial Les Paul guitar





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Guitar designer Les Paul, center, signs former Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page's chest after signing his guitar at a 72nd birthday party thrown for Paul on June 11, 1987. Guitarist Jeff Beck, left, joined Paul and Page for the party, which drew a variety of rockmusic personalities. (AP Photo/John Bellissimo)

Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay swooped in tonight to purchase <u>the</u> <u>controversial Les Paul guitar</u>, saying he paid \$335,500 to add the instrument to a collection that includes the guitar Bob Dylan played when he went electric at the Newport Folk Festival and Grateful Dead guitarist Jerry Garcia's "Tiger."

"I know there was a lot of negative talk from a few guys who were well respected but look, it's an important guitar and I'm happy to have it as part of my collection," said Irsay, who was not in New York for the auction but had his guitar curator Chris McKinney close the deal.

"I don't believe it's the "Holy Grail," said Irsay, referencing to the claims that rankled so many Gibson Les Paul guitar experts. "I don't think there is a Holy Grail, frankly. But it really enhances my collection significantly. And I'm really happy to have it."

[The Holy Grail of electric guitars? Auction of a Les Paul ax has split sixstring circles.]

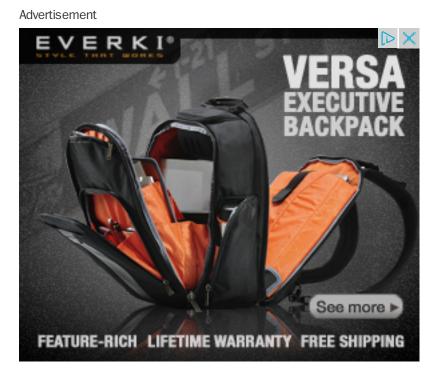
The Les Paul Custom wasn't the only item up for auction. Guernsey's also had a Gretsch guitar that once belonged to Chet Atkins as well as a slew of Les Paul-related items. But Irsay's purchase was the highest profile item, without question.

Some of those items, including old set lists, gig tapes and a caricature of Paul, passed without a bid. More dramatically, the night's other showcase item, the Gretsch, drew bids up to \$26,000 before showing as "passed" and unsold. Lot 17, the "Black Beauty," opened at \$50,000 before a series of bids pushed it up to \$275,000. The added \$60,500 is the 22 percent Irsay pays the auction house as a buyer's premium.

"All right, that's more reasonable," said Cheap Trick's Rick Nielsen, who owns about 100 Les Paul guitars. "That's way more than it's worth. But it's been on the cover of a bunch of stuff and it's got the provenance of Les Paul having it at one point. I'm so happy it didn't go for \$2.1 million."

The guitar, owned by longtime Paul assistant Tom Doyle, had been at the center of a controversy after the seller's contention that the instrument was the prototype for the slew of more famous guitars played by Led Zeppelin's Jimmy Page, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons and other rockers. A group of the world's leading Gibson experts and Paul's own son, Russ, said that the statements were overblown and untrue.

Guitar Player magazine drew fire from those experts for calling the 1954 model, on its February cover, "The Grail!" and declaring that it was "The Genesis of All Les Paul Guitars to Come!" In reality, the first Les Paul came out two years earlier, in 1952. Also, those models, not the Custom, evolved into the instrument embraced by Page and other famous players. When contacted for comment tonight, Doyle hung up the phone.



"I think we can take a lot of little things from this," said Tom Wittrock, the Springfield, Missouri <u>guitar dealer</u> who is one of four owners of the on-line Les Paul Forum, where the guitar's significance was debated in recent weeks. "One, I don't think it was worth getting worked up. Two, the method of marketing it, it didn't help. I don't know if it hurt, but I don't think it helped."

"I don't think it's worth that," said Drew Berlin, a guitar collector who worked with the Les Paul estate on an authorized auction of his guitars in 2012. "I don't know what that guitar should really be worth."

Irsay said he felt he got a good deal.

"I was willing to go a little higher but I would never go into a million or anything like that," he said. "I just didn't believe that it was there at that sort of price."



Geoff Edgers joined the Washington Post staff as national arts reporter in 2014. Before that, he worked as an arts reporter at The Boston Globe.



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