

Women, war and wonderful guitars

Description



"Laura the Luthier"

Illustration by artist Vivian Shih for [She Shreds Magazine](#), 2015.

Source: sheryldavis.org

One woman's war

It's 1939, in Edinburgh, Scotland. An 18 year-old Scottish woman was tired of living at home with her family in an Edinburgh tenement (block of flats). The usual path for women of her age was to find employment in an office or store and/or find a husband and become a housewife.

She longed for adventure and happened to pass a British Army recruiting post one day. There were rumblings of trouble ahead with the rise of Nazi Germany, and it was clear that the British armed forces needed to prepare for the worst. The Army had started taking women the year before – the [Auxiliary Territorial Service](#) (ATS), was formed in September 1938, initially as a women's voluntary service.

Sensing that this could be the passport out into the world that she'd been looking for, she signed up. Not long after, in September 1939, the Second World War started, and she got her call-up papers. On hearing the news her father sombrely informed her: "You know you are no longer an individual and are now only a number".

Undeterred, she started in the Army – at first still living at home and without a uniform, but later fully equipped and on postings around the country. While mostly doing clerical work to begin with, she also received basic army training, including arm to arm combat and rifle skills. Because of her prowess at

the rifle range, she was also trained as a sniper with instructions on what to do in the event that Britain was invaded.



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She never had to put her sniper skills to the test, but did work in a variety of places across a range of jobs, including signals and anti-aircraft defences. She experienced the ups and downs of wartime service, made some life-long friends, and dated quite a few nice young soldiers – some of whom did not make it through the war, and one of whom later became her husband.

Early in the war, women were not posted abroad, but this changed as the war progressed. Her first overseas posting was to Brussels, where she worked mostly on signals. She was on signals duty on 8 May 1945 and received the signal from British High Command that marked the ceasefire and end of the war in Europe. She'd certainly escaped her humdrum home existence!

Strong women in a man's world

The young woman who ran off to join the Army was my mother, Agnes Sellar, who later married George Hobbs who was also in the Army. It was only when she was in her 80s that she told us some of her wartime experiences. The independence, stoicism and resilience she learned during the war years stayed with her all her life – through losing her first child at birth, losing her husband who was killed on active service in Cyprus in 1956, and bringing up a child as a single, working mother back in Scotland.

As that child, it was normal for me to have a strong, independent woman in charge. I'm fortunate to now have another strong, independent woman as my wife, and another as my daughter. When I was growing up, it never really occurred to me that women were anything other than equals, and it was only later that I realised that it was still very much "a Man's World" in which women had far fewer opportunities and were subject to all sorts of discrimination and, sometimes, harassment.

I realise now that, without exception, all my lecturers at university in the early 1970s were male. I recently found an old 1982 photograph of the staff and Honours students in the Botany Department at

the University of Aberdeen, where I did my PhD and then worked on staff part-time. The front row are the students – roughly 50/50 male/female – and there are a couple of women support staff here and there at the edges. But in the central part of the photo, the academic staff are all (bar one temporary visitor) male.



The Department of Botany at the University of Aberdeen, 1982. I'm the hairy guy in the middle of the back row.

When I moved to Australia in 1984, I joined CSIRO in Western Australia. The scientific staff there were all male too, and in the General Division of which we were part, there were 125 research scientists of whom 5 were female.

Luckily, things have changed a bit since then. And when I went on to run a research group of my own, there were consistently more women than men staff members and students – and I had a wonderful bunch of women colleagues. But there's still a way to go before the playing field is even vaguely level in the tertiary education sector and elsewhere.



My research group at the University of Western Australia, 2014. I'm in the middle again, but with slightly less hair this time.

