

The History of Epiphone

Before there were Epiphone guitars and Epiphone basses, the Epiphone musical instrument story started back in Greece in 1873 where Anastasios Stathopoulos crafted quality lutes, violins and traditional Greek instruments. Stathopoulos moved his family to New York City in 1903 where sons Epimanondas and Orpheus joined him in the family trade.

The Stathopoulos family arrived in America at the height of a mandolin craze. The production of mandolins and other stringed instruments provided a good living, and when Anastasios died in 1915, his son Epimanondas, known as Epi, took over the business.

Just 22-years-old at the time he became head of the family business, Epi was blessed with an acute business sense and pride in the musical instruments he created. As a musician, he was keenly aware of the changing times and how they could affect the popularity of his stringed instruments.

Mandolins fell out of favor by 1917 and Epi joined the growing jazz boom by exploiting the new popularity of the banjo. He refined banjo design with innovations in rim construction and tone ring configuration.

In 1923 Epi came up with a new name for his company based on a combination of his nickname and the Greek word for sound: "Epiphone." 1924 saw the release of the Epiphone Recording Banjo series. The popular Artist, Bandmaster, Concert, Deluxe, and Emperor banjo models soon followed. By 1928 Epiphone had bought out other banjo manufacturers to keep up with their own expanding business and had changed the company name to the Epiphone Banjo Company.

The first production of Epiphone guitars coincided with the stock market crash of 1929, when the banjo boom also went bust. Epiphone Recording Guitars of spruce and laminated maple helped take up the slack for the declining banjo demand.

One of Epiphone's main competitors at this time was Gibson, whose guitars offered greater volume and projection than Epi's. But by 1931 Epiphone was producing archtop guitars that could compete with Gibson, including the Epiphone Broadway, DeLuxe, Masterbilt, Tudor, and Windsor Series of guitars.

The Epiphone and Gibson rivalry led to the production of ever bigger, better, and more luxurious guitars. Epi brought out his top-of-the-line Emperor, a wide-body guitar with a provocative advertising campaign. In 1936, Epiphone increased the size of its Broadway, DeLuxe, and Triumph guitars to make them larger than similar Gibson models.

Epiphone guitars now enjoyed a reputation as being among the world's finest. Famous musicians hung out at the Epiphone headquarters in Manhattan, adding to the brand's cachet. Guitarists Al Caiola and Harry Volpe would hold jam sessions, eventually endorsing Epiphone instruments. Even the great Les Paul lent his credibility to the Epiphone line.

Epiphone introduced their first electric guitar, the Electar, in 1935. Its incorporation of individually adjustable pickup pole pieces was an innovation that brought considerable respect. Electric Hawaiian guitars were next on the scale of guitar evolution and Epiphone innovations included the ability to change the guitar's pitch. As the decade played out, Epiphone introduced a successful line of upright basses as well.

Along came World War II, and with it, the death of Epi. After the war, without Epi at the helm, the company fell on hard times and was purchased in 1957 by its former archrival, Gibson. Gibson intended to resurrect the respected Epiphone basses for their own product line.

Ted McCarty, Gibson's general manager, aware of the intact reputation of the Epiphone name, and having acquired a stockpile of high quality tone woods with the purchase of the Epiphone brand, decided to revive the Epiphone name. He planned to sell Epiphone instruments through dealers who had not yet earned the right to sell Gibson-branded products.

As early as 1958 Epiphone instruments weren't just Gibson clones at budget prices. Classic Epiphone guitars like the DeLuxe, Emperor, and Triumph reappeared as well as new models like the solidbody Moderne Black and the semi-hollow Sheraton. Epiphone now introduced their own line of guitar amplifiers. New acoustic Epiphone guitars like the square-shouldered Frontier also were introduced at this time.

The '60s folk revival coincided with the debut of Epiphone acoustic guitars such as the 12-string Bard, a smaller guitar called the Serenader, and the Troubadour line of steel-string flattop guitars. The Epiphone Seville classical guitar line was reintroduced during the '60s as well.

But perhaps the most notable model was the semi-hollow double-cutaway Casino guitar made famous by The Beatles. George Harrison, John Lennon, and Paul McCartney all appeared in performance with Epiphone Casino guitars.

Epiphone was also producing classic bass guitars like the Thunderbird IV, an electric bass that still looks modern.

Epiphone guitar and bass amplifiers are famous for their tube sound. You can still get Epiphone Valve Junior amp heads and half stacks, and Epiphone combo amps and the famous Blues Custom tube amp round out the line.

To reduce costs, Epiphone became a pioneer in producing their instruments in Asia, first in Japan and then in Korea. Flagship Gibson guitars like the Les Paul and SG were now released under the Epiphone name at budget prices.

Epiphone began issuing limited-run electric guitars from the Gibson Nashville factory. The Gibson Montana luthiery built 250 Excellente, Texan, and Frontier flattop Epiphone guitars as a promotion during the '90s. Public enthusiasm led to Korean versions of these guitars. Guitar luminaries like Chet Atkins and Noel Gallagher signed on with the Epiphone brand. The John Lee Hooker Sheraton guitar joined the Epiphone USA collection at this time. The Epiphone John Lennon Revolution and reissued 1965 Casino guitars appeared toward the end of the '90s.

Epiphone's reintroduction of their Masterbilt guitar range restored their former flattop glory, and the 2005 reissue of the Epiphone Paul McCartney 1964 Texan acoustic guitar made a big splash in the music world. Epiphone now moved production to China at their own dedicated factory.

Working musicians now prize affordable Epiphone replicas of famous Gibson guitars such as the Epiphone Les Paul, and SG electric guitars, including the Epi G-400. The Epiphone Dot is still an excellent value in a semi-hollow electric guitar. And Epiphone Elitist reissues of Casino, Emperor and Excellente guitar models are snapped up by collectors. Rock and Roll fans are delighted with Epiphone's affordable Nick Valensi Riviera and Zakk Wylde Les Paul Custom and Tony Iommi SG electric guitars as well as semi-hollow Jack Cassady and Allan Woody Epiphone basses.

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