GUITAR HEROES

The duo that collected a secret trove of instruments heading to the Met.

BY NICK PAUMGARTEN

PHOTOGRAPH BY HANNAH WHITAKER

In 2007, Jayson Dobney, an Iowan with a master's degree in the history of musical instruments, from the University of South Dakota, moved to New York to be a curator in the department of musical instruments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. For decades, there had been whispers in guitar circles of a vast trove of twentieth-century guitars, in private hands, somewhere in the tri-state area—an El Dorado of coveted Strats and Les Pauls and Martins of impeccable provenance. Even in Vermillion, South Dakota, Dobney had heard the rumors. Coming east, he wanted to learn more, especially because the Met's instruments department, for all its heirlooms (the world's oldest piano, three Stradivarius violins, a Mayan double whistle), possessed almost nothing from the twentieth century.

In 2011, Dobney put together an exhibition celebrating the work of the Italian American luthiers who had designed and built the archtop guitars beloved by jazz musicians. Seeking objects for the show, he met a record producer and guitar maven named Perry Margouleff, who said that he might have a few instruments to share, as an anonymous lender. Dobney visited a warehouse outside the city where, in a reception area, Margouleff showed him eight guitars. "It was so secretive that when I, as a curator of the Met, came to visit, I had no idea what was actually there. I just saw those eight guitars," Dobney told me recently.

Unseen that day was the rest of the collection, the one that so many people had wondered about. Also unseen: the man who owns it, Dirk Ziff, a wealthy publishing heir and financier with a reputation, too, as a connoisseur and a guitarist who had recorded and toured with Carly Simon. Few people were aware that the two men had spent decades working together to assemble what is now recognized as the world's finest collection of vintage guitars.

Dobney had some insight into the power that such objects might possess. Early in his Met tenure, Dobney, whose thesis at South Dakota was titled "Innovations in American Snare Drums: 1850–1920," got Ringo Starr to lend the museum his gold-plated Ludwig snare (given to him by Ludwig, after the Beatles' 1964 appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show" juiced sales). "Everyone was shocked that there was a line out the door just of people who wanted to get their photo taken with a little drum in a case," Dobney said.

He finally met Ziff in 2019, when Ziff came to the museum for a private tour of "Play It Loud," an exhibition of totemic rock instruments, which was a collaboration between the Met and the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. Ziff and Margouleff had lent eleven guitars, and Margouleff had also wrangled the instruments (and coöperation) of Jimmy Page, Keith Richards, Eric Clapton, and Eddie Van Halen. Ziff and Dobney spent hours together, talking gear. Margouleff had long believed that the Ziff collection should be shared with the public and had floated the idea of building a museum, but Ziff preferred a low profile, and patience. "We'll get to that," he would say. Generally, the big institutions looked down on guitars. Margouleff told me, "After the Guggenheim did an exhibition on the art of the motorcycle, I said to the guy there, 'You should do guitars.' He said, 'Over my dead body.' As Jimmy Page says, guitars were tarred by the brush of rock and roll. We'd been told no so many times. We really needed a museum to ask *us*."

"Play It Loud" was among the most well-attended exhibitions in the museum's history. Max Hollein, who had

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started as the Met's director the year before, had a mandate to modernize the programming and attract a new generation of visitors and donors. A few months after the show closed, Hollein made a trip to the warehouse. This time, Ziff and Margouleff opened the vault.

"That was my eureka moment," Hollein told me. "The collection blew me away. I thought, *This should and must be at the Met.*" The guitar, he said, is "one of the most—if not the most—iconic American objects of the twentieth century."

Last year, Ziff and Margouleff donated the collection to the Met. In the spring of 2027, the museum will open a permanent gallery devoted to the evolution and cultural impact of the American guitar.