“Pretty good for a girl”



Nancy Wilson rose to fame in the 1970s alongside her older sister, Ann, in the rock band Heart. Source: [Active.fm/Quotes](#)

When I spent a year at the University of California, Santa Barbara in 1976-77, I stayed for the first quarter in an international dorm on campus. Every day at about the same time, an undergrad in the adjacent dorm block obviously got tired of studying and instead blasted a track or two from the “[Dreamboat Annie](#)” album by Heart across campus at full volume. I got to know “Magic Man” and “Crazy on You” pretty well. Heart was led by the Wilson sisters, Ann and Nancy. Nancy Wilson is [credited](#) as being “responsible for some of the greatest guitar moments in rock history”

And yet, in the early 1970s when she was starting out, she regularly heard the comment that she was “[pretty good for a girl](#)”.

Girls just didn’t play rock guitar back then, it would appear. Certainly, most rock and blues guitarists were male, although there have been some [standout women players](#) too – [Memphis Minnie](#), [Sister Rosetta Tharpe](#), [Bonnie Raitt](#) and, more recently, [Samantha Fish](#), to name but a few – and not just rock and blues but most other genres as well.

And it’s the same with guitar builders. Guitar making has predominantly been a male domain – most of the people we’ve met in previous posts have been males. Lovely human beings without exception, but definitely male. But, again, there have been a few pioneer women who have entered the world of guitar building, and their numbers are increasing. We met Jayne Henderson in an [earlier post](#). Canadian [Linda Manzer](#) led the charge, joined by [Kathy Wingert](#) and [others](#).

And they’re really good at it – as good, if not better, than many of their male counterparts. English guitar maker [Rosie Heydenrych](#) summed it up: “As well as trying to develop myself in the art of guitar making, I am equally engaged in showing through my work that women can compete on the same level as our male counterparts.”

We'll explore the world of women guitar makers in more depth in a later post. But here, we'll look at a fascinating story that highlights the fact that there's a historical precedent for women building pretty darned good guitars.

A guitar moment

The Gibson flattop guitar came in a battered case with no handle. It had been in storage for a while and had a coating of dust and strings that had seen better days. This guitar had seen a lot of life. The back and sides had long lost a lot of their finish. A couple of cracks in the back appeared to have been fixed at some point. But otherwise it was structurally in good shape and sounded OK.

I took the guitar home, gave it a clean-up and polish and some new strings. It looked like it was happy to have some attention. And man, when I tuned it up and played a few chords, it just burst into life. I had heard about these "Oh wow" experiences when you first play a guitar and it just sounds completely amazing, but I thought people were exaggerating. I've had some amazing first impressions of guitars, but this beat up old beauty made me just about fall off my stool.

The guitar was a Gibson JG2 and had a gold banner on the headstock that proclaimed "Only a Gibson is Good Enough". It was made in Kalamazoo, Michigan in 1943.

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“Only a Gibson is Good Enough”

Julius Bellson, who was in charge of personnel at Gibson during World War II, wrote and self-published a history of Gibson, “[The Gibson Story](#)” in 1973. This book is almost impossible to get hold of, although it was available for a time to download from a website run by former Gibson CEO, Henry Juskiewicz, who we met in [a previous post](#). The website is no longer operational.

Bellson wrote that during WWII restrictions “forced us to stop the manufacture of musical instruments”.

Similarly, Tom Wheeler’s “[American Guitars: An Illustrated History](#)” (1992) stated: “Gibson guitar production effectively ceased from 1942 to 1945”

So, what to make of my “1943” Gibson? Is it wrongly dated? That wouldn’t be surprising, given the haphazardness of Gibson’s serial numbering systems.

“Complicated, thorough, illogical, accurate, ambiguous, specific, non-existent: these adjectives describe Gibson’s application of serial numbers on their guitars made since 1925. During the period covered by this book, Gibson has used no fewer than eight different numbering systems” that range from dead-accurate (the current one) to haphazard and chaotic (most of the others).”

“Here are a few of the variables that make Gibson-dating so exasperating and often interesting: the company used both serial numbers and factory order numbers (FON) simultaneously; they used one but not the other; they sometimes used neither; they liked some numbers so much that they used the same ones – duplicates, in other words – over and over again, on different models and in different years; and when they did exist, numbers were sometimes written and sometimes rubber-stamped, sometimes in ink and sometimes in near-invisible pencil, and sometimes stamped into the wood itself, though in various locations on the guitars”

“At the bottom line is this sober note: there usually isn’t a simple way to date a Gibson by the serial number alone”.

