

# **Gibson Electric Serialization**

## **Taken from the 11<sup>th</sup> Edition Blue Book of Electric Guitars**

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**GIBSON**

Identifying Gibson instruments by serial number is tricky at best, and downright impossible in some cases. The best method of identifying them is to use a combination of the serial number, the factory order number and any features that are particular to a specific time. (i.e. logo design change, headstock volutes, etc).

In addition to the above serial number information, Gibson also used Factory Order Numbers (F O N) to track batches of instruments being produced at the time. In the earlier years at Gibson, guitars were normally built in batches of forty instruments. Gibson's Factory Order Numbers were an internal coding that followed the group of instruments through the factory. Thus, the older Gibson guitars may have a serial number and a F O N. The F O N may indicate the year, batch number, and the ranking (order of production within the batch of forty).

This system is useful in helping to date and authenticate instruments. There are three separate groupings of numbers that have been identified and which are used for their accuracy. The numbers are usually stamped or written on the instrument's back and seen through the lower f-hole or round soundhole, or maybe impressed on the back of the headstock.

Code Letter F O Ns were discontinued after 1941, and any instruments made during or right after World War II do not bear an F O N codes. In 1949, a four digit F O N was used, but not in conjunction with any code letter indicating the year.

From 1952-1961, the F O N scheme followed the pattern of a letter, the batch number, and an instrument ranking number (when the guitar was built in the run of forty). The F O N is the only identification number on Gibson's lower grade models (like the ES-125, ES-140, J-160E, etc.) which do not feature a paper label. Higher grade models (such as the Super 400, L-5, J-200, etc.) feature both a serial number and a FON. When both numbers are present on a higher grade model, remember that the FON was assigned at the beginning of the production run, while the serial number was recorded later (before shipping). The serial number would properly indicate the actual date of the guitar.

1935-1947: The first production electric guitars appeared in 1935. These guitars picked up on the serialization, which was already established by the acoustic models. The serial numbers started with number 100 for acoustics and around 90000 for electrics. This system ran to 99999 for both acoustics and electrics. All numbers are approximate. In most cases, only the upper end instruments were assigned identification numbers. Serial numbers appear ink-stamped on a white paper label. FONs were first used in 1935. Other FONs may appear that aren't listed here that were produced during WWII. From 1935 to 1937, the letter appeared between the batch and instrument numbers (i.e. 722 A 23, 465 D 58, 863 E 02). The number is ink-stamped inside the guitar on the back. In 1938, the FON was changed to a two- or three-letter prefix before the batch and instrument numbers. The first letter indicates the year, the second indicates the brand (i.e. G for Gibson, K for Kalamazoo), and the third (if applicable) for electric. The FON is either ink-stamped on the label or on the back of the headstock.

**SERIAL NUMBERS**

APPROX. LAST NUMBER	YEAR
92800	1935
94100	1936
95200	1937
95750	1938
96050	1939
96600	1940
97400	1941
97700	1942
97850	1943
98250	1944
98650	1945
99300	1946
99999	1947

**FACTORY ORDER NUMBERS (FON)**

LETTER	YEAR
A	1935
B	1936
C	1937
D	1938
DA	1938
E(X, OR OTHER LETTERS)	1939

**FACTORY ORDER NUMBERS (FON)**

LETTER	YEAR
E	1941
F	1940
FA	1940
G	1941
H	1942

1947-1961 (HOLLOWBODIES): Gibson changed their serialization system once they reached 99999 and decided they did not want to go to a six-digit system. Instead, they added an A prefix followed by a three-, four-, or five-digit number. The new system started on April 28, 1947 with number A 100. The last number was used on February 21, 1961. From 1947 to early 1955, white oval labels were used. In early 1955, the label was changed to an orange oval. Serial numbers are on the label and FONs are ink-stamped on the inside back of the guitar. FONs consisted of a letter, four-digit batch number, and count number (i.e. Y 2230 21, V 4867 8, R 6785 15). FONs were discontinued after Gibson changed to the new serialization system in 1961.

