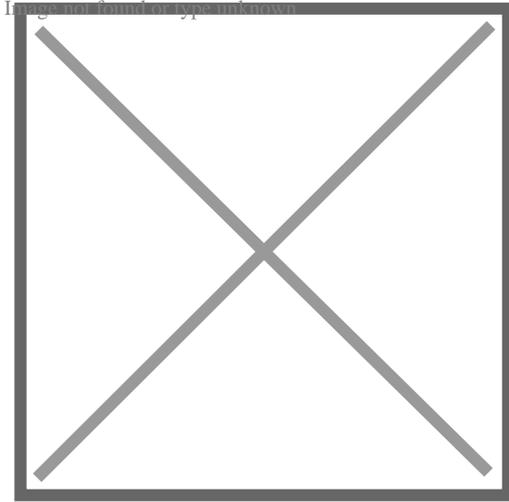


Ethical consumer choice and guitars

Description



Consumer choices are increasingly influenced by environmental and social factors – Gibson's corporate behaviour is alienating many guitarists

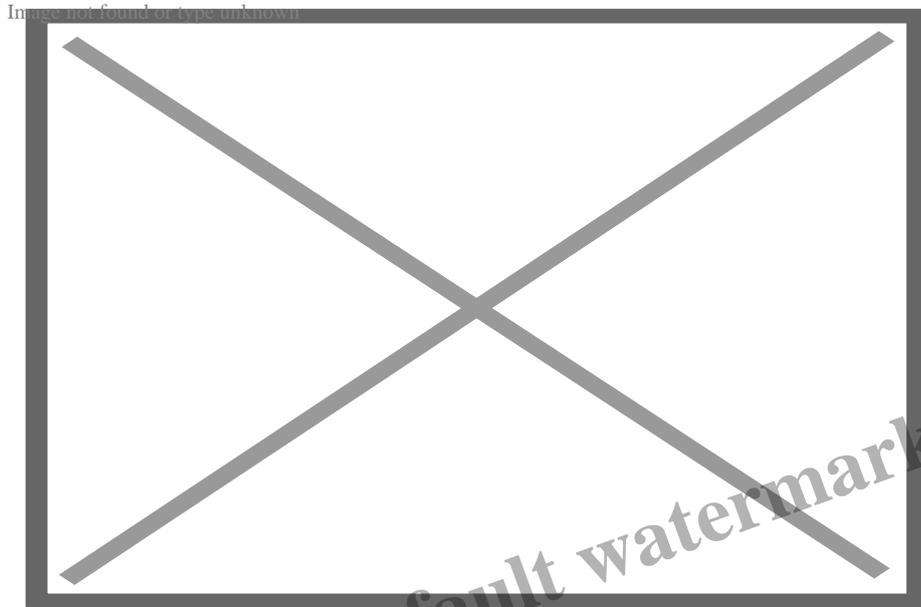
Responding to environmental and social change

An underlying premise of this website is that our world is changing rapidly, particularly in the face of ongoing human modification of the environment, climate change, resource use and societal shifts. Recognition of these changes, both at an individual and a broader societal level, is an important first step. But then, equally important is the ensuing recognition that some sort of response to these changes is required if we want to retain or improve our current livelihoods and lifestyles.

As discussed in [earlier posts](#), the current state of the world can leave you bewildered, frustrated and overwhelmed. It's easy to feel like the problems are all too much for any one person to either make sense of or make a valid contribution to finding solutions. But, as [Sarah Wilson](#) and others have written, there is plenty that can be done by individuals, communities, industry and government.

Having said that, it's not always easy to decide what's best to do. And options vary greatly depending on where you are, what sort of governance structures are in place, and, importantly, the general level of access to essential goods and services. Rich nations should, theoretically, have more options for tackling large environmental and societal issues than poorer nations.

But things are not necessarily that straightforward, as shown by the recent round of [climate talks in Glasgow](#) – some wealthy nations, including Australia where I live, have shown a clear reluctance to undertake even the most basic of measures to curb the increasingly troubling effects of human-caused climate instability. [Yes, despite stuff you read and hear from some media and political sectors: *human-caused climate change is real*. And vaccines do, indeed, help prevent the spread of deadly diseases].



