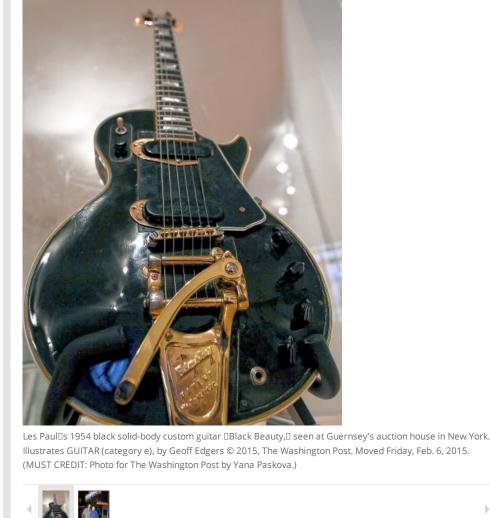
## Holy Grail or Just a Really **Cool Guitar? Les Paul Instrument Up for Auction Causes**

**Divisions Among Musicians, Collectors** 

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Newsletters



By Geoff Edgers The Washington Post Sunday, February 8, 2015 (Published in print: Sunday, February 8, 2015)

Les Paul was a musician, inventor and obsessive tinkerer. His signature six-string became the instrument of choice for a Mount Rushmore of guitar heroes: Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy

Page.

But there is something else Paul was known for. He was notoriously frugal, even cheap. If he paid people at all, he often didn't pay them much.

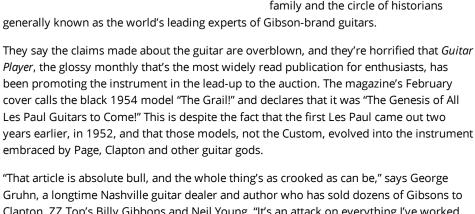
he heard a guitar given away by the legend would be auctioned this month as "the most important Les Paul guitar of all time." "What is this?" Braunstein asked Russ Paul, the guitarist's son.

"Oh, that," Russ told him. "That's just a broken-down guitar."

the market at a time when famous axes once belonging to Bob Dylan and Jerry Garcia can score as much as \$1 million. The Feb. 19 auction at Guernsey's in New York has already

That's why Michael Braunstein, the executor of the late guitarist's estate, was baffled when

National Football League's Indianapolis Colts. At the same time, the sale has sparked controversy within the Paul



on for over the last 50 years."

care of these guys."

catalogue — against Braunstein's wishes.

1976 by Paul in lieu of payment for other work.

Clapton, ZZ Top's Billy Gibbons and Neil Young. "It's an attack on everything I've worked The "Grail" debate has exposed what classic rocker Steve Miller admits is a "mess" left behind by Paul, the only member of both the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and National  $\ensuremath{\mathsf{National}}$ Inventors Hall of Fame. Paul was Miller's godfather and one of his heroes. But Miller saw Paul's "guys," as he calls them, were largely left to fend for themselves after

The vintage-guitar market, Miller says, is ridiculous, with castoff instruments selling for hundreds of thousands of dollars to collectors who wouldn't know a single coil from a "Hell, I hope the richest, dumbest f----- lawyer in the United States pays a fortune for it,"

Miller says. "And Tommy Doyle can say, 'Thank God I can go get that colonoscopy I need.' That's what this is all about. It's about surviving. There should have been a plan to take

The Les Paul Custom, referred to in the auction as "Black Beauty," was given to Doyle in

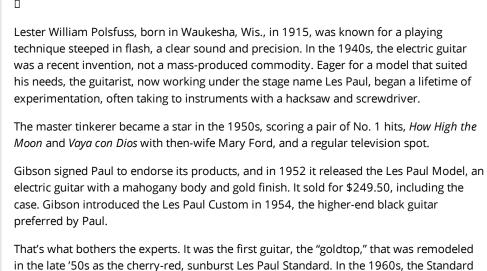
"Is Tommy hyping it up a little bit? Hell, yeah," Miller says. "But is this guitar an important guitar? It's an electric guitar, it's made by Gibson, and it was Les' guitar. That's what makes

the guitarist's death in 2009. That's why Miller wrote the forward in the Guernsey's

Doyle, now 72, had repaired Paul's guitars for decades, as well as serving as his sound man, driver, even backstage barber. Members of Paul's inner circle and guitar experts describe Doyle as a good man who worked hard for an always-demanding boss.

younger.

guitar historian who has had dealings with Stavron. "He's been motivated to create a buzz about this guitar simply to inflate the guitar for auction."



became the icon for rock 'n' roll was the Les Paul Standard."

Bloomfield and Keith Richards.

whole life."

special.

buy it."

security guard.

experts."

closest to the late guitarist.

Guernsey's news release spread unchecked.

"Why would Molenda fall for it?" he wondered.

museum in Milwaukee.

Paul,' " Lawrence says.

he's going down the wrong path with this guy Max."

