

The 1950s and the Clash of Giants...

The electric guitar was by no means a new idea by 1950, but the solid body electric was quickly becoming the in-demand instrument, above hollow body electrics. Fender was still sorting out the Telecaster's identity crisis, but the model's progenitors had started a revolution, and one of the electric giants was born. Gibson was also no stranger to electric guitars, with the Electric Spanish (ES) series having started in 1936, but when the company noticed the attention Leo Fender was getting for the Telecaster, they knew they had to snag a piece of the action. And so rose the other giant, the Gibson Les Paul, partly designed by the monumental player for which the legendary guitar was named. The stage was set for a decades long battle between Fender and Gibson for solid body domination, with both sides bringing their own unique build techniques, specs, and standards that would divide the guitar playing community to this day...



A 1950 Fender Esquire (left) and a 1952 Gibson Les Paul (right)

From the Brink of Disaster...

The late '80s saw now all too familiar problems for the guitar-smiths at Gibson. The Norlin company had led the beloved brand into decreasing quality, terrible business decisions, and even the closing of the legendary Kalamazoo plant (which led to the formation of the fabulous Heritage Guitars!). It is said that Gibson was months away from bankruptcy, but thanks to a buyout, the company was saved, and profits rose drastically as the 1990s arrived; yes, Gibson was riding high again (until the next scare; see Chapter 9). With a high standard of quality restored to its legacy lines, Gibson was in a decent position to take some risks and introduce

some new lines to their catalog. Mind you, these were not the desperate last ditch efforts to save the ship, ala the Gibson Victory line, but rather bold new ideas like the US-1 series designed by Wayne Charvel...that ended up the same way as any other new idea Gibson has had. Yes, for better or worse, Gibson has never had much luck establishing new models since the '60s, and in the case of the ultra-cool Nighthawk, it's a definite "worse".



A 1993 Nighthawk with 3 pickups

A Blending of Two Worlds...

Before the '80s, guitar heroes had essentially two choices when it came to electric sound and style: the dual humbucker, shorter scale mahogany monsters made by Gibson, or the snappy single-coil, string stretching lighter fare from Fender. Some, like Jeff Beck, longed for the best of both worlds, but there was no production model that offered such a thing. But as players got speedier and music got heavier, it was clear that a blend would have to manifest; and so dawned the age of the Super-Strat. Finally, shredders could get the playability of Fender with the power of a Gibson! It also meant that the market was expanding, and Fender and Gibson no

longer had it cornered, and both companies felt they needed to try and meet the new demand. This was easier for Fender, since they already had the shape and scale length shredders were looking for, and all they needed to add was a humbucker in the bridge. Gibson, however, had to get radical and stray away from their normal designs if they wanted to compete. Their first attempt was the aforementioned Victory model, but it was not received well and only lasted three years. The next attempt was a more direct approach with the U-2 and US-1 models, but these too did not last more than a decade. But there was one model in this string of attempts that was more of a blend with Gibson's style, and less of an attempt to catch up. It was 1993, and the Nighthawk was rising...

Figured maple top, mahogany body, humbuckers; it's a Gibson.

25.5 inch scale length, a hardtail bridge, and a slanted bridge pickup; it's not *all* Gibson.



A 1998 Nighthawk that a found a happy new roost

Yes, the Nighthawk does the blend as discussed earlier, but it is clearly NOT a Super Strat, it is a modern Gibson guitar, and it's awesome. The model originally had two versions: the Standard, which had a rosewood fretboard with parallelogram inlays, and the Custom, which had an ebony fretboard with pearl crown inlays and a bound headstock. Both varieties had a three pickup

version which added an NSX single-coil to the middle position. Whichever one you play, you immediately feel the melding of both worlds, and it's a real pleasure. It seemed that Gibson had found a best of both worlds, and who wouldn't love that? It had to go far, right?

Nope.

The ill-fated innovation was short lived, sadly, and Gibson gave up on the Nighthawk after only five years. Quality was high, the guitar was beautiful and ambitious, but sales and interest were low. Even though there are a couple of Nighthawk players today (most notably Nancy Wilson of Heart), it seemed that no one wanted a long-scale guitar from Gibson. Recent revivals include the Nighthawk Studio, the 20th Anniversary Nighthawk Standard, and the Nancy Wilson Nighthawk Standard, but as of date of writing (February 2019), I can't seem to find any



Nighthawks on Gibson's website. As for why such a fabulous piece would be so unsuccessful, it's always multi-faceted, but if I had to hazard a guess, it'd be that the Gibson-buying public would rather have the legendary models that their guitar heroes had played. And by this point, anyone looking for that melding of worlds so oft mentioned here had A LOT of options to pour through by '93. This trend seems to continue today, with Gibson and Fender only being able to squeak through a few innovations over the years (see the S-1 switch!), with anything drastic being shouted down in forums like medieval convicts being marched through the city streets... Yes, we in the guitar world fear change, it seems. But! You can still snag a Nighthawk of your own, and hold on to a piece of daring and elegant design from the Elder Guitar Giant, Gibson.