This Joel Pett cartoon appeared just before the 2009 Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen (© USA Today)

Consumer conundrums

All these issues are complex. Some aspects of trying to live sustainably and consume ethically are obvious and make sense anyway – ride a bike to work rather than driving, buy local produce and so on. But often it's actually tricky to work out what's best to do, particularly in our modern globally connected world. People in poorer nations simply don't have options where the focus is primarily on acquiring the basics in order to survive.

In developed nations, some folks simply can't ride a bike to work or even take public transport because of distance and lack of infrastructure. Many people can't afford the luxury of deciding to buy locally produced clothing instead of cheap foreign imports – even if they are aware that the cheap foreign imports are produced by exploited sweatshop labour. Consumer choices are often based on multiple factors, rarely just on the basis of sustainable and ethical production.

And even people who are full-on environmentally aware [ethical consumers](#) can still make vastly disparate decisions on different products. Lots of folks into outdoor activities like hiking, biking or skiing in remote areas like to get away from civilization and all its technology and human-produced stuff – but they also want to use the latest technology for outdoor clothing and equipment, GPS and so on – and don't forget to bring the smartphone along too!

Nevertheless, consumer choices can, and do, influence changes in how goods are produced and delivered. Where I live, the past few years have seen big shifts in the local supermarkets to, for instance, free-range eggs, less packaging and no single use plastic bags, sustainably-caught seafood and much more. Demand for [ethically-sourced products](#) is increasing. Individual consumer choices may not seem much on their own, but when adopted widely enough can make a big difference. Sometimes the changes are facilitated by government policy decisions, and sometimes they happen despite government policy.

Would you buy a guitar from this company?

Focusing this discussion back into the world of guitars, let's look at a guitar player's dilemma (albeit a very first-world dilemma in the context of what we've been considering so far). Would you buy a guitar made by a company that has a known record of poor treatment of staff, flaunting trade restrictions on timber from increasingly endangered tree species, a bullying approach to other guitar makers, questionable trade practices, and ongoing issues with poor quality control?

Sounds like a pretty crap company, right? But what if that company has, in the past, made some of the most iconic and sought-after guitars ever produced and is still one of the biggest names in guitar making? And what if that iconic brand still carries an allure that's almost irresistible to many guitar players?

And there you have the Gibson dilemma. There are, of course, many responses to this dilemma. If you don't know about the problems the company has had, then there's no dilemma at all – you simply buy a new Gibson (although maybe check it over for QC issues first). Same applies if you know but don't care. Even if you do care about the issues, this may still not be enough to distract you from the dazzle of owning a Gibson guitar. Or you may be a bit more reluctant, scout around for alternatives, and then still decide that only a Gibson will cut it. Or, you might join the increasing band of people who feel that they can't bring themselves to buy into the Gibson hype and thus go for another brand altogether.

I've been exploring stories about Gibson Guitars in the past couple of posts, and I had planned to move onto other topics for this post. However, the research I did for those posts uncovered several other Gibson rabbit holes to explore. And it made me think more about the Gibson dilemma – as we'll see, it's one I got personally involved with.

Gibson continues to surprise

OK, so in [previous posts](#) we followed Gibson's checkered history through its highs and lows, various corporate takeovers and poor management decisions, being pinged for illegally importing timber from CITES-listed tree species, its curious unwillingness to acknowledge the role of women in making Gibson guitars during World War II, and its filing for bankruptcy in 2018.

Coming back from bankruptcy under a new chief executive, James Curleigh, saw some fresh hope that the iconic brand was getting back on track. New approaches and getting back to making quality guitars were promised.

But then in June 2019 Gibson dropped an amazing clanger in the form of a promotional You Tube

video entitled “Play Authentic”. This video featured Mark Agnesi who had recently been appointed as Gibson’s Director of Brand Experience. Mark featured in an [earlier post](#) doing a review of a Banner Gibson in his former role at Norm’s Rare Guitars. His Norm’s Rare Guitar reviews were always characterised by his hyper, enthusiastic and well-informed approach, coupled with some great guitar playing.

But then he pops up in this new role at Gibson. The role title itself is telling – what on earth does a “Director of Brand Experience” do? Weird unintelligible role titles are sure sign of corporate doublespeak. I’ve experienced it many times at the universities I’ve worked in – senior management levels expand with new positions with roles whose purpose is opaque at best, but whose titles sound very impressive.

That aside, employing someone like Mark with some credibility in the guitar world could be a good strategy for a company trying to regain some positive market influence. But then getting him to do this “Play Authentic” video? It was widely panned as a complete train wreck. Far from enhancing Gibson’s attraction to the guitar playing public, it simply indicated to many that Gibson had really not moved on at all and was still stuck in its previous bad habits.