One Sunday last month, I paid a visit to the warehouse, in a light-industrial area. "You were never here," Margouleff said, ushering me inside. It was his winking way of confirming that I'd honor a promise not to reveal its location. Margouleff had on jeans and a faded Crocker Motorcycles T-shirt. He has sideburns and long gray hair, and wears honey-tinted, oversized Jackie O. glasses. He carries himself with the assurance of a man who knows his business and can fix anything and has met a certain subset of everybody—that is, all the people he'd want to meet, which is another way of saying he has more than one Bob Dylan story. He doesn't suffer fools or jerks, has exacting standards in matters luthieristic and otherwise (Italian food, wine, manners, business dealings), and since childhood has considered himself essentially unemployable. He's a car buff, too, and built a dune buggy when he was nine. One of his measures of character is the degree to which you truly care about guitars, but he is not a snob. He wants everyone to play, even poorly. He is married (he and his wife live in Connecticut) but has never wanted kids. The guitars are his children.

Margouleff led me through a tidy workshop and into a reception area with a kitchenette and a wall of a half-dozen supersized Vox amps. "No one knows what's in the collection," he said. "We try to keep it as private as humanly possible. Sometimes people reach out to me and offer me something, and I think, *You're trying to sell me something I already own.*" Ziff once got a call from a dealer offering him the highly coveted "Brock Burst" 1959 Les Paul Custom, named for a collector. The dealer asked for half the money up front, not knowing that Ziff already had the Brock Burst under the bed he was sitting on.

Margouleff's pronouns tend to blur ownership and agency. Sometimes when he says "I," he means "we," as in he and Ziff, or really "he," as in just Ziff. A patron-steward dynamic pertains. In the early days, Margouleff's counterparties doubted that "Dirk Ziff" even existed. Ziff isn't merely the moneybags, but he has another life: family, high finance, various passions and enterprises. (He is the principal owner of the World Surf League, the governing body of pro surfing.) Margouleff is the guy on the ground. One collector referred to him as "Dirk's guitar pimp." Margouleff would prefer "guitarcheologist."

"I am the owner, and technically the gift to the Met is from me," Ziff said. "But I think of it as a gift from both of us, because we have done this together, over the course of almost forty years."

Margouleff was nine years old when, in 1969, his brother, who was eighteen, took him from their home on Long Island to the Fillmore East to see the Who perform "Tommy." The music was galvanizing, but what really seized his soul was the sight and sound of Pete Townshend's red Gibson SG Special. "I was abducted by the guitar," Margouleff likes to say.

A week later, Margouleff's brother persuaded their parents to take them back to the city, to Manny's Music, on the stretch of West Forty-eighth Street known as Music Row. They emerged with an SG like Townshend's. By the time Margouleff was twelve, he was a regular glass-fogger on Music Row. He noticed some things. One was that the used guitars at We Buy Guitars sounded better than the new ones across the street at Manny's and yet cost less than half as much. The rock guitarists he admired seemed to prefer the older ones, too. Another was that the sight of those used guitars hanging there on bailing wire, strung up by their headstocks, knocking against one another, filled him with sadness, of a kind that others might feel when encountering a box of abandoned puppies. He thought, *I have to save them. I have to find them good homes.*

That summer, Margouleff earned just enough working construction to purchase his first collectible guitar, a 1963 Gibson Johnny Smith archtop, for eleven hundred dollars, from a local buff named Russell Hirsch, who became his first guitar mentor. A year later, Margouleff tracked down a 1963 Gibson Firebird, like the one he'd seen Johnny Winter play at the Beacon. By the time Margouleff was fourteen, he'd worked his way into the good graces of the infamously cantankerous shop owners on Music Row, and had infiltrated the tessellation of men, most of them a decade or more his senior, who shared his ardor for used guitars that were not yet considered vintage, or even particularly collectible. He began driving up and down the East Coast, without a license but with an ever more refined sense of which instruments were worth saving, and at what price. By sixteen, he was running a brisk trade—selling his instruments only when necessary, to raise money to buy better ones. He decided to commit to guitars full time. "You have to stay in school," his English teacher said. Then, when he told her he was clearing as much as a thousand dollars a week, she said, "Drop out of school."

Margouleff's father, the chief of nuclear medicine at North Shore Hospital, was appalled. "You'll wind up as a homeless person pumping gas," he told his son. With the impetuousness of youth, and the conviction of the convert, Margouleff left home and moved to Manhattan. He got work as an assistant engineer at Sundragon Studios, where the Ramones, Talking Heads, and David Johansen, among others, cut albums. (Margouleff eventually started a line of amps, called Sundragon, with Jimmy Page.) It was more than a dozen years before he spoke to his father again.

