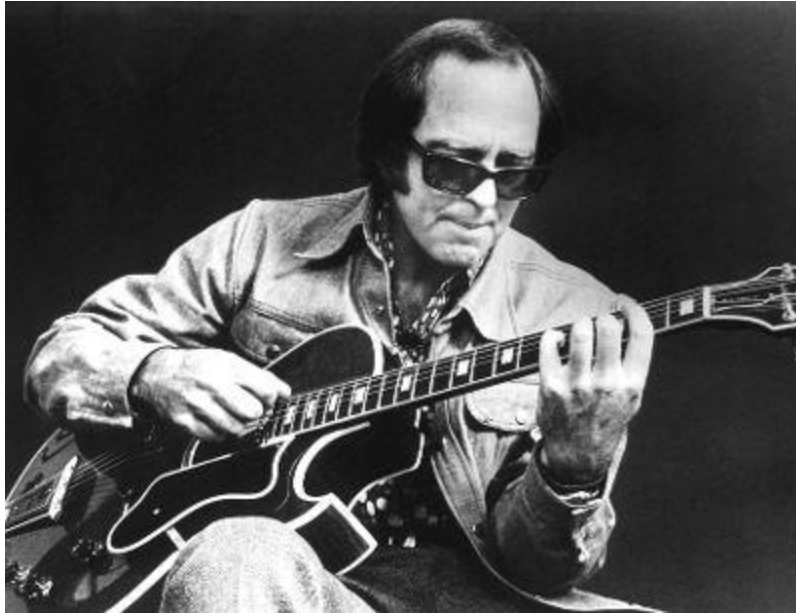


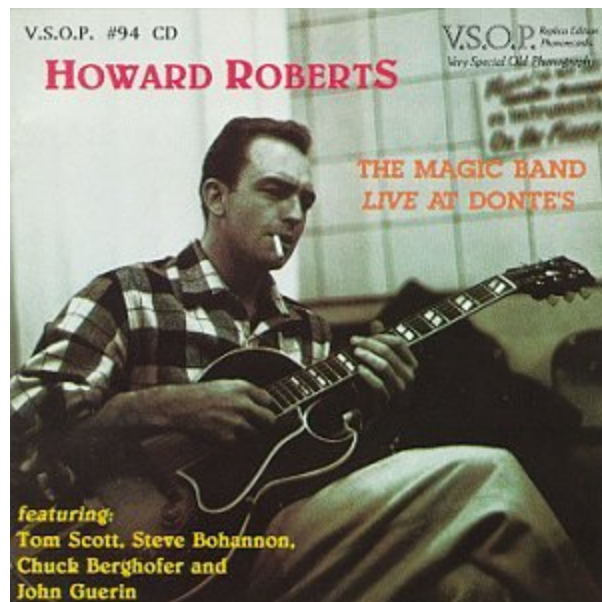
Throughout the long and storied mythos of modern rock and pop music, there has always been one stalwart figure behind the curtain: the studio cat. With no glitz, no glamour, and rarely any wide recognition, studio cats are the unsung heroes of the recorded music world; professional musicians who know their stuff, and their client's stuff (better than they do in many cases!). There have been many of them over the years, some who have gone on to greater fame like Jimmy Page and Duane Allman, but there is one who I'd bet more people have heard than could ever recall his name.



Howard Roberts was a Jazz guitarist before hitting the studios of LA. He had been playing guitar since his eighth birthday, and was a true jack of all trades in the studio, having even been a member of the famous “Wrecking Crew”, a collective of studio cats in 1960s LA. Having worked with a myriad of varied artists all the way to ‘60s TV, Roberts was a Swiss Army knife for producers, who could fit any genre needed. Names like Elvis Presley and Frank Sinatra, and themes as timeless as “The Twilight Zone” and “Batman”; all certified pop culture exhibits that made use of this relatively little-known legend. I would have never known about him had a 1981 Gibson Howard Roberts Custom not come through the shop, and this article is for the people like me who never knew, and for those who maybe want to learn a little more. There is a wealth of information on the Man and his legacy online, so what will follow is a brief introduction to the work of Mr. Roberts, and of course, the gear he used along the way.

***Jazz, first and Foremost***

Most of the flash and surprise of Howard Roberts' catalog will come later, but it is important to remember the man's first love and strongest passion. Roberts began playing Jazz professionally in the mid forties when he was just 15 years old, and some of his earliest recordings upon his move to LA in 1950 were with Jazz greats like Bobby Troupe and Henry Mancini, along with a mighty handful of Jazz compilations. He would also continue to hone his jazz chops in the LA club scene during the '60s and beyond. Some of his best recorded works are as a leader of his own Jazz band, and one of his most lasting legacies was as a columnist for *Guitar Player*, contributing his "Jazz Improvisation" series for many years. It was his love of Jazz and education thereof that lead to his true legacy, the Guitar Institute of Technology, the first vocational school for guitar.