**SERIAL NUMBERS**

APPROX. LAST NUMBER	YEAR
A 1304	1947
A 2665	1948
A 4413	1949
A 6597	1950
A 9419	1951
A 12462	1952
A 16101	1953
A 18667	1954

**APPROX. LAST NUMBER YEAR**

A 21909	1955
A 24755	1956
A 26819	1957
A 28880	1958
A 32284	1959
A 35645	1960
A 36147	1961
700-1000S	1947
1100-3700S	1948

**FACTORY ORDER NUMBERS (FON)**

LETTER/NUMBER	YEAR
3700-4500S	EARLY 1949
2000S	LATE 1949
3000-5000S	1950
6000-9000S	1951
Z	1952
Y	1953
X	1954
W	1955
V	1956
U	1957
T	1958
S	1959
R	1960
Q	1961

1952-1961 (SOLIDBODIES): When production of solidbody guitars began, an entirely new serial number system was developed. Though not used on the earliest instruments produced (those done in 1952), a few of these instruments have three digits stamped on the headstock top. Sometime in 1953, instruments were ink stamped on the headstock back with 5- or 6-digit numbers, the first digit indicating the year, and the following digits indicating production numbers (Y NNNN or Y NNNNN). The production numbers run in a consecutive order and, aside from a few oddities in the change over years (1961-1962), it is fairly accurate to use them when identifying solid body instruments produced between 1953 and 1961. Later models typically feature six-digit numbers. Examples of this system:

4 2205 = 1954
6 14562 = 1956
0 9865 = 1960

1961-1970: In 1961, Gibson started a new serial number system that cov-

## 2 GIBSON ELECTRIC SERIALIZATION, cont.

ered all instrument lines. It consisted of numbers that were impressed into the wood. This is generally considered to be the most confusing out of all Gibson's serial number systems used between the years 1961 and 1970. There are several instances where batches of numbers are switched in order and duplicated, not just once, but up to four times, and seem to be randomly assigned throughout the decade.

**Note:** If "MADE IN USA" is stamped in the back of the headstock near the serial number, the guitar is not from the 1960s, but the 1970s. In this case, please refer to the next section on serialization for 1970-1975 guitars.

NUMBER	YEAR
100-42440	1961
42441-61180	1962
61450-64222	1963
64240-71040	1964
71041-96600	1962, 1963, 1964
96601-99999	1963
000001-099999	1967
100000-106099	1963, 1967
106100-108999	1963
109000-109999	1963, 1967
110000-111549	1963
111550-115799	1963, 1967
115800-118299	1963
118300-120999	1963, 1967
121000-139999	1963
140000-140100	1963, 1967
140101-144304	1963
144305-144380	1963, 1964
144381-149864	1963
149865-149891	1964
149892-152989	1963
152990-174222	1964
174223-176643	1964, 1965
176644-250335	1964
250336-305983	1965
306000-310999	1965, 1967
311000-320149	1965
320150-320699	1967
320700-329179	1965
329180-330199	1965, 1967
330200-332240	1965, 1967, 1968
332241-348092	1965
348093-349100	1966
349121-368638	1965
368640-369890	1966
370000-370999	1967
380000-385309	1966
390000-390998	1967
400001-406666	1966
406667-409670	1966, 1967, 1968
409671-410900	1966
410901-419999	No Entries
420000-429193	1966
500000-500999	1965, 1966, 1968, 1969
501009-501600	1965
501601-501702	1968
501703-502706	1965, 1968
503010-503109	1968
503405-520955	1965, 1968
520956-530056	1968
530061-530850	1966, 1968, 1969
530851-530993	1968, 1969
530994-539999	1969
540000-540795	1966, 1969
540796-545009	1969
555000-556909	1966
558012-567400	1969
570087-570643	1966
570645-570755	1966, 1967