For 1942-46 Flat-tops, they state: “Serial numbers are seldom found on flat-tops from this era, and some instruments do not even have Factory Order Numbers. When present, the FONs contain four digits, stamped in ink on the neck bloc, indicating the batch number. This is followed by a two-digit number in red pencil, indicating the sequence in that batch of guitars, usually not more than 46 per batch.”

My guitar is FON 2131-27. That puts it fairly and squarely as being produced in 1943.

[Gibson’s Fabulous Flat-top Guitars](#)

It actually turns out to be abundantly clear that Gibson continued to produce guitars during the war.

And the “Only a Gibson is Good Enough” banner only appeared on guitars between 1942-45.

In [“Gibson’s Fabulous Flat-top Guitars”](#), originally published in 1994 with a second edition in 2009, Eldon Whitford, David Vinopal and Dan Erlewine write about the LG-2 being introduced in 1942 and provide examples of wartime instruments. They also provide a list of Factory Order Numbers covering the period 1942-1945. Similarly, the encyclopaedic “Spann’s Guide to Gibson 1902-1941” published by Joseph E Spann in 2011 doesn’t actually stop in 1941 as the title suggests, but also covers the wartime period and provides an extensive listing of FONs for guitars produced between 1940 and 1945.

Tom Mulhern, writing in the 1994 book [“Gibson Guitars: 100 Years of an American Icon”](#) wrote that during the war, “Gibson, like most other companies, had to put all of its peacetime activities aside”. The workforce made electrical and mechanical radar assemblies and other war-related items. However, rather than saying that all guitar production ceased, Mulhern instead suggests that “Only about 10 percent of Gibson’s activities were related to musical instrument manufacture, and the shortages of materials forced heavy rethinking of even the most fundamental design features.” (e.g., no metal truss rods strengthening the neck)

Mulhern also included a photo of the wartime Gibson workforce that had the title “During World War II the ranks of female workers increased dramatically at 225 Parsons Street” (the address of the Gibson factory in Kalamazoo). Obviously, as well as a shortage of materials, Gibson probably experienced a shortage of male employees as men went into the armed forces. While my mum had joined the army at the start of the war, many women in the US, UK and elsewhere contributed to the war effort by replacing the men who had worked in manufacturing and [agriculture](#) before departing for the war.



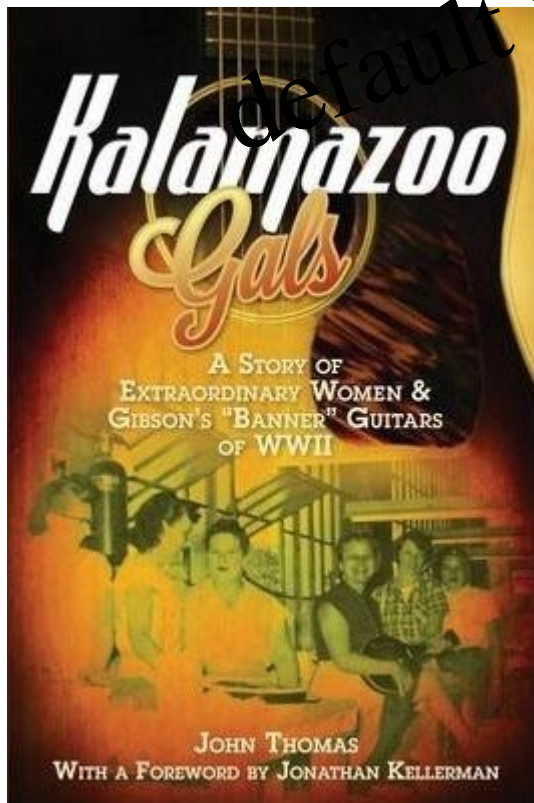
1944 photo of Gibson staff outside the Kalamazoo Factory. Source: [Guitar Interactive Magazine](#)

Laura the Luthier

The photo begs an obvious question – one that is explored in great detail in John Thomas’s 2012 book “[Kalamazoo Gals](#)”. If most of the people in that photo outside the Gibson factory were women, does that mean that the Gibson guitars built during the war years were made by women?

