

Seminal Star of the Solo Guitar

The sneak audition of a young black Texas-born guitarist, named Charlie Christian, helped change the course of pop music.

During the Big Band era of the 1930s, guitars were typically non-amplified, acoustic instruments in the rhythm section. Christian was among a few musical innovators experimenting with *electrified* guitars played as *solo* instruments.

In 1939, New York music producer John Hammond got wind of Charlie's new style. Determined that big band leader Benny Goodman should take a listen, Hammond sneaked the guitarist on stage during the dinner break at a Goodman show in Los Angeles. After the break, an annoyed-but-willing Goodman put Charlie to the test on a tune called "Rose Room."

Hammond later recalled that the rendition jammed for 47 minutes to a grand reception. At age 23, Charlie Christian joined one of America's top bands and within weeks was a national star.

Born in 1916 in Bonham (65 miles northeast of Dallas), Charles Henry Christian came from a musical family. His father, Clarence James, on trumpet, and mother, Willie Mae, on piano, accompanied silent movies at Bonham's Best Theater.

The father went blind in 1918, and the family moved near relatives in Oklahoma. As a teenager, Charlie played guitar on the streets of Oklahoma City's "Deep Deuce" section, jamming with blues great T-Bone Walker and other notables passing through.

Charlie also listened to jazzy Western Swing innovators--such as steel guitarists in Bob Wills' Texas Playboys band--who played amplified instruments. Charlie tried out the technique during the 1936 Texas Centennial in Dallas, where he played an acoustic guitar, amplified through a microphone held in place by rubber bands.

In 1937, Charlie acquired his first electric guitar, a Gibson ES150, and established a following locally with his own band, then nationally with Goodman. *Downbeat* magazine rated him America's best guitarist from 1939 to 1941. The Goodman hit, "Solo Flight," featuring Charlie Christian, topped *Billboard* magazine's Harlem Hit Parade in 1943, a year after Charlie's untimely death from tuberculosis.

The guitar great is buried at Gates Hill Cemetery in Bonham, where the Fannin County Museum displays a permanent exhibit on his life and music.

Biographer Peter Broadbent, author of *Charlie Christian: Solo Flight--The Seminal Electric Guitarist* (Ashley Mark Publ. Co., 2003) says Charlie Christian "single-handedly elevated the guitar from the rhythm section to the status of a front line solo instrument" and ranks with Louis Armstrong and Charlie Parker in the development of jazz. Because of his influence on blues and rock music, he was even inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Texas blues legend Jimmie Vaughan adds: " Without Charlie Christian, jazz and blues wouldn't sound the way they do today or be nearly as popular. Everybody might still be playing a banjo!"

Released in 2002, a re-mastered, four-CD box set, *Charlie Christian: The Genius Of The Electric Guitar* (Columbia/Legacy), comprises the first comprehensive collection of Christian playing with the Goodman Sextet and Orchestra, 1939-1941.

--Randy Mallory, Tyler

RESOURCES:

-- *Charlie Christian: The Genius Of The Electric Guitar* (Columbia/Legacy) liner notes (attached)

--Peter Broadbent: peter.broadbent@ntlworld.com

--Handbook of Texas Online for Charlie Christian

--Interview with Tom Scott, dir., Fannin Co. Museum, 903-583-8042

-- <http://www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/patc/electricguitar/> and <http://www.si.edu/lemelson/guitars/noframes/01electr.htm> re: early electric guitars

--<http://www.charlie-christian.com/>

-- <http://www.musicweb.uk.net/encyclopaedia/c/C129.HTM>

--Charlie Christian: Musician by *Craig R. McKinney*, found on--<http://www.charlie-christian.com/>

-- *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz*, Oxford University Press.

via: http://www.pbs.org/jazz/biography/artist_id_christian_charlie.htm

--*Country Music USA*, Bill C. Malone, p. 162 re: Muryel "Zeke" Campbell