NUMBER	YEAR
570857-570964	1966
580000-580080	1969
580086-580999	1966, 1967, 1969
600000-600998	1966, 1967, 1968 (LOW END)
600000-606090	1969 (HIGH END)
700000-700799	1966, 1967
750000-750999	1968, 1969
800000-800999	1966, 1967, 1968, 1969
801000-812838	1966, 1969
812900-819999	1969
820000-820087	1966, 1969
820088-823830	1966*
824000-824999	1969
828002-847488	1966, 1969
847499-858999	1966, 1969
859001-895038	1967
895039-896999	1968
897000-898999	1967, 1969
899000-899999	1968
900000-901999	1970
910000-999999	1968

**1970-1975:** From 1970 to 1975 the method of serializing instruments at Gibson became even more random. All numbers were impressed into the wood and a six-digit number was assigned, though no particular order was given and some instruments had a letter prefix. The orange labels inside hollow bodied instruments were discontinued in 1970 and were replaced by white and orange rectangular labels on the acoustics, and small black, purple, and white rectangular labels were placed on electric models.

In 1970, the words **MADE IN USA** were impressed into the back of instrument headstocks (though a few instruments from the 1950s also had this. The difference between a 1960s and a 1970s Gibson model is the "MADE IN USA" stamp on the back of the headstock.

NUMBER	YEAR
000000S	1973
100000S	1970-1975
200000S	1973-1975
300000S	1974-1975
400000S	1974-1975
500000S	1974-1975
600000S	1970, 1971, 1972, 1974, 1975
700000S	1970, 1971, 1972
800000S	1973, 1974, 1975
900000S	1970, 1971, 1972
6 DIGITS + A	1970
A + 6 DIGITS	1973, 1974, 1975
B + 6 DIGITS	1974, 1975
C + 6 DIGITS	1974, 1975
D + 6 DIGITS	1974, 1975
E + 6 DIGITS	1974, 1975
F + 6 DIGITS	1974, 1975

When the Nashville Gibson plant was opened in 1974, it was decided that the bulk of the production of products would be run in the South; the Kalamazoo plant would produce the higher end (fancier) models in the North. Of course, many of the older guitar builders and craftsmen were still in Kalamazoo, and if they weren't ready to change how they built guitars, then they may not have been ready to change how they numbered them! Certain guitar models built in the late 1970s can be used to demonstrate the old-style, six-digit serial numbers. It is estimated that Gibson's Kalamazoo plant continued to use the six-digit serial numbers through 1978 and 1979. So double check the serial numbers on those 1970s L-5s, Super 400s, and Super 5 BJBs!

**1975-1977:** During the period from 1975 to 1977, Gibson used a transfer that had eight-digit numbers. The first two indicate the year (99=1975, 00=1976 and 06=1977), the following six digits are in the 100000 to 200000 range. *MADE IN USA* was also included on the transfer and some models had *LIMITED EDITION* also applied. A few bolt-on neck instruments had a date ink stamped on the heel area.

NUMBER	YEAR
99XXXXXX	1975
00XXXXXX	1976
06XXXXXX	1977

**1977-JUNE 2005:** Between 1997 and late June or early July 2005, Gibson used the same serialization system on all standard-built guitars. This updated system utilizes an impressed, eight-digit numbering scheme that covers both serializing and dating functions. The Custom/Historic/Art divisions do not use this system. Certain models in the Standard series also do not follow this, either. Please refer to the end of the section for exceptions. The pattern is as follows:

**YDDDYPPP**

**YY** is the production year

**DDD** is the day of the year

**PPP** is the plant designation and/or instrument rank.

In 1994, for Gibson's Centennial, they used a special serialization. Every serial number started with 94 followed by six digits, which were the production dates and number (YYNNNNNN).