One version of what happened is that the women worked mostly on manufacturing war-related items – and the guitars were mostly made by the small number of older, experienced men who remained at the factory because they were too old for active service.

Another perspective is that the women did, indeed, get involved in the guitar making process in a big way. And it’s this perspective that John Thomas investigated very meticulously in his book – including conducting interviews with surviving women who had been Gibson employees during the war years.



From their accounts and other material in the book, there can be little doubt that, yes, the women played a big part in manufacturing the 9000 or so guitars and many other instruments that came out of the Kalamazoo factory between 1942 and 1945. That’s given rise to the picture of “[Laura the Luthier](#)” – the guitar equivalent of “[Rosie the Riveter](#)”, the wartime poster girl encouraging women to join the industries supplying the war effort.



Rosie the Riveter

And it seems like they did rather a good job as well. The “Banner” Gibson flat-tops are considered to be superior to similar models built either before or after the war. Indeed, some of the Banner guitars, especially the jumbos, have been [hailed](#) as some of the best-sounding guitars ever produced – albeit that there is a fair degree of variation in the guitars because of the woods used depended on what was available. Indeed, it’s likely that the introduction of the smaller-bodied LG-2 and its siblings was a direct result of the need to reduce material usage.

1943 Gibson Banner Southern Jumbo guitar played by Mark Agnesi from Norman’s Rare Guitars

Why were the guitars so good? John Thomas suggests that one of the reasons is that the women employees produced guitars with thinner tops – he went as far as doing medical imaging scans of banner and other guitars to compare their characteristics. It’s certainly clear that quality of build did not suffer as the women took over, but rather it probably improved.

How could this be? The women recruited into the workforce would not have any experience in the various complex manual tasks needed in guitar making. Most would probably never have worked with woodworking tools (even in my day at high school, the boys did woodwork while the girls did “home economics”, a fancy name for cooking and sewing. It took well into my adult years before I learned to cook a half-decent meal, and sewing machines are still some form of voodoo as far as I’m concerned).

But the women did come equipped with excellent manual skills from their experiences with sewing and other hand-crafts. From the first-hand accounts of the women employees, it would appear that they were initially shown what to do in the various stages of manufacture and then picked it up pretty quickly.

Laura the Luthier? Really??

Not everyone agrees with this idea, though. It seems that, even in the face of pretty good evidence, some folks find it hard to accept that women could have been responsible for producing what some

think are the finest guitars ever made. For instance, a 2016 blog on [True Vintage Guitar](#) suggests: “While it has been reported that women built the banner applied Gibson guitars, it’s more likely that the small group of older and more skilled craftsmen did most of the building since they had worked in the factory building guitars for many years. Many of the women of the Gibson factory during the war had just entered the workforce in an industry that requires technical expertise and years of experience.” (This observation maybe ignores the trend discussed in an [earlier blog](#) towards employing more less-skilled employees in Gibson factories!)

Interestingly, Gibson themselves have seemed to continue to want to sweep under the carpet the idea that women made guitars during WW2.

There has been some speculation that this may be because acknowledging that large numbers of guitars were built during the war might reflect badly on Gibson’s contribution to the war effort, whoever built them. Remember that the first history of the company explicitly stated that they built no guitars during the war.

However, Thomas’s research for his book revealed that Gibson complied with all restrictions, including production and material use limitations. So, they didn’t actually break any rules. And other guitar companies – notably Martin – continued to make guitars during the war. And, of course, all this was nearly 80 years ago, and the Gibson company leadership has changed several times since then – so, really, are people going to care that much now? And Gibson have twice made re-issues of the Banner Guitars, once in [2013](#) and more recently in [2020](#) – both times with the date “1942” in the naming.

Instead, Thomas was confident that the only explanation for Gibson’s wartime secrecy was its apparent belief that the buying public would not embrace women-made guitars. Hence, Gibson asserted in advertisements of the day that it would not build guitars until “the boys come home.” Certainly, when the boys did come home, many of the women left employment. And the “Only a Gibson is Good Enough” promptly disappeared from guitar headstocks.

