Handout 1 - The Guitar – From Acoustic To Electric

During the early 20th century, guitar makers met demand for louder instruments by building larger-bodied instruments and using steel strings (as opposed to gut strings, made from animal intestines) which produced a louder sound to resonate inside the body of the guitar and out through a “sound hole.” While the traditional acoustic guitar gained some volume through these designs, guitarists still struggled to be heard while playing in an ensemble.

The introduction of an electromagnetic pickup in 1927 opened a new era for the guitar. Until then, the microphone was the only method for increasing the volume of a sound source. The electromagnetic pickup offered an isolated and direct means of capturing the sound of the instrument to which it was attached.

In 1936, Gibson began production of the ES-150 and 250, guitars with a hollow-bodied shape similar to traditional acoustic guitars but which featured a mounted electromagnetic pickup that directed the instrument’s electrified signal to an amplified speaker. New levels of volume were now attainable. The “electrification” of the instrument was a pivotal moment for guitarists, and as their sounds grew louder, their role in ensembles began to change as well.