The three PPP numbers 001-499 indicate Kalamazoo production from 1977 to 1984. The Kalamazoo numbers were discontinued in 1984 when the factory closed. The three PPP numbers 500-999 indicate Nashville production from 1977 to 1989.

All currently manufactured Gibsons (non-custom shop) are stamped with a hand arbor, and start at 300 or 500, and continue until production is finished that day. This hand stamp used to be reset daily at #300 or #500 for all the LP style headstocks. The other shapes (Flying V, T-Bird, Explorer, etc.) were started at 700.

When acoustic production began at the plant in Bozeman, Montana (in 1989), the series' numbers were reorganized. Bozeman instruments began using 001-299 designations and, in 1990, Nashville instruments began using 300-999 designations. It should also be noted that the Nashville plant has not reached the 900s since 1977, so these numbers have been reserved for prototypes. Examples:

70108276 means the instrument was produced on Jan. 10, 1978, in Kalamazoo and was the 276th instrument stamped that day.

82765501 means the instrument was produced on Oct. 3, 1985, in Nashville and was the 1st instrument stamped that day.

03202652 means the instrument was produced on November 16, 2002 and was the 152nd instrument stamped that day (assuming they started at 500).

There are a few exceptions to this system.

**JULY 2005-PRESENT:** In early July 2005, Gibson altered their serialization system a bit. A modified nine digit system was introduced with a new batch number added to the previous system. The new system follows the format of YDDDYBPPP. The first through fifth digits and the seventh through ninth digits all follow the old system, but a batch number was implemented to better keep track of production and allow for more than five hundred instruments to be produced in a day. At the beginning of each day, the sixth digit is reset to 0. Once the last three numbers reach 699, the batch number moves on to 1, and the last three digits are reset to 500. Examples: 028360612 indicates a guitar that was stamped on the 283rd day (October 10th) in 2006 and was the 112th guitar stamped that day. 001071520 indicates a guitar that was stamped on the 10th day (January 10th) of 2007 and was the 220th guitar stamped on that day (it was part of the second batch and the 20th guitar of the second batch - first batch was of 200 guitars).

**Centennial Year/Models:** 1994 is the most notable exception, with the first two numbers representing the year, so all models start with 94 and are followed by six digits. The Centennial models produced for the 1994 model year have an inked-on serial number that is six digits long. The serial number appears as YYYYMM. The first four represent the number produced. They all started on 1894, which represents instrument #1, and 1994 would be instrument #101. The last two digits indicate the month of the guitar released. A new model was released each month with a total of fourteen different models that includes two prototypes. The last two numbers will range from one to fourteen.

**Special Runs/Limited Editions:** Certain special editions in the 1970s and 1980s may feature serial numbers with six digits in the configuration of YY NNNN. The YY indicates the year and the NNNN is the instrument ranking.

**Les Paul Classic:** The 1960 Les Paul Classic features a six-digit number like the models had in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The serial number works just like it did back then with the first number indicating the last number in the year of production. The following four or five digits are production rank and if there is only four digits there will be a space between the first and last four digits, but if there are five digits they will all appear together. For example, 215678 would be either a 1992 or 2002,

and a 615890 would be a 1996. These models have been produced since 1990, so every ten years the numbers will recycle. Also, in 1989 only, a four digit number was first used that started with 9. No "Made In U.S.A." stamp appears by the serial number either.

**CUSTOM SHOP:** Regular production Custom Shop guitars utilize a serialization system of CSYRRRR. CS stands for Custom Shop, the Y indicates the last digit in the year of production, and the following digits indicate the production ranking. Earlier Custom Shop models may use a Y9NNN or Y9NNNN (if the production run is higher than 1000 units in a year). The Y indicates the last digit of the year the guitar was built. 9 is assigned to every custom shop guitar, and the last three or four digits are production numbers. Example: CS31205 is a Custom Shop instrument produced in 2003 and was the 1,205th guitar built that year.