*The Cover of the first "Magic Band" Live Album*

Roberts played an ES-175 in the early '50s, but he seemed to be the most fond of his ES-150, acquired from Herb Ellis and modified beyond recognition. This piece, dubbed "The Black Guitar", was featured on some of Roberts finest jazz works like *H.R. is a Dirty Guitar Player* and his "Magic Band" live recordings.

### ***In the Studio with the Greats***

After making a name for himself in LA studios with fellow jazz cats, Roberts became connected to a collective of LA studio musicians that would later be called "The Wrecking Crew". Musicians from The Crew would find themselves on countless

legendary recordings throughout the '60s and '70s, and Roberts was no different. The list is enormous, with Roberts having appeared on over one thousand recordings by some estimations, so here are some of the best and brightest:

*Chet Atkins in Hollywood* - Chet Atkins, recorded 1958

This album features beautiful playing by Mr. Atkins over gorgeous orchestrations, and underneath that? The ever-stalwart comping of Howard Roberts.

*Flaming Star* - Elvis Presley, recorded 1960

This is the soundtrack to the western film of the same name, starring Presley of course. The music is what you might expect for the film genre, with some fittingly twangy electric guitar provided by Roberts.

*Ain't That Good News* - Sam Cooke, recorded 1963

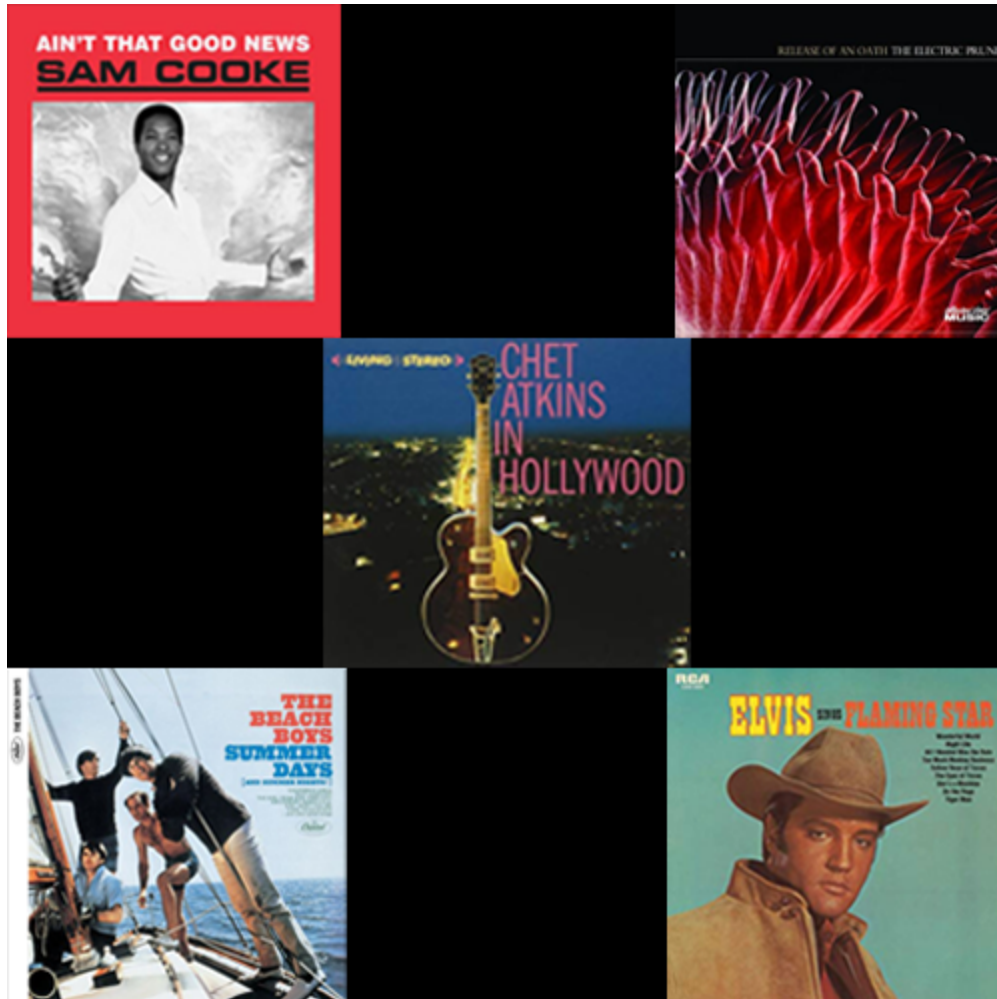
Roberts is one of many guitarists credited on this album, including John Pisano and Barney Kessel. Specifically, Howard is credited on the title track of the album, though he likely played on others as well.