In the face of a fusillade of criticism, Gibson quickly withdrew the video – but of course it is still available on YouTube. Have a look for yourself to see what all the fuss was about.

Gibson’s June 2019 deleted video is still available on YouTube, via [The Music Lab](#). Also on [Reddit](#)

The video has been criticised on many levels. Mainly, though, the tone and message of the video suggests that Gibson is mostly concerned about stopping rival companies copying their guitar designs. It does little to endear the brand to potential buyers. Certainly, it makes the point that Gibson has produced some cracker designs. But then, in the words of [Music Radar](#), “That all builds to Agnesi’s threat to fellow guitar builders: ‘You have been warned; we’re looking out and we’re here to protect our iconic legacy.’ He follows up by stating, ‘This isn’t about us being bullies or trying to stifle the boutique marketplace.’ Unfortunately, that’s exactly how it comes across.”

Even the video’s title “Play Authentic”, repeated several times by Mark, reeks of corporate branding. It seems that today’s mottos and slogans have to have a maximum of two words and be largely devoid of meaning or grammatical correctness. What does “Play Authentic” even mean? It’s like my university adopting “[Pursue Impossible](#)” as its marketing slogan (fortunately that was quietly dropped after a while and we reverted back to the original founding motto of “Seek Wisdom”).

Ironically though, Mark ends the video with “Remember: Only a Gibson is Good Enough” – the words that appear on the Banner Gibsons made during World War II. Ironic because Gibson still has, somewhat inexplicably, not recognised the role of the “[Kalamazoo Gals](#)” – the women who took over guitar production during the war years.

Here’s a couple of responses to the video (out of dozens out there on YouTube):

*Casino Guitars: Gibson Steps on its own D**k (Play Authentic) June 2019*

Leon Todd – Don't Play Authentic June 2019

All the videos have lots of follow-up comments. For instance, The Casino Guitars video has a comment: "I work in PR and when I saw the video I almost fell off my chair. It was clear that it hadn't been passed a professional PR person as it was that bad! Doubtless it was taken down when Gibson's media relations team saw it... This will cost the company sales, damage its reputation, dent Mark's credibility and also make people angry. In other words... a total car crash."

In January 2020, Gibson's Chief Merchant Officer, Cesar Gueikian, admitted that the video had been [a big mistake](#).

Let's sue everybody...

In another video from February 2021, Jeremy Sheppard, aka The Guitar Hunter, asks "[Why is Gibson losing guitar players?](#)" He points to several reasons, mainly centred on Gibson being completely out of touch with all but a small fraction of guitar players, and their advertising being weirdly off the mark. But he sums up the other main reason simply as "They sue everyone".

Just after the "Play Authentic" debacle, Gibson was again in the news in June 2019, this time because it had filed a [lawsuit against Dean and Luna guitar companies](#), alleging trademark infringements and counterfeiting. A strange aspect of this was that the Dean guitars at the centre of the allegations had been in production since Dean started up in 1977.

It appears that part of the recovery strategy developed by Gibson after bankruptcy was to target other companies that produced instruments similar to Gibson models – even if the companies had been doing this for a very long time. Oddly, this strategy also involved Gibson filing multiple trademark applications for design aspects that had been in the public domain for decades – as explained in this Vinyl Rundown video.

Vinyl Rundown: The Gibson Video, Mark Agnesi and the Dean Lawsuit June 2019

The Dean lawsuit was one of several that Gibson has launched over the years. It's only fair to point out that other guitar companies have also sought to sue for alleged copycat transgressions (see Lawsuit Guitars on [Jedistar](#)). But Gibson has been far the most active, especially recently.

[There's a whole other story to be told in another post about lawsuit guitars in general: see [Soundfly](#)]

Interestingly, many of the lawsuits that sought to protect a company from having its designs copied have been thrown out of court. And, as many commentators have noted, the quest to sue for copying particular shapes and designs begs the question of exactly what a company can rightfully claim as their own intellectual property (especially if it was never trademarked in the first place). Can Gibson really claim that their Les Paul and other designs from past decades can't be used or modified by other companies? How would it be if Martin decided to try to sue other guitar makers who use their classic guitar shapes and sizes (0,00,000, Dreadnought etc)?