**Reissues:** Early Les Paul reissues produced between the late 1970s and 1993 should have an inked-on serial number on the back of the headstock. The first number should indicate the last year of the production. For example, 8 0358 would be a 1988. The Heritage Flying V, Moderne, and Chet Atkins CE produced between 1981 and 1983 will feature a serial number with a letter prefix followed by three digits. The letter may range from A through K, and the number started at 001. Most numbers finished at 099 and would move to the next letter. However, certain models do feature higher numbers than 100. The Heritage Series Explorer produced between 1982 and 1983 has a serial number that starts with 1 + 4 digits. These digits are strictly production numbers.

In 1992, the serialization of reissues became standard. The configuration of M YNNN is still in use by Gibson. The M indicates the model code, specifically the last digit of the year of the reissue. The Y indicates the last number of the year of the guitar, and the NNN are the production numbers. For example, 4 8256 indicates a 1954 Les Paul reissue built in 1998 and is the 256th instrument of the year. The following codes represent most of the reissues:

NUMBER	MODELS
2	1952 LES PAUL
4	1954 LES PAUL
6	1956 LES PAUL
NUMBER	MODELS
7	1957 LES PAUL
8	1958 LES PAUL, EXPLORER
9	1959 LES PAUL, FLYING V
0	1960 LES PAUL

In 1997, Gibson reissued many of the 1960s models. A similar serialization system was used, but it is different than the 1950s reissues. The configuration consists of YYNNNM, where the YY is the last two years of the guitar's construction date, the NNN is the production number, and the M is the model code, specifically the last year of the reissue. For example, 021568 indicates a 1968 Les Paul Custom reissue built in 2002 and was the 156th instrument built that year. The following codes represent most of the reissues:

NUMBER	MODELS
1	SG CUSTOM/SG SPECIAL/LES PAUL
2	SG STANDARD
3	1963 FIREBIRD I
4	1964 FIREBIRD III
5	1965 FIREBIRD V/FIREBIRD VII
8	1968 LES PAUL CUSTOM

**HISTORIC ES MODELS:** Historic ES models use a slightly different system than the Custom Shop. The configuration consists of a letter prefix + MYNNN. The letter, which is usually an A or B, indicates that it is part of the Historic Collection, the M indicates the last year of reissue model, the Y indicates the last number of the year the guitar was built, and the final NNN digits are production numbers. For example, A-93012 is a 2003 1959 ES-335 with Dot inlays reissue and it was the 12th instrument produced that year. The following codes represent most of the reissues:

NUMBER	MODELS
2	ES-295
3	1963 ES-335 BLOCK INLAYS
4	ES-330
5	ES-345
9 W/ A PREFIX	1959 ES-335 DOT INLAYS
9 W/ B PREFIX	ES-355

**CARVED TOP MODELS:** On models with carved or ached tops the number will normally appear on an orange label. The serialization used on these instruments consists of a format YDDDYRRR, which is very similar to Gibson's standard serialization system. The first and fifth digits indicate

#### **4 GIBSON ELECTRIC SERIALIZATION, cont.**

the last two years, the second, third, and fourth indicate the day of the year according to the Julian calendar, and the final three digits indicate the numbering sequence of carved/arched top instruments produced that day. In 2000, Gibson changed this system so every serial number starts with 2 instead of 0. Examples: 21364003 indicates a guitar stamped on the 136th day (May 16th) of 2004 and was the 3rd carved top model stamped that day.

**CUSTOM SHOP SIGNATURE MODELS:** Most Custom Shop signature guitars use a serialization system with the artists initials and the instrument production number.

The Gibson Les Paul Chambered Reissue (also known as the Cloud Nine) has a "CR" prefix before the serial number. This model was introduced in 2004.

**Source:** *A.R. Duchossoir, Gibson Electrics, The Classic Years and Walter Carter and George Gruhn, Gruhn's Guide to Vintage Guitars.*