*Summer Days (And Summer Nights!!)* - The Beach Boys, recorded 1965

This is another where his specific single credits only feature the songs "Salt Lake City" and "California Girls", but he is likely on other tracks as well. Particularly on "Help me Rhonda", though no one source seems to be certain about his contributions.

*Release of an Oath* - The Electric Prunes, recorded 1968

This psychedelic departure is the brainchild of David Axelrod, who continued the Electric Prunes project even after the original group disbanded. It is said that the group couldn't handle Axelrod's complex arrangements, and as such *Release of an Oath* called upon hotshot session cats, including Howard Roberts. Give it a listen!



***...Right to your Living Room!***

So there's five examples of Roberts' work, and that's just as a sideman, and pre-1970s! But as varied and wonderful as his work with bands and artists is, where I'm certain you've heard him is in his work for popular TV programs of the '60s. Just like the previous section, Roberts' contributions to TV, and movies for that matter, are too numerous to list here, but here are a few of the big ones:

*The Twilight Zone Opening Theme*, first aired 1959

That's right! The famous trebly, jangly, creepy-as-all-get-out guitar part for the original Twilight Zone opening was performed by Roberts on a Fender Broadcaster.

# The TWILIGHT ZONE

*Bonanza Opening Theme*, first aired 1959

This gargantuan Western series ran for a whopping 14 years and boasts one of the most iconic themes ever, the guitar part for which having been played by none other than Howard Roberts!

*The Andy Griffith Show Opening Theme*, first aired 1960

This most wholesome of shows has one of the most iconic and catchy tunes for an opening, with the melody in question being whistled! While Roberts may not have been a studio whistler (although, who knows?!), he did lay down the guitar part for this classic theme.

*Beverly Hillbillies Opening Theme*, first aired 1962

Yet another black and white classic, this one about newly-rich Jed Clampet and clan moving to the land of swimming pools and movie stars, and all the antics that ensue! The narrative opening song is one of TV's most memorable, and features playing by Howard Roberts!

*Batman Opening Theme*, first aired 1966

Whop! Pow! Zok! Yeah, that Batman. The beautifully cheesy show starred the late-great Adam West as the caped crusader, and opened with an unmistakable guitar-driven theme song. This chromatic riff was the first tune learned for many a young guitarist in the late '60s, and was originally played by Roberts on a 1952 Telecaster.



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Other themes include, *I Dream of Jeannie*, *The Jetsons*, *Lost in Space*, *Johnny Quest*, and many many more. Talk about prolific! And this is not even mentioning his work on movie soundtracks. So it's no stretch to say that more people have heard him than know his name. Heck, for the Baby Boomer generation in America he may be the most heard guitarist ever! If you watched prime time TV in the late '50s and '60s then you heard him!

### ***A Legacy of Learning***

The Howard Roberts story does not end with TV or in the studio, but rather in the classroom. Roberts began his forays into education by helping start a publishing company in order to bolster the state of guitar literature. He then began writing methods for guitar and giving seminars, all culminating in the founding of the Guitar Institute of Technology, now known as the Musicians Institute. Under either name, the Institute has seen shred legends like Paul Gilbert and Synyster Gates pass through their halls, along with not-so-shreddy notables like Rivers Cuomo and John Frusciante. With names like this in the alumni roster, you can bet the legacy of this little-known studio cat will live on, ever after his tragically early passing in 1992. In closing, I hope this short look into the life a true unsung guitar hero will pique your interest in learning more. Howard Roberts had his hands in countless projects, and produced a robust catalog of solo work, so

there is plenty more to see and hear! If you'd like to learn more, go check out **The HR Project** and Mike Evans' exhaustive **archive** on Roberts!



*A few MI Alumni, all with varying dedication and...appreciation. But Alumni nonetheless!  
Left to Right: Jeff Buckley, John Frusciante, Rivers Cuomo, Synyster Gates,  
Paul Gilbert*

### ***One more thing!***

How could I not include his signature guitars?! Roberts' first endorsement came from Epiphone in the '60s, who built him a roundhole jazz box that he co-designed himself. This model had a standard and custom version, with the latter having Roberts' preferred 25.5" scale length. This design was moved to Gibson in the '70s, where it stayed in production until 1981. Roberts took a more wild turn with the Fusion, also made by Gibson. This instrument was a semi-hollow that was meant to be equally effective playing jazz and rock, and it must have been; Gibson kept the instrument in production until 2003. There were also plenty of knockoffs made in Japan in the '70s as well! So, there is one more way that the man lives on; in possibly my favorite way, through a beautiful instrument.





*A 1981 Gibson Howard Roberts Custom*