By the time his peers were graduating from college, Margouleff had bought and sold around a thousand guitars. He'd travelled all over the world, hunting down instruments and soaking up expertise. He had a sideline exporting vintage guitars to Europe. He'd befriended Les Paul and was producing tracks for Ronnie Wood, with guest appearances from Keith Richards

and Bob Dylan. Eventually, he opened Pie Studios, on Long Island, where he recorded the Rolling Stones, Brian May, Cyndi Lauper, and Cheap Trick. It beat schoolwork, or pumping gas.

One night in 1983, at a birthday party at Tortilla Flats, in the West Village, Margouleff was introduced to a teen-age guitar player who wanted to buy a Marshall amp. Margouleff sold him one, and they started hanging out.

The teen was Dirk Ziff, one of three sons of William Ziff, the chairman and owner of Ziff Davis, the magazine publisher. The company sold off its hobbyist and travel titles in 1984, and its computer magazines ten years later, when it became clear that the sons didn't want to run the business. The sons, led by Dirk, allocated the proceeds to an array of investments, including in the burgeoning hedge-fund sector. It was, as they say, a good trade. Dirk Ziff is now worth almost seven billion dollars, according to *Forbes*.

As it happens, Ziff had also seen the Who perform "Tommy," in 1970, at the Metropolitan Opera House, with his father and his uncle. He was six. As the lights went down, his uncle said, "Prepare to have your mind blown." It was. (At the warehouse, Margouleff showed me the red SG that Pete Townshend smashed up that night.) Ziff got his first guitar at Manny's: a Japanese copy of a Sunburst Les Paul, for ninety-nine bucks. As a student at Trinity, a private high school on the Upper West Side, he played in a few rock bands when it seemed as if every other kid in Manhattan was swapping Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin riffs. Before long, Ziff had serious chops, and ideas about becoming a professional musician. But after college, with the family fortune to look after, he embarked on a Wall Street career.

Margouleff helped Ziff build a recording studio at his parents' estate, in Pawling, New York. He also sold Ziff a black 1968 Les Paul Custom for seven hundred dollars, Ziff's first vintage guitar. Ziff took it with him to see Paul himself play live, at Fat Tuesday's. Backstage, Paul appraised Ziff's instrument—"Oh, an old one"—and then, with an awl, scratched an inscription into the clear coat (but not through the finish) on the back: "To Dirk, Keep picking. Les Paul." Ziff showed this, triumphantly, to Margouleff, who was aghast that he'd damaged the instrument.

"I thought the relationship was over," Ziff said. "I maintained my belief that the guitar was enhanced. Eventually, Perry came around."

In 1987, Margouleff, back in New York after a few years in Europe playing guitar in the band the Pretty Things, proposed a new venture to Ziff: with Ziff's capital, they could assemble a peerless collection of vintage guitars. "These are essential parts of musical history and incredible works of art," he said. "If we don't build a collection, it'll never happen, and everything will be dispersed." The moment was ripe. Others were catching on to the value and the superior craftsmanship of older guitars. Japanese collectors were circling. Still, prices were reasonable, and Margouleff knew more than anyone which guitars were where.

"I thought of it as Noah's ark," Margouleff said. "I was doing this for the guitar, and not for me." Ziff, in spite of some family skepticism toward Margouleff and his scheme, agreed.

"Are you ready?" Margouleff asked at the warehouse. He unlocked a door, and immediately a thick, corky scent hit me, the emanation of hundreds of aging guitars—the great variety of hardwoods, the glue and paint and lacquer, the oxidation of strings and coils, the leather straps and handles, and the sarcophagal musk of the cases themselves. Guitar collectors know and savor this smell. Margouleff has thought of hiring a perfumer to try to re-create it. "When someone brings me a guitar, the first thing I do is smell it," he said. "Smell is a fingerprint. It's how I tell if it's real or not."