As several of the commentaries in the videos point out, Gibson seems to be spending large amounts of money on lawyers tasked with tightening up on copyright issues and targeting competitors with the

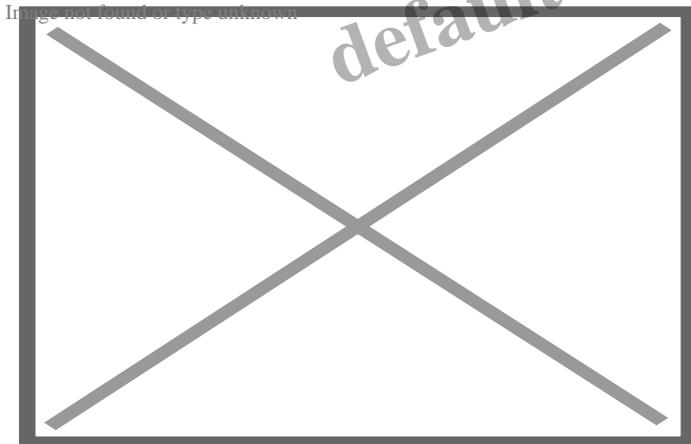
threat of legal action. This does not really endear them to the guitar playing public, nor do anything to fix the quality and pricing issues that make the non-Gibson alternatives more attractive. It also makes small, independent guitar makers uneasy. Some repair shops are now [boycotting repair and set-up work](#) on all recently-purchased new Gibson instruments, as a means of alerting customers to Gibson's activities.

In addition, the legal action probably gives a huge burst of free publicity to the companies they are suing.

Back to Kalamazoo

For the next part of this story, let's backtrack a bit to a part of Gibson's history. Gibson started life in Kalamazoo, and Gibson guitars were produced in a factory in Parsons Street for many decades. In the early 1980s, the company decided to relocate much of its operation to Nashville. The Kalamazoo factory stopped production completely on 30 June 1984, with many of the workers relocating to Nashville.

However, a bunch of employees decided not to move to Nashville. And some of these wanted to keep building guitars. In early 1985, a group led by Jim Deurloo, Marv Lamb, and JP Moats purchased space at the Parsons Street factory along with its original guitar-making equipment. They called the new company [Heritage Guitars](#), and the factory reopened on 1 April 1985



Heritage Guitars staff and the Kalamazoo factory. Source: [Discover! Kalamazoo](#)

Thus it was that guitar makers formerly employed by Gibson continued making small batches of handcrafted guitars in the original Gibson factory on the original factory equipment. Most of the founders of Heritage had been working there for many years. For instance, Rendell Wall was a second-generation guitar builder at Heritage. A 2012 [Premierguitar.com](#) article noted that "Wall has been making guitars in this same factory for 48 years—26 with Heritage and the previous 22 with Gibson, where he worked in research and development. His father worked for Gibson for 37 years".

[The guitars Heritage made](#) resembled the original Gibson designs, with minor modifications. For instance, the Heritage H-150 is clearly modelled on the Les Paul Standard. One could say that they were making Gibson guitars the way Gibson guitars used to be made. They, in effect, created a time bubble where guitar making remained in the Gibson glory days – while Gibson itself moved location

and also moved on into more “modern” and more corporate ways of doing things.

Heritage Guitar Inc. of Kalamazoo – Our Story

Things change at Heritage too

Heritage continued with this approach until fairly recently and garnered a lot of support and admiration for what they were doing. They appeared to be doing what many people wished Gibson themselves would do – focus on making high quality guitars that ticked all the boxes that guitar players wanted, and at a reasonable price. There are a lot of comparisons out there between equivalent Gibson and Heritage models and several polls as to whether people would rather buy a Gibson or a Heritage. Most of the comparisons indicate that Heritage generally stacks up well against Gibson, and most poll results come down to whether people are happy to have a Heritage or whether they still need to see the Gibson logo on the headstock.

But Heritage, too, has been in the news for various reasons. In the past few years, ownership and management have changed. In 2016, the original owners decided they had been around long enough and sold the company to a partnership of local businessmen. Then in 2017, Heritage entered a sales and marketing agreement with [BandLab Technologies](#) – a Singapore-based company that operates the social music platform BandLab – who now effectively run the company.