They have different feelings for Doyle's business partner, Max Stavron, a California-based guitar dealer 20 years

"P.T. Barnum," says Edward Ball, a

Says guitarist Lou Pallo, 80, a longtime

member of the Les Paul Trio: "I love

Tommy, just love the guy. But I think

became Gibson's most famous model when it was adopted by Clapton, Page, Mike

workshop stuffed with a stable of guitars. For this, Doyle typically received very little. "Everybody would say, 'How can you keep working like this?' " Doyle says today. "I'd say:

One day in 1976, Paul brought by a black guitar that he had been messing with at home. This guitar wasn't playable. It had been gouged full of holes and didn't include any electronics. But Paul gave it to Doyle for repairing another guitar. Paul told Doyle that he

'You don't understand. I do. I've been given the position to be with this great man my

"Ludicrous," says author Walter Carter, another Nashville dealer who was Gibson's former historian, about the claims being made by the auctioneer and magazine. "The guitar that

Doyle and Paul met in 1966. By then, Paul had fallen off the charts and gone through an ugly divorce with Ford. The pair grew closer as Paul revived his career and began playing the weekly gig in New York City that he would maintain through his 90s. Paul kept Doyle's

"Someday," Doyle says he remembers Paul telling him, "this is going to be worth a lot of money." Doyle's repair skills are well known, which is why nobody is surprised he was able to

make "Black Beauty" auction-ready. What Doyle says he has always struggled with,

had played the guitar on television appearances and in recording sessions.

behind the man.' " They are working together on Doyle's memoirs.

though, is telling his story. Enter Max Stavron.

asked Doyle about his relationship with the dealer.

years. I never once saw him play that guitar."

Curtis Dowling, going on an expletive-laced rant.

Stavron's presence has driven a wedge between Doyle and the Paul family. Braunstein, representing the Les Paul Foundation, asked that Doyle tone down his redone website. Russ Paul says he is upset with how the guitar is being pitched — it's not that

More historically important Les Paul guitars, he says, can be found at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in Nashville and Discovery World, a science and technology

Robb Lawrence, an author who lived with Les Paul for a year as part of his research for a two-volume Paul bio, fell out with Stavron over material on Doyle's website. He also

"I said to Tommy: 'This is your guitar. I don't know what Max has to do with a gift from Les

As Doyle's partner, Stavron rewrote Doyle's website, calling him "Luthier to the Stars" and Paul's "close friend, confidant, co-inventor, ear, sounding board and fixer ... 'The man

Stavron and Doyle met in 1983 in New Jersey, fell out of touch, and then reconnected in 2012. That's when Stavron learned that Julien's Auctions in Beverly Hills was auctioning off a white, 2002 Gibson Les Paul. He called Doyle.

"I said, 'Jeez, that's the guitar used on the cover of his book,' " Doyle recounts, referring to a photo on Paul's 2009 autobiography, In His Own Words. "If you can buy it, you should

\$500,000. Darren Julien, the auction-house president, said he forced Stavron to take the listing down because it wasn't accurate. "It's not worthless," says Drew Berlin, a guitar enthusiast known as one half of the "Burst Brothers." "But he was claiming it was Les' favorite guitar. I followed Les to his gigs for 30

It was a tense shoot, says co-host Catherine Knebel, the only time the show had to hire a

Told on camera that his guitar wasn't worth what he had hoped, Stavron snapped at host

Then, in 2013, Stavron took the guitar on CNBC's Treasure Detectives.

Stavron did, paying just over \$7,000 at the auction. He then tried to sell it on eBay for

"You just think I'm some toadstool that fell off a f----- turnip truck?" Stavron said. "... You got a lawsuit on your hands." Stavron isn't surprised by the controversy over the auction.

"There are so many haters coming out of the woodwork," he says. "And because they bought a \$100 Les Paul Junior at a pawn shop when they were in high school, they're

And Doyle doesn't apologize for Stavron. In fact, he says that he needs him. In the years since Paul's death, Doyle says he has been disrespected by those who claim to have been

"Look, if you're being attacked from all directions, you've got to have a Patton," Doyle says. "I'm an easygoing guy, and they'll take advantage of that along the way. Max is a very, very passionate guy. And to divide us in any shape or form is not going to work." There's nothing shocking about two guys trying to hype a guitar they're bringing to

auction. The Gibson historians say they're more disappointed in how the material in the

In January, it ran in a slew of publications, including the Los Angeles Times, Entertainment

Weekly and Britain's Guardian. The article in Guitar Player particularly upset Gruhn, the Nashville guitar dealer, and Tom Wheeler, the former editor of Guitar Player and now a journalism professor at the

University of Oregon. Wheeler wrote a lengthy email, circulated to a variety of experts and

Doyle, detailing why the article contradicted everything "we know about the development of the Les Paul." Over at Vintage Guitar magazine, Ward Meeker just shook his head and thought of Guitar Player editor Michael Molenda.

"But do we trust that Tom, working closely with Les, had the story and would be OK?" Molenda says. "Yes."

Molenda doesn't think that Guitar Player's coverage will boost the Les Paul's value.

"The guitar's going to sell for what it's going to sell for," Molenda says.

important guitars that has ever gone to auction," Irsay says.

So is "Black Beauty" the Holy Grail?

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Molenda says he didn't fall for anything. Sure, the "Grail" declaration was "overzealous" and he wishes he had asked Gruhn, Wheeler and others about the guitar before running

And Irsay, the Colts owner who paid \$957,000 for Jerry Garcia's "Tiger" in 2002 and \$965,000 in 2013 for the Fender that Dylan played at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, plans to be in on the bidding.

Doyle calls the "Black Beauty" he's selling "the Mona Lisa" of guitars. He hopes whoever

"I'd like to retire," he says. "I worked on the bench for 50 years."

"I really can't list it as the Holy Grail, but I do think it's worthy of one of the most

"They can call it whatever they want to call it," Doyle says. "I don't make up titles. I just know what the guitar was to him. This was a particular guitar he loved. That's my interpretation. They weren't there. I was."

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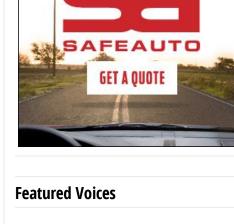
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family and the circle of historians

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