Receding into the warm amber light of the warehouse's middle distance, on both sides and a few tiers, were red-carpeted shelves of old cases packed as snug as library stacks. Here was a Beinecke of guitars. Margouleff explained the sorting system—make, model, serial number, with a chronological overlay. Gibsons, Fenders, Martins, Gretsches, D'Angelicos. In the open floor space were Oriental carpets, black leather couches and club chairs, dozens of vintage amps, coffee-table books, and an old Schwinn Sting Ray with a banana seat. It was not so much man cave as man arsenal, teeming yet tidy, the lair of a latter-day Count of Monte Cristo. The temperature stayed at sixty-eight, humidity at fifty per cent. Photography was forbidden.

The lion's share of the collection—almost six hundred instruments—was destined for the Met. A hundred and seventy-three had already travelled there last spring. (An earthquake hit when they finished loading the U-Haul.) Two more shipments were scheduled.

"The collection presents a representation of the American guitar that is pretty much complete," Margouleff said. "There's nowhere else on planet Earth where this exists."

Margouleff, who built out the warehouse himself, keeps some of his own collectibles here, too. He produced a battered guitar in a display case, with "Do Not Touch" scrawled on the body and the headstock snapped off. This was Old Yellow, the longtime test guitar at Manny's, which customers used to compare amplifiers. Another Rosebud. "Everyone handled that guitar," Margouleff said. "Jimi Hendrix, Jimmy Page, Eric Clapton. It's the first guitar I ever saw in a music store. When Manny's got sold to Sam Ash, they hung it on the wall. And then Sam Ash went bankrupt. I finally got to buy it." In this case, "I" meant "I."

He retreated through the guitar sanctuary, killing lights and setting alarms. "Now, with the Met gift, the world is going to know we're doing this," he said. "It's like trying to convince people that there are pyramids. It's one thing to say, 'There are pyramids.' It's another to show them the pyramids."

Medieval arms and armor, Shaker furniture, Chinese porcelain, Byzantine reliquary—such objects, well represented at the Met, are industrial art of another time and kind, a marriage of form and function, ornament and use. But one trait differentiates the music department. "The guitar is an object of art that's used to create art," Margouleff said at the Met one day.

"That's the tagline for our collection," Dobney replied.

"It's like having an exhibit of paintbrushes."

"Except the guitars exhibit a higher art and artistry themselves—first, as objects. There's high-quality craftsmanship, but it's different. The guitar is the

object of the people. We always talk about it as 'the people's instrument.' American music is bottom-up. So many art forms are top-down. It's different from the rest of our instruments collection, which is often for the élite."

A central thesis of the guitar collection is that the art these art objects created changed the world. Guitar-based American music begat the dominant pop music of the past century, which in turn was the leading edge of American pop culture's global conquest, or, if you're feeling patriotic, its benefaction. The guitar, by transitive property, broke down racial and class barriers, fought tyranny, freed up minds and bodies. "This machine kills fascists," Woody Guthrie scrawled on the body of his acoustic. It didn't kill them all. But it is hard to deny that the pinnacle and most optimistic incarnation of American culture is its music—the great melting pot of styles and genres and sounds. The guitar probably had more to do with this than any other instrument, especially once you count the electric bass, the machine that moves behinds.

"No guitar, and the world's a different place," Ziff said.

To a certain generation—perhaps that of the current donor class—this argument connects. For others, it may not. For every stodgy conservator who might consider the guitar a tawdry, lowbrow diversion, there's a cultural critic who dismisses it as an object of boomer nostalgia, about as musically relevant in this post-rockist era as the harpsichord. Let them cancel each other out, while Taylor Swift strums and the dad-rock back catalogue keeps the recording industry afloat. Max Hollein, anyway, refutes the idea that the collection is a bid for museum attendance, or for trendy attention. "Us doing this has nothing to do honestly with, Oh, we need to bring more people in the door," he said.

Dan Kershaw, the Met's exhibition-design manager, told me that, when the gallery opens, he hopes to show as many as a hundred and fifty guitars at a time, rotating objects in and out. But, he said, "we don't want it to look like a guitar store." The space, on a narrow mezzanine in the American Wing, presents challenges. "I'm glomming on to every inch the museum will let me have," Kershaw added. "I don't think all the curators are delighted."

