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Les Paul's 1954 Gibson "Black Beauty" Guitar Sells for \$335,500 at Auction

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Last night, Indianapolis Colts owner Jim Irsay paid \$335,500 for a controversial guitar, Les Paul's very own 1954 Les Paul Custom "Black Beauty."

According to *The New York Times*, Irsay's guitar curator, Christopher McKinney, placed the bid at the February 19 auction, which took place at Guernsey's in New York City.

"I know there was a lot of negative talk from a few guys who were well respected but look, it's an important guitar and I'm happy to have it as part of my collection," Irsay told *The Washington Post*.

The owner of Black Beauty was Tom Doyle, Les Paul's long-time guitar tech, friend and sound man. Doyle also was selling other Les Paul memorabilia through the Guernsey's auction, titled The Tom Doyle Collection, including a prototype Gretsch 6120, called Dark Eyes, that belonged to Chet Atkins. Carrying a pre-auction estimate of \$50,000 to \$1 million, the Gretsch didn't reach its reserve price and wasn't sold.

Notable sales included an RCA 74-B mic with stand (\$2,000), a Stevens pickup winder from the Gibson factory that went for \$1,600 and Les's DeArmond Tremolo Control, which sold for \$1,000. The bargain of the night was probably the Ampex 400 recorder that sold for \$500 (all of the other items that did sell went for \$500, including Mary Ford's music stand). Nine of the 17 items offered for sale were sold.

In the end, however, all eyes were on the Black Beauty.

"I don't believe it's the "Holy Grail," Irsay said. "I don't think there is a Holy Grail, frankly. But it really enhances my collection significantly. And I'm really happy to have it."

"We know the importance of the guitar historically," McKinney told James Barron of *The New York Times*. "This guitar was used by Les in recordings, in television. It was his main guitar for innovations. It shows his thinking and progress as an inventor. A lot of the things that were done to this guitar went on to become industry standard."

It was reported that McKinney was ready to bid up to \$625,000 for the '54 Custom.

Pre-auction press about Black Beauty was rampant, and some sale estimates for the guitar were in the strata of \$1 million or more.

The guitar also stirred up quite a debate in vintage circles, as well as in two critical stories by *Washington Post* reporter Geoff Edgers. *Guitar Player* magazine was called out for calling Black Beauty "The Grail" and for stating the 1954 Custom was the "genesis of all Les Paul guitars to follow."

According to Mike Molenda, *Guitar Player's* editor in chief, the magazine stood by calling Black Beauty "The Grail," due to its early and essential importance in Les Paul's experimentation for his ultimate sound, as well as some "corrections" to elements that Les was not happy with on the original 1952 Les Paul goldtop. Les apparently had threatened to take his name off of the guitar, had Gibson's Ted McCarty and others at the Gibson factory not come up with something he wanted to play for the early 1953/1954 Les Paul Custom prototype (which was made "custom" for Les—though some called it a "pre-production" model).

However, *Guitar Player* apologized to readers for fumbling the "genesis" issue in the April 2015 issue of the magazine. While GP still feels Doyle had some compelling data here, vintage guitar experts took issue with the specifics, and we have invited the Les Paul Legacy series author, Robb Lawrence, to provide a historical timeline in our April 2015 issue to clarify the Les Paul guitar's production.

"I think we can take a lot of little things from this," said Tom Wittrock, co-owner of the Les Paul Forum, in the post-auction article filed by Edgers for *The Washington Post*. "One, I don't think it was worth getting worked up. Two, the method of marketing it, it didn't help. I don't know if it hurt, but I don't think it helped."

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