With new ownership and what amounts to a corporate takeover, Heritage started to look like it was running into the same sorts of issues we’ve discussed in relation to Gibson. Some of the older staff [were let go or left in 2018](#), and some automation was introduced in the form of CNC machines which did some of the basic initial wood shaping. [Some commentary](#) at the time suggested that this was the end of Heritage as it had been known – loss of experienced staff and a move away from the down-home traditional approaches smacked of what had happened in other companies. But [other accounts](#) put a more positive perspective, suggesting that the changes have actually led to improvements in the manufacturing process and a more even – but still high – standard of guitars.

Heritage and Gibson: from peaceful coexistence to legal troubles

OK, but hang on a minute. Given Gibson’s propensity to sue companies that are seen to be copying their designs, how on earth did Heritage get away with making guitars that some describe as “more Gibson than Gibson”? The fact that their models closely resemble the equivalent Gibson models and, on top of that, are made in Gibson’s old factory surely puts them in Gibson’s legal crosshairs? Despite this, Heritage has continued to operate apparently untrammelled by legal problems from Gibson.

However, it appears that all was not plain sailing in the beginning. Heritage claims that shortly after the company began making guitars in 1985, the two companies clashed in both federal and trademark court over the look of its instruments. In 1991 that litigation was resolved with a confidential agreement that meant that, [according to Heritage](#), “For the ensuing 29 years, Heritage and Gibson went their separate ways, each selling its own well-known guitars into the market, with no problems or issues.”

This information has only surfaced recently. And it only surfaced because of recent legal friction

between the two companies. This time it was [Heritage that launched legal action against Gibson](#) – as a pre-emptive measure to try to prevent Gibson winding back the agreement that has stood since 1991. Heritage claim that, with the new management that took over following their bankruptcy, Gibson have been threatening legal action over alleged trademark infringements. Sound familiar?

It's unclear how this situation will be resolved – as far as I can find out, the [legal proceedings](#) have still to play out fully. What remains apparent, though, is that Gibson does not seem to be about to change its approach of threatening or enacting legal action against competitors any time soon.

Back to that question

So, we started this post thinking about the ins and outs of sustainable and ethical consumer choices. And in particular, I asked the question “Would you buy a Gibson guitar?”