"This is a complex institution," Hollein told me. "If you buy a contemporary work of art, I'm not sure everyone here applauds. The Met is put together of a multitude of different people, curators who speak with different voices about what art is. A contemporary curator has a very different idea of what art is than someone from Arms and Armor."

Kershaw designed "Play It Loud," both at the Met and at the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, and noted that, at the Met, the wall text describing each item tended to deëmphasize the musician it was associated with. "At the Hall of Fame, it was all about who played it," he said. "Here, it was manufacturer, craftsman, materials, date, then the musician." This reflected the museum's emphasis, which dovetails with that of the donors, on the object, not the celebrity provenance.

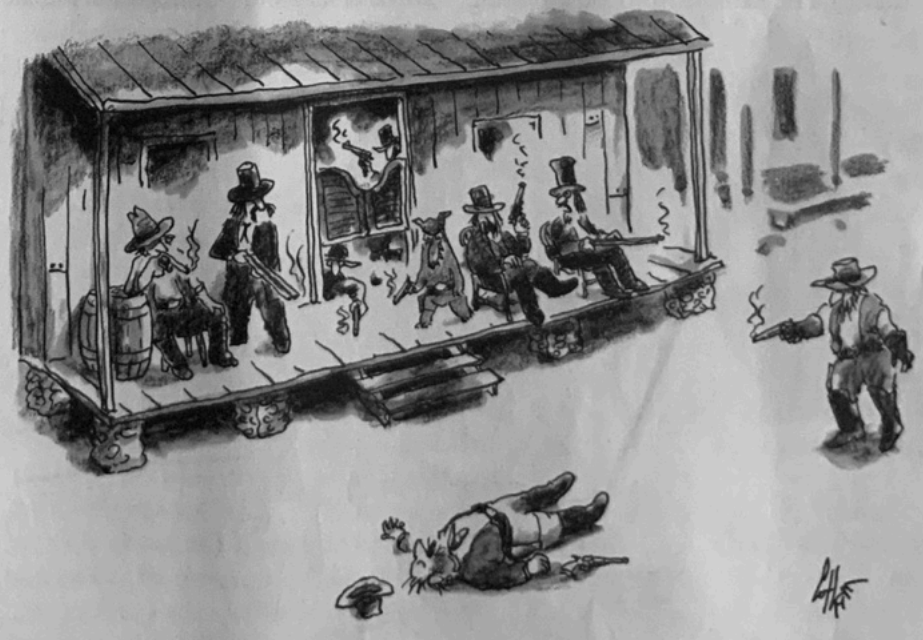
"Perry and I are not interested in memorabilia," Ziff said. "It's about a guitar's place in the arc of the story, not about who played it."

When people think of a guitar collector, they might imagine either a player who has a relentless desire for new toys or a rich souvenir hunter, like Jim Irsay, the owner of the Indianapolis Colts, who has amassed a trove of Americana, including an impressive array of rock-star guitars. (Margouleff cops to coveting at least one of them, the "going electric" Strat that Dylan played at Newport in 1965; Irsay outbid him, paying more than nine hundred thousand dollars.) Ziff isn't that guy.

There's another kind of guitar guy: he played growing up, and now, in middle age, ramps it up again and goes down the hole. Pandemic, empty nest, dwindling appetite for new friends and maybe even for the old ones, too. The guitar, like golf, invites solipsistic dissolution masquerading as self-actualization. Or perhaps it's the other way around. See the weekender in his basement, wearing pressed khakis and a Montauk hoodie, with his new Stevie Ray Vaughan Strat and his Fender Twin Reverb amp, working out the riffs in "Voodoo Chile" or "Midnight Rambler." Or else hunched over his phone, spamming friends with audio selfies and guilt-inducing invitations to his Friday-night dad-band bar set. I have a lot of friends who will take this description personally. I don't ask them to watch me play tennis.

Ziff isn't that guy, either. From the outset, he and Margouleff wanted the collection to tell the story of the guitar in America, from Christian Frederick Martin's arrival on these shores, in 1833, to the antebellum Spanish flamenco craze; from the invention of the Hawaiian lap steel guitar, before the turn of the century, and its influence on country music and the blues to, most prominently, the guitar's electrification, with an emphasis on its development and design in the years following the Second World War, the golden age of Fender and Gibson.

