

Blue Book of Electric Guitars Sixth Edition

Gibson Serialization

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GIBSON SERIALIZATION

Identifying Gibson instruments by serial number is tricky at best and downright impossible in some cases. The best methods of identifying them is by using a combination of the serial number, the factory order number and any features that are particular to a specific time that changes may have occurred in instrument design (i.e. logo design change, headstock volutes, etc). There have been 6 different serial number styles used to date on Gibson instruments.

The first serialization started in 1902 and ran until 1947. The serial numbers started with number 100 and go to 99999. All numbers are approximates. In most cases, only the upper end instruments were assigned identification numbers.

YEAR	LAST #	YEAR	LAST #
1903	1150	1926	83600
1904	1850	1927	85400
1905	2550	1928	87300
1906	3350	1929	89750
1907	4250	1930	90200
1908	5450	1931	90450
1909	6950	1932	90700
1910	8750	1933	91400
1911	10850	1934	92300
1912	13350	1935	92800
1913	16100	1936	94100
1914	20150	1937	95200
1915	25150	1938	95750
1916	32000	1939	96050
1917	39500	1940	96600
1918	47900	1941	97400
1919	53800	1942	97700
1920	62200	1943	97850
1921	69300	1944	98250
1922	71400	1945	98650
1923	74900	1946	99300
1924	80300	1947	99999
1925	82700		

White oval labels were used on instruments from 1902 to 1954, at which time the oval label was changed to an orange color. On instruments with round soundholes, this label is visible directly below it. On f-hole instruments, it is visible through the upper f-hole. The second type of serial numbers used started with an A prefix and ran from 1947 to 1961. The first number is A 100.

YEAR	LAST #	YEAR	LAST #
1947	A 1305	1955	A 21910
1948	A 2665	1956	A 24755
1949	A 4410	1957	A 26820
1950	A 6595	1958	A 28880
1951	A 9420	1959	A 32285
1952	A 12460	1960	A 35645
1953	A 17435	1961	A 36150
1954	A 18665		

When production of solid body 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 3 digits stamped on the headstock top. Some time in 1953, instruments were ink stamped on the headstock back with 5 or 6 digit numbers, the first indicating the year, the following numbers are production numbers.

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. Examples of this system:

4 2205 = 1954

614562 = 1956

In 1961 Gibson started a new serial number system that covered all instrument lines. It consisted of numbers that are impressed into the wood. It is also generally known to be the most frustrating and hard to understand system that Gibson has employed. The numbers were used between the years 1961-1969. There are several instances where batches of numbers are switched in order, duplicated, not just once, but up to four times, and seem to be randomly assigned, throughout the decade. In general though, the numbers are approximately as follows:

YEAR	APPROXIMATE SERIAL RANGE	YEAR	APPROXIMATE SERIAL RANGE
1961	100-42440	1965	320700-321100
1962	42441-61180	1965	322000-326600
1963	61450-64220	1965	328000-328500
1964	64240-70500	1965	328700-329179
1962	71180-96600	1965, 1967	329180-330199
1963	96601-99999	1965, 1967, 1968	330200-332240
1967	000001-008010	1965	332241-347090
1967	010000-042900	1965	348000-348092
1967	044000-044100	1966	348093-349100
1967	050000-054400	1965	349121-368638
1967	055000-063999	1966	368640-369890
1967	064000-066010	1967	370000-370999
1967	067000-070910	1966	380000-385309
1967	090000-099999	1967	390000-390998
1963, 1967	100000-106099	1965, 1966, 1967, 1968	400001-400999
1963	106100-108900	1966	401000-407985
1963, 1967	109000-109999	1966	408000-408690
1963	110000-111549	1966	408800-409250
1963, 1967	111550-115799	1966	420000-426090
1963	115800-118299	1966	427000-429180
1963, 1967	118300-120999	1966	430005-438530
1963	121000-139999	1966	438800-438925
1963, 1967	140000-140100	1965, 1966, 1968, 1969	500000-500999
1963	140101-144304	1965	501010-501600
1964	144305-144380	1968	501601-501702
1963	144381-145000	1965, 1968	501703-502706
1963	147009-149864	1968	503010-503110
1964	149865-149891	1965, 1968	503405-520955
1963	149892-152989	1968	520956-530056
1964	152990-174222	1966, 1968, 1969	530061-530850
1964, 1965	174223-176643	1968, 1969	530851-530993
1964	176644-199999	1969	530994-539999
1964	200000-250335	1966, 1969	540000-540795
1965	250336-291000	1969	540796-545009
1965	301755-302100	1966	550000-556910
1965	302754-305983	1969	558012-567400
1965, 1967	306000-306100	1966	570099-570755
1965, 1967	307000-307985	1969	580000-580999
1965, 1967	309848-310999	1966, 1967, 1968, 1969	600000-600999
1965	311000-320149	1969	601000-601090
1967	320150-320699	1969	605901-606090

