

LIFESTYLE

Gibson > Lifestyle > Features > What Were They Thinking?! (An

What Were They Thinking?! (An Angry Reader's Guide to the *Gibson.com* Top 50 Guitarists of All Time)

Michael Wright | 05.28.2010

Think it's exasperating reading a Top 50 Guitarists of All Time list and seeing your faves sink down to unbearable rankings... or worse, not make the list at all? Try compiling one. At least readers can focus their vitriol on the staff who compiled it (though if you didn't vote, shame on you). But to be on such a staff compiling those votes, watching them come in from fans, your peers and a host of musicians you admire – and watching it all, to borrow an expression from our English-born editor Andrew, *go pear-shaped*...well, that's a little tougher to swallow.

We all have our own idea of what that Top 50 should look like ([here's mine](#)). And there are guitarists whose non-inclusion borders on criminal. John McLaughlin, Randy Rhoads, Steve Vai, Brian Setzer, Carlos Santana, Steve Morse... the list goes on and on – though, honestly, the only satisfactory Top 50 list would have about a hundred names on it. To ease the pain, here are some props for but a few of those who we feel deserved to make the list:

James Burton

At the ripe old age of 14, James Burton was already a hired gunslinger, playing in the house band for the *Louisiana Hayride* radio show. Later in his teens, he moved to California and joined Ricky Nelson's band... and never looked back. One of rock and country's all-time great session men, Burton was a part of L.A.'s famous "Wrecking Crew." He was the guitarist of choice for everyone from Jerry Lee Lewis, The Everly Brothers and Johnny Burnette to Emmylou Harris, Gram Parsons and John Denver to Elvis Costello, Brad Paisley and Johnny Cash. That all-time great riff on Dale Hawkins' "Suzie Q"? James Burton. Most famously, he was Elvis Presley's guitarist from the late '60s until The King's death in 1977. Think those Scotty Moore licks are tough? Try playing them in Vegas double-time. – *Michael Wright*



Bill Kirchen

"Hot Rod Lincoln" on its own practically necessitates Bill Kirchen's inclusion on this list. I'm not talking about the wonderful Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen version from the '70s (though Kirchen's restless rockabilly guitar on that track is impressive). No, I mean the version Kirchen plays now, when he tours. During an extended version of the hit, Kirchen runs through a veritable history of pop music, nicking riffs from country artists (Johnny Cash, Marty Robbins), bluesmen (Muddy Waters, Elmore James), early rock legends (Chuck Berry, Scotty Moore), British Invaders (Beatles, Stones), punk rockers (Sex Pistols) and almost every other guitarist in *Gibson.com*'s Top 50 – and nailing every single one. It's an astounding exercise that could only be achieved by the most versatile and talented of guitarists. That's what Kirchen is. He's famous for his big, bold twang, but he's just as good at swing and honky-tonk. There's no guitarist I'd rather see at play. – *Bryan Wawzenek*



Mark Knopfler

Probably the only guitarist here who likes a "cuppa" tea during a concert, Mark Knopfler and his distinctive Lonnie Johnson-inspired fingerpicking guitar style first broke through with Dire Straits in the '70s and '80s. His deceptively easy and fluid style is immediately identifiable – the understated guitar work perfectly complementing his low-key stage persona. A notable songwriter, Knopfler saw his English take on American roots music take over the world in the mid-'80s when he became a bona fide pop star thanks to Dire Straits' *Brothers in Arms* – the album that spawned worldwide smash "Money For Nothing." Uncomfortable in the rock star role, Knopfler turned instead to soundtracks and country blues projects like the Notting Hillbillies, and playing guitar with artists he truly admires like Buddy Guy, Emmylou Harris, Eric Clapton and Bob Dylan. – *Andrew Vaughan*



Brian May

Stargazer and veteran rock star Brian May's style incorporates the full breadth of what an electric guitar is capable of – from slabs of menace, a la "Death on Two Legs," to the delicate arpeggios of "It's Late," which seamlessly roll into his trademark AC30 growl. He is *dynamics* incarnate. With unique gear at his disposal, such as the "fireplace" guitar he built with his father, he has been among the most adventurous orchestrators in the studio with no loss of power or grandeur in a live context, either. Who can forget the reinterpretations that make *Live Killers* among the most essential live albums of all time? The man commands respect, having provided the blueprint for shredding with taste and tone in the context of songs that are unforgettable. In this, he has vigilantly sidestepped the typical criticism that plagues many players who also possess notable technical prowess. He is, now and forever, rock and roll royalty. – *Shane Sanders*



Rik Emmett

I was 15 years old when I saw Rik Emmett perform for the first time. I had heard Triumph a lot on the radio – it was the early '80s and they were riding high on two very successful albums, *Allied Forces* and *Never Surrender*. I jumped at the chance to see Triumph when my buddy scored a couple of tickets. I didn't know much about them other than their hits – didn't even know they were a trio – but when Rik Emmett started singing and playing, it was absolutely jaw-dropping. His voice, of course, is amazing, but it was what he did with his guitar that boggled this fledgling guitarist's mind. The blistering leads, the intricate and jazzy chord phrasings – this was rock music, for heaven's sake! What the hell kind of a chord is that?! Between the lasers and pyrotechnics and dazzling visuals – all hallmarks of a monster Triumph show – Rik even took a little time out to perform an instrumental piece on a classical guitar. The biggest pleasure, however, has been watching Rik evolve post-Triumph as an artist and guitarist. From jazz and blues to rock, classical – you name it – Rik Emmett easily ranks among the elite of the elite. – *Sean Dooley*



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