"Automobiles and guitars are manufactured objects," Margouleff said. But



"He had a quick temper, but who in these parts does not?"

"no two guitars are identical—less so than with, say, Chippendale. Nowadays, they may be, with modern manufacturing. But that's why we don't have the magic anymore." He talked about the Gibson acoustic guitars made in Kalamazoo, Michigan, during the war. These so-called Banner guitars, prized for their unique sound and feel, were made by women, whose touch, the theory goes, produced a different, superior instrument.

"It's not just Gibson," Dobney said. "We have a scholar here as a fellow who is studying the many Mexican American women who built Fender guitars during the golden age. They were winding the pickup coils, because they had the skills from being seamstresses to do this handwork." Some connoisseurs say they can differentiate between the sound of each woman's pickups.

It might pain a punker's heart to see private wealth and institutionalized high culture sanctify and cordon off these old troublemaker tools. Guitars should be played, not hoarded, or stranded in vitrines. But Ziff and Margouleff were adamant that these guitars be played. When visitors have passed through, Margouleff has been the one to set up the guitars—adjusting the action and pickups and intonation. The Met is figuring out how best to make them available to visiting musicians, recording artists, and maybe even students. (Andrés Segovia's guitars were donated to the Met, in 1986, under the condition that no one ever play them.) The exhibit won't be a petting zoo; the public won't be plucking strings or fiddling with knobs. But the collection is very much alive.

One afternoon in March, I met Margouleff on the Met's front steps, and we entered the Egyptian galleries, where, just past two ancient statues of the lion-headed goddess Sakhmet, a side door led into one stem in the museum's vast root system: a suite of offices and then a storage room, with linoleum flooring, fluorescent lights, and, on two walls, shelves stacked with guitars, almost all in their original cases. This was the first tranche of the Ziff collection.

Dobney, sweet-natured and solicitous—or else anxious, when civilians are bumping around the vault—presided with a colleague named Daniel Wheeldon, who pulled on a pair of blue nitrile gloves. Margouleff did his best to defer to the new owners as they conducted a show-and-tell, selecting more than a dozen guitars to delineate the story the collection purports to convey. "Perry knows everything," Dobney said. "Daniel and I are getting close."

Even though the bulk of the Ziff collection is from the twentieth century, it contains some earlier artifacts. The first piece Wheeldon produced, out of an elegant rosewood case, was a primitive gut-strung Martin acoustic, believed to be a presentation model for the 1853 Crystal Palace Exhibition, in what is now Bryant Park—a forerunner of the more affordable parlor guitars that proliferated with the arrival of mail-order catalogues in the late eighteen-hundreds. The next specimen was: the first production model of a 1924 Gibson L-5 archtop, signed by its designer, Lloyd Loar. It had steel strings, f-holes, and the so-called sunburst finish that guitars would have for a century to come.

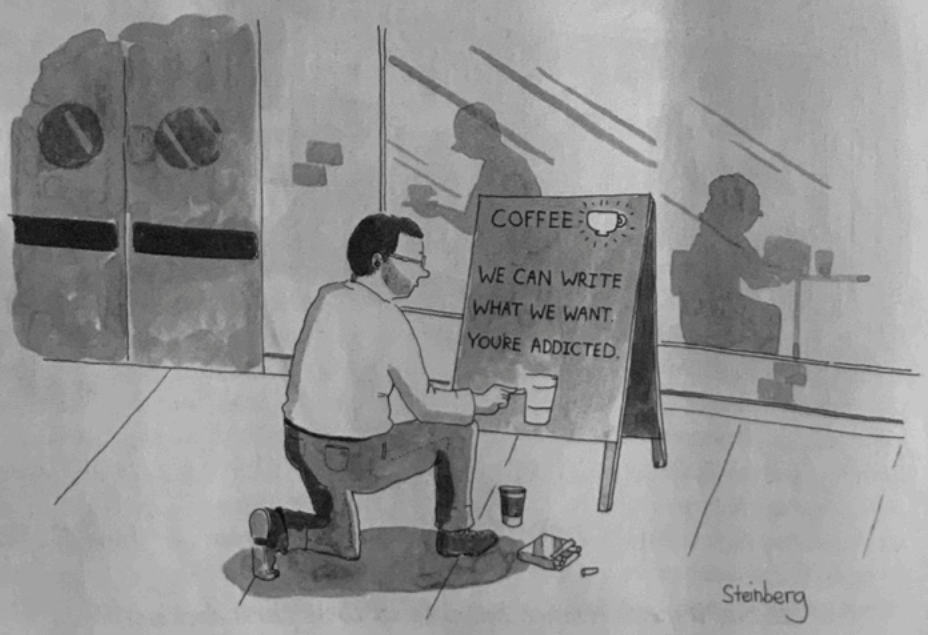
"If you looked at an automobile in 1924 and then looked at one today, it would be completely unrecognizable, the change is so dramatic," Margouleff said. "If you went to a music store today and bought a new Gibson L-5, it might look identical to this one, in every way. They had it right from Day One." Steel strings, louder than gut, enabled guitars to move out of the parlor and into public performance spaces. The larger the audience, the louder the instruments needed to be.