YEAR	APPROXIMATE SERIAL RANGE	YEAR	APPROXIMATE SERIAL RANGE
1966, 1967	700000-700799	1967	893401-895038
1968, 1969	750000-750999	1968	895039-896999
1966, 1967, 1968, 1969	800000-800999	1967	897000-898999
1966, 1969	801000-812838	1968	899000-899999
1969	812900-814999	1968	900000-902250
1969	817000-819999	1968	903000-920899
1966, 1969	820000-820087	1968	940000-941009
1966	820088-823830	1968	942001-943000
1969	824000-824999	1968	945000-945450
1966, 1969	828002-847488	1968	947415-956000
1966	847499-858999	1968	959000-960909
1967	859001-880089	1968	970000-972864

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

In 1970, the words "MADE IN USA" was impressed into the back of instrument headstocks (though a few instruments from the 1950s also had MADE IN USA impressed into their headstocks as well).

Year(s)	Approximate Series Manufacture
1970, 1971, and 1972	100000s, 600000s, 700000s, 900000s
1973	000001s, 100000s, 200000s, 800000s and a few "A" + 6 digit numbers
1974 and 1975	100000s, 200000s, 300000s, 400000s, 500000s, 600000s, 800000s and a few A-B-C-D-E-F + 6 digit numbers

During the period from 1975-1977 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 were 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.

In 1977, Gibson first introduced the serialization method that is in practice today. This updated system utilizes an impressed eight digit numbering scheme that covers both serializing and dating functions. 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.

The numbers 001-499 show Kalamazoo production, 500-999 show Nashville production. The Kalamazoo numbers were discontinued in 1984.

When acoustic production began at the plant built 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.

However, it has come to light recently that the Kalamazoo plant did not directly switch over to the “new” 8 digit serialization method in 1977. 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 6 digit serial numbers. **It is estimated that Gibson's Kalamazoo plant continued to use the 6 digit serial numbers through 1978 and 1979.** So double check the serial numbers on those 1970s L-5s, Super 400s, and Super 5 BJBS!

Gibson's F O N System

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 40 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 40).

This system is useful in helping to date and authenticate instruments. There are three separate groupings of numbers that have been identified and 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.

1908-1923 Approximate #s

YEAR	F O N	YEAR	F O N
1908	259	1917	3246, 11010
1909	309	1918	9839, 11159
1910	545, 927	1919	11146, 11212
1911	1260, 1295	1920	11329, 11367
1912	1408, 1593	1921	11375, 11527
1913	1811, 1902	1922	11565, 11729
1914	1936, 2152	1923	11973
1915	2209, 3207		
1916	2667, 3508		

F O Ns for the years 1935-1941 usually consisted of the batch number, a letter for the year and the instrument number. Examples are as follows:

722 A 23
465 D 58
863 E 02.

Code Letter and Year

A	1935	E	1939
B	1936	F	1940
C	1937	G	1941
D	1938		

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 40). 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 F O N. When both numbers are present on a higher grade model, remember that the F O N 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. F O N examples run thus:

Y 2230 21
V 4867 8
R 6785 15

Code Letter and Year

Z	1952	U	1957
Y	1953	T	1958
X	1954	S	1959
W	1955	R	1960
V	1956	Q	1961

After 1961 the use of FONs was discontinued at Gibson.

There are still some variances that Gibson uses on some instruments produced today, but for the most part the above can be used for identifying instruments. For the most accurate identification you would need to contact the Gibson Guitar Corporation itself.