OK, it seems weird now, but maybe that may have been semi-plausible back in the 1940s, when men were still men and women were mostly in the kitchen. An old male company executive could have assumed that the guitar-buying public was not ready to hear that some Gibson guitars had been made by women (gasp!).

No gals for Gibson?

What’s more puzzling, though, is Gibson’s more recent on again/off again approach to recognizing the contributions of the Kalamazoo Gals after Thomas’s book was published. Thomas and his book were at first embraced, then denied by the Gibson Company. Initially they looked keen to partner in efforts to promote the Kalamazoo Gals book, but then mysteriously withdrew support. Why Gibson shifted its position on the role of these female guitar makers – and the guitars they made – is unclear. As [Michigan NPR](#) observed in 2016, the story kept getting stranger.

Talking Guitar – Kalamazoo Gals with Prof. John Thomas (2016)

The city of Kalamazoo embraced the story, setting up an exhibition on the women guitar makers at the old factory celebrating these women. The story was picked up in lots of places and garnered lots of

interest, including a [British radio program](#) on the topic by none other than rock legend [Suzi Quatro](#). In this program “*Suzi Quatro unravels the mystery of the Kalamazoo Gals, quite possibly, the greatest craftswomen written out of American guitar history.*” Sadly, the program doesn’t appear to be accessible any more.

And yet, Gibson pulled back from acknowledging the role the women played in making the Banner guitars. As the radio article asked: “This seems like a feel-good story. Women stepping in, helping out during the war, making fantastic instruments. So why won’t Gibson acknowledge that these women made guitars?”

Who knows what went on in Gibson boardrooms at the time, but remember that the story of women making guitars during the war emerged at pretty much the same time that Gibson was still smarting from all sorts of other troubles, including [being raided by Fish and Wildlife officials](#) in relation to illegal wood imports. They may either simply have not had enough bandwidth to deal with a revisionist story of part of the company’s history, or they may have reverted to standard corporate behaviour of obfuscation and denial.

A look at discussion threads and blogs at the time reveal the prevalence of opinions in this regard:

Kalamazoo Gals, Gibson Guitars, what are you thinking...?

I hoped against hope that it wasn’t just garden variety sexism, but maybe that’s what’s behind this. Though I would think showing such willingness to allow women to demonstrate their instrument making talents would be a PR bonanza for Gibson.

Jim Booth, [Scholars and Rogues](#)

Modern Gibson’s reaction to a vintage Gibson story 2016

“On the one hand, that makes sense, especially since they’ve been in government trouble recently with the rosewood bust. But on the other, isn’t this cover-up attitude just asking for trouble? They should have acted casual and supported the feel-good story since the cat is already out of the bag on that one anyway. Now people are going to be all suspicious and dig up other past funny business...”

“Wasn’t it Gibson who was involved in an incident for using illegally acquired wood a few years ago. Seems like they have a history of coverups so no surprise here? Take all the MBAs and image consultants and those irrelevant to making the guitars out of the equation and perhaps things would be different?”

[Acoustic Guitar Forum](#)

But wait, so after Gibson went bust in 2018 and [was resurrected with a new CEO](#), surely there is the opportunity to take the Kalamazoo Gals story and celebrate it? Maybe – I corresponded with John Thomas recently, and he indicated that “Gibson has tentatively indicated that it is embracing its history and the Gals’ story.”

As with other things, there’s probably plenty of corporate ethos that still needs to be changed. But

maybe a firm acknowledgement from Gibson that, yes, women did make fabulous guitars during World War 2 would provide a clear signal that the troubled company has finally turned the corner back to better times. And give due recognition to a bunch of amazing women who, like many more in that era, grabbed the opportunity and showed how much and how well they could do.

The Glen Miller Orchestra – “I’ve got a Gal in Kalamazoo”, from the 1942 movie “Orchestra Wives”. My mum loved Glen Miller and remembered dancing to his music many times during the war years.

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