"That's the overarching story here, this American need for volume," Dobney said. "Bigger audiences, bigger impacts. The phonograph, the radio, and then electric guitars. You know, 'Hear me!'"

"And 'Look at me,'" Margouleff said. "Les Paul used to say he chose guitar because if you play piano, you're stuck behind the piano. If you play saxophone, you can't sing and play at the same time. If you want to be a performer in the front, the guitar is a romantic thing and an extension of the person. You hold it next to your body, you're embracing it, as you use it to tell your story. It's almost like a tango dancer dancing with his partner."

The guitar, as people often remark, suggests the shape of a woman and yet is often wielded as a kind of phallic substitute. Either way, it is fondled with two hands. For some, the lasciviousness adds to the appeal. For others, it's a turnoff. The guitar face, that soloist's expression of orgasmic delight, whether it be sincere or affected, can contain and project all that is poignant or debauched about virtuosity's lewd self-regard. It can be hard to keep a straight face, even when you're playing air guitar.

The guitars kept coming, like pitches at a batting cage. Before long, we reached the heart of the collection, the dawn of the solid-body electric guitar and, eventually, of rock and roll. "These guitars were really for music that didn't even exist yet," Margouleff said. Wheeldon presented the "Klunker," an Epiphone Zephyr DeLuxe that, in 1941, Les Paul modified to be essentially a solid-body—he bolted a steel bar into the body and sealed the f-holes. Later, Gibson, which



Paul endorsed, insisted that he put a Gibson decal on the headstock. But the case read "Mary Ford," who was Paul's wife and partner, and an ace as well. "Mary and Sister Rosetta Tharpe were the first two female rock stars," Margouleff said. "The instrument itself isn't sexist." Add Mother Maybelle Carter and Elizabeth Cotten to this particular Mt. Shredmore, and the story of the guitar is no longer as dude-centric as conventional wisdom deems it to be.

The next solid-body specimen was designed in Downey, California, in 1948, by a motorcycle builder and racer named Paul Bigsby. Merle Travis, the country-and-Western hot shot, had asked Bigsby for an electric guitar with the sustain of a Hawaiian lap steel guitar. "Bigsby built everything, including all the casting, the inlay, winding the pickup coils," Margouleff said. Downey was where Leo Fender first saw Travis playing a Bigsby guitar, which he then copied, to produce a prototype of the classic Fenders. Opening a battered case, Wheeldon unveiled the prototype, its white body paint chipped—an object not nearly as elaborate as the Bigsby and yet, in light of the Telecasters and Stratocasters to come, possibly more august. Next up was an original Fender Esquire and then an early Stratocaster prototype, with a half-melted pick guard. Its materials had been "self-destructing." "There was a lot of trial and error with the plastics," Margouleff said. "They were working with volatile chemicals and man-made junk. There's a reason Stradivariuses are still here. They're made entirely of wood." A pristine 1954 Strat was next, its shape as familiar and enduring as that of a spoon.