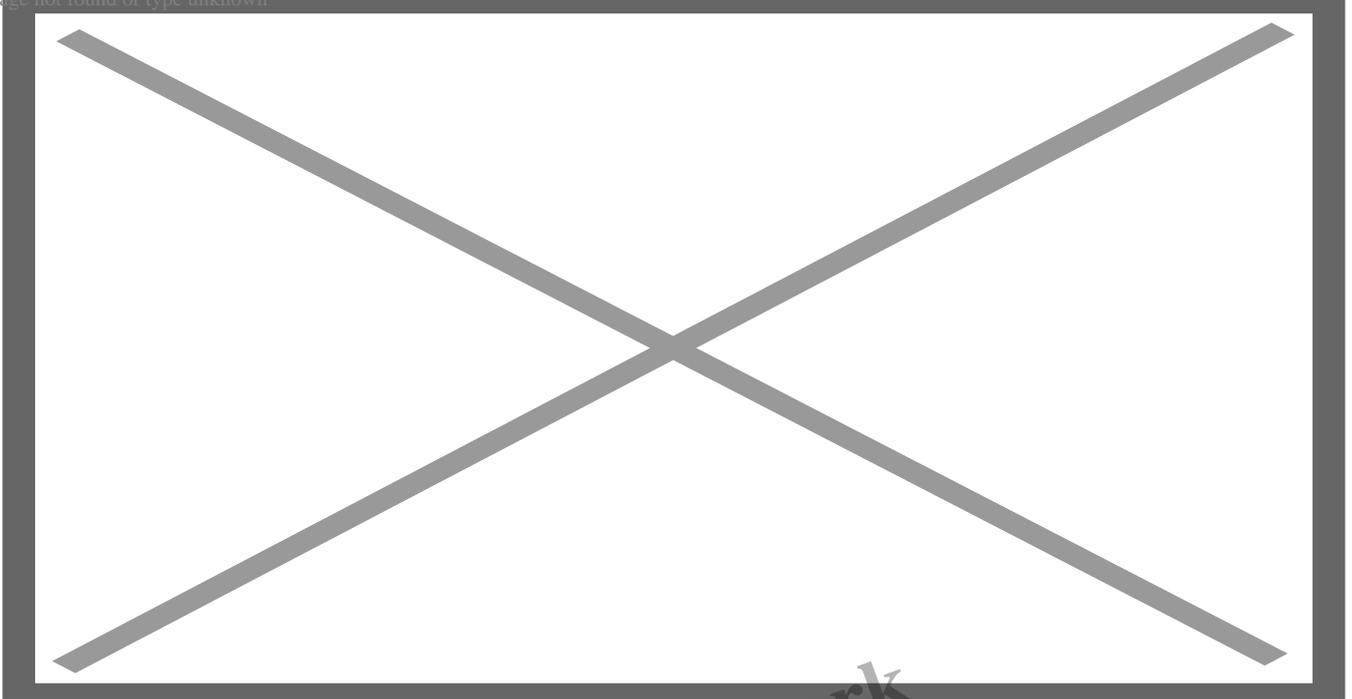
Yes

I suggested there might be several responses to this question, based on your degree of knowledge and concern about how Gibson behave as a company versus your desire to own one of their guitars.

I know all about this spectrum of responses because I have moved across it myself. I have owned several Gibson guitars – acoustics from the 1940s and 50s and electrics from more recently. In my [post](#) about being obsessed with guitars, I recounted the tale of buying a Gibson Les Paul in 2015 while traveling in western North America.

The reason I did that was my fascination with one of the iconic guitars of the past century. I already owned a Fender Stratocaster and knew that many of my guitar heroes played either a Strat or a Les Paul (or both). Gibson Les Pauls, particularly those made in the brief period 1958-1960, became one of the enduring icons of the emerging music scene in the 1960s. At that stage, I didn't know about how the Sunburst Les Paul Standards from that period were “discovered” by emerging stars like Keith Richards, Eric Clapton and Jimmy Page. Both the guitarists and the guitars went on to become music legends.

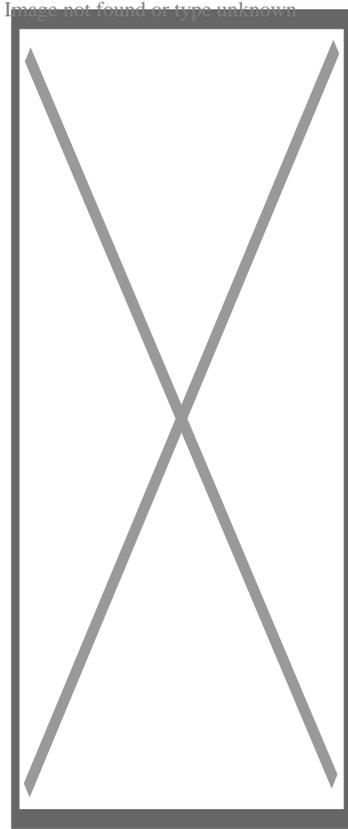
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Tony Bacon's 2013 [book](#) on the 1958-60 Sunburst Les Pauls

So it was that I was seduced into buying a new sunburst Les Paul in 2015 at a Guitar Center in the San Francisco Bay Area. I knew nothing at that stage about the Gibson company's troubled past. I just knew I wanted a Gibson Les Paul. And I didn't know that the newer Les Pauls were really not the same beast as those originals from '58-60.

The guitar I bought was pretty nice from my relatively undiscerning perspective. It played nicely and sounded great, and travelled with me through the US West Coast, BC and Alaska. But slowly some quality issues began to show through the rose-tinted haze. And the guitar had G-Force robotic tuners – you pressed a button and the tuners turned themselves and found the correct tuning for each string. At first this was a bit of a novelty. I was crap at tuning a guitar by ear, and so the robotuners saved me the bother. But then you couldn't just tweak the tuning yourself while playing. And if the battery ran out, you were pretty much screwed. I only found out later the degree of ridicule heaped on the [Gibson robotic tuning systems](#) – a product of the then Gibson CEO's obsession with bringing robotics into guitars.



2015 Gibson Les Paul Les+

And it was only later, while doing research for this website, that I uncovered all the stuff about Gibson's environmental and corporate mis-steps. I ended up selling that guitar. But the lure of the Les Paul didn't fade, and I actually had some regrets about selling it – despite the issues with the guitar and the company.

No

I had a brief dalliance with a Gibson Les Paul Smartwood – Gibson's early attempt to produce guitars with sustainably harvested woods. It, too, was a nice guitar – but again it was nothing like the original Les Paul Standards.

Of course, the prospect of ever playing, let alone owning, an original Les Paul from the golden era is infinitesimally small – only an estimated [1459 Sunbursts](#) were made during 1958-60. And those that survive command eye-watering prices if they even come up for sale.