But the cream of the collection, and Ziff's particular obsession, was the Les Pauls of the late fifties, which, when they débuted, did not sell well. Wheeldon presented a 1959 Sunburst model, its cherry-red finish faded to yellow. This was the "Keithburst," which Keith Richards played on "The Ed Sullivan Show," the Rolling Stones' (and, it is believed, the Sunburst's) first appearance on American television, in 1964. "This was not a popular instrument at the time," Margouleff said. "It was out of production." He contends that Richards must have bought it in New York, on Music Row, though Richards has said that he got it in London. (In the early nineteen-fifties, the British government imposed import restrictions that affected American guitars, so they were uncommon in the U.K.) In England, Richards apparently shared it with Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page, among others, whetting their appetites for the older American instruments.

In all, 1964 was a fateful year for the guitar. After the Beatles' appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," every kid in America wanted one. "The companies couldn't keep up with the demand," Margouleff said. "The process got industrialized, mechanized, homogenized. The instruments were designed by accountants. The bean counters ruined everything. All the guitars they made after that were junk."

Margouleff handed me the Keithburst and, plugging it into a small amp, urged me to play. One grows accustomed to never touching the art, but I hit some open chords, the few I know. By gum, whether it was the instrument itself or the ghosts of fingers past, the sound was rich and sassy, and moved me to make faces.

This spring, the Met hosted a couple of private concerts for museum donors, with the performers playing Ziff guitars. The first night, it was the singer-songwriter Rosanne Cash and her husband, John Leventhal. Two weeks later, it was Steve Miller with Ernie Sites, the "Yodeling Cowboy." A few days before their performance, Miller and Sites visited the storage room, along with the curators and other staff, to get acquainted with the instruments and choose a few to play. A dozen or so guitars were arranged on stands in a semicircle. Space was scarce. As everyone got settled, Miller's wife asked Margouleff if the guitars had been his. "I built the collection," he replied. "My friend funded it."

Miller played the intro to "The Joker," and sang, "Some people call me the space cowboy, some call me the gangster of love," then stopped and swapped guitars. He and Sites tried different ones, handing them back and forth, replacing them on their stands, as Wheeldon and Dobney looked on nervously. Margouleff sat along a wall, posture stiff, restraining himself from saying something about Sites's jean jacket. The metal buttons might scratch the guitars. Not his children anymore. Finally, Dobney spoke up: "Ernie, can I get you to take off your jacket?"

"Whoever has set up these guitars, I have a bunch of guitars that could use some help," Miller said. Margouleff, who had set them up, said nothing.

Miller, who is eighty-one, is on the visiting committee of the musical-instruments department. He owns some four hundred guitars, though mostly newer and more customized ones than Ziff's. Like Ziff and Margouleff, he's coy about his collection's whereabouts. When he brings people to see it, he instructs them, "Tell everybody you saw this collection in Los Angeles." (It is not in Los Angeles.)

Miller told me, "When I heard about this big collection of Dirk's, I was, like, Yeah, I've seen some pretty big collections. But this one was serious and scholarly. They were so far ahead of the game, so much smarter than everybody. In the eighties, I was going, 'Five thousand dollars for a Stratocaster? Fuck you, I can buy a brand-new one for two-fifty!'" These days, the old Strat might sell for fifty thousand dollars.

Now, playing these museum guitars, he was stunned by the tones coming out of them. Each axe got him going: "It sounds like a guitar that was made this morning." "That's the nicest G chord I've ever heard." "Brazilian hardwood—beautiful, man."

"Box 'em up, we'll take 'em," Sites said.

With Les Paul's Klunker flat on his lap, Miller, who is Paul's godson, fiddled with knobs and teased out wild noises. "I can't believe how good these pickups sound," he said. "Les made them on the counter in the kitchen. He gave me some before he died."

Miller asked about a rare Fender: "Can I just look at it?"

Margouleff gestured toward Dobney and said, "It's up to him."

"Can we record with some of these, ever?" Miller asked.

"Sure," Dobney said. "We'll talk."

Miller shook his head. "Man, I'll bet they don't have this much fun in the Greco-Roman-sculpture department."

"Who knows what they do," a Met conservator said, under his breath. ♦