Gibson has done multiple reissues of the coveted Les Paul design, but many of these failed to capture the characteristics of the originals. It took a while for Gibson to listen and respond to what players were actually after. The company is now striving to recreate the original designs more carefully, with "Historic" Les Paul Standards doing a much better job of that. They're also producing replica models of guitars owned by famous people – with the guitars [replicating the original guitar](#) even down to the various dings and modifications it's received. (Why, one might ask?)

But there's still that Gibson dilemma there – do I really want to buy a guitar from a company with such

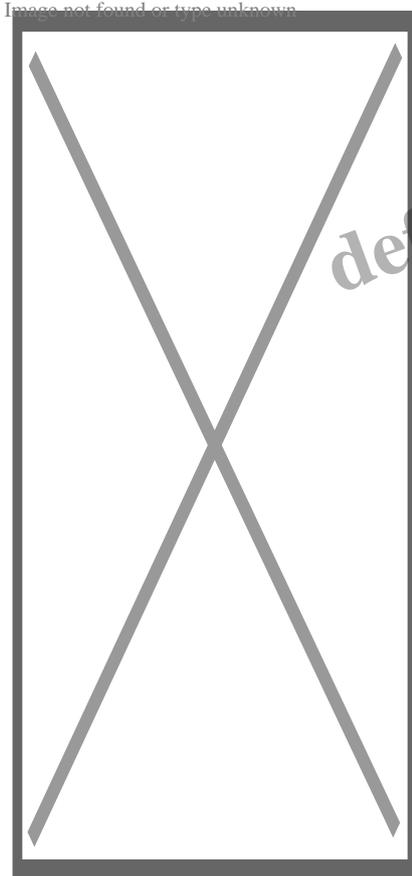
a questionable recent history? No, is the answer.

Wrong question!

The thing about yes/no questions is that there is usually always another alternative that cuts through the apparent dichotomy. Individually and collectively, humans often aren't very good at stepping away from the polarization and finding viable alternatives. And therein lies the source of most conflict situations, from personal relationships through to global warmongering. And internal conflicts about whether to buy a guitar or not.

But, of course, there usually is an alternative. I hear a voice saying, "Yes, there is a clear alternative: Don't buy another guitar at all!" Of course, that is a very viable alternative that certainly cuts through all the ethical consumer angst.

But when a beautiful 2018 Heritage Standard H-150 cherry sunburst came up for sale here in Australia – at a very reasonable price – this also provided another alternative.



2018 Heritage Standard H-150

A [recent review](#) of the H-150 decided that "If you desire a single-cutaway solidbody that oozes vintage Kalamazoo mojo and don't want to drop six figures, the Heritage Standard H-150 delivers the same thrills for a lot less bills".

Chris Gill, the reviewer, summed up his feelings about the guitar using the analogy of "terroir", a term

used to explain the characteristics of wines from particular areas:

“The French use the term terroir to refer to the environment — particularly the soil and climate — that gives certain artisanal foods and wines characteristics that reflect the place where it originated. I never thought of using terroir to describe an electric solidbody guitar before, but after playing the Heritage Standard H-150 I’m hard-pressed to think of a better word to explain what makes it so damn irresistible. I’ve played more than a hundred guitars from dozens of companies both domestic and imported that are based on the coveted late-Fifties Les Paul Standard with dual humbuckers and a solid carved figured maple top laminated to a single-cutaway mahogany slab body, but I don’t recall any that have come as close to the tone, feel and overall vibe of the original version as much as the Heritage.

The reason for that is because the Heritage H-150 is made like the original model used to be made and, equally importantly, where it used to be made, in the same factory in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where this classic solidbody design was born. For those of you unfamiliar with the Heritage story, the company was formed by ex-Gibson employees who refused to move to Nashville when Gibson relocated its factory there in the mid-Eighties. Several of the founders, who are still working with Heritage today, were building guitars in the Kalamazoo factory back in the Fifties and know every detail and trade secret behind the construction of the most desirable models. But while many other builders today also know the same details and secrets, what makes the Heritage H-150 truly special is something I can only attribute to Kalamazoo terroir.”

Chris Gill, [Guitar World](#) 2019

I can only agree that the guitar is pretty special – and possibly more “authentic” than the current Gibson equivalents! And less expensive. Now I can get back to worrying about where the bananas in our local store come from.

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