

Knutsen's Electrical Knnnection

Or

Knutsen & Hoopii: Strangers – or Friends – in Paradise?¹

By Darrell Urbien

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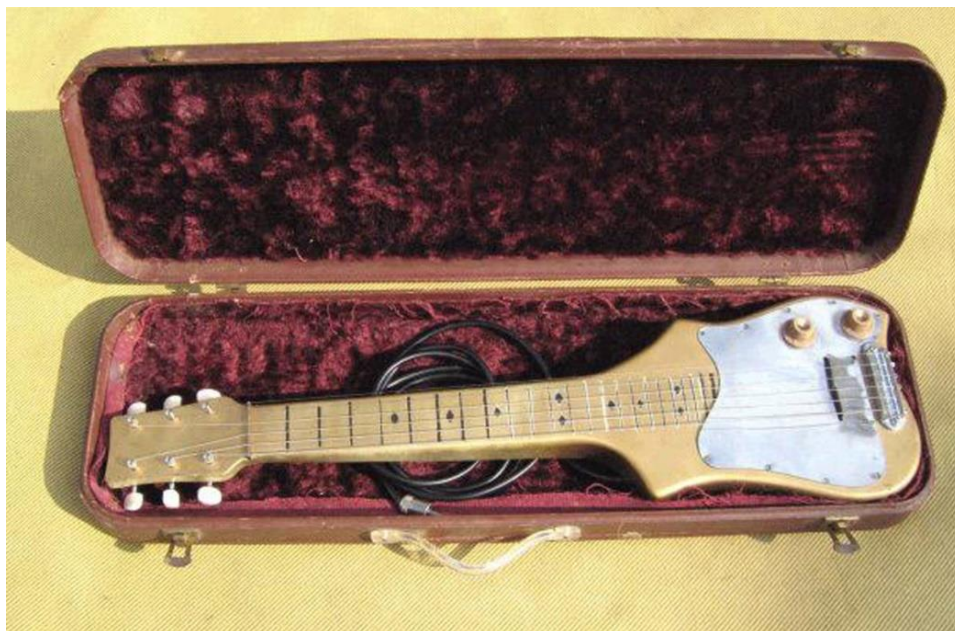
Member, Echo Park Historical Society

2006, with revisions in blue by Gregg Miner, 2020

“That looks like a Knutsen lap steel,”

I thought, casually clicking on an eBay ad. In my role as Research Assistant and Sub-Geek at the online Knutsen Archives, I had developed a desire to learn how to play steel guitar. And while actual Knutsen acoustic steels were out of my school-teacher-salary's price range,

electric lap steels (especially the older, odd-looking ones from the '50s) were often inexpensive enough to warrant a bid...or three.



This particular auction item had what I can only describe as a “Knutsen-funky” aesthetic. It had a very blocky, “Knutsen-ish” headstock. It had a weird inlaid (metal!) pickguard. The end of the lower bout even sported a decorative point, like a Knutsen harp guitar or harp mandolin. The upper bout, on the other hand, had another point that looked a lot like those found on Kay Kraft mandolins or Tahitian banjos. Neat!

c. 1907 short-scale “double-point” Chris Knutsen harp guitar.

But of course, this particular steel couldn't be a Knutsen. First, it was made out of a solid slab of wood. And second, it had a big honking electric *pickup* in it. Knutsen was alive during an amazing transitional period in Hawaiian music, but he had died in 1930. That's too early to have gone electric. It would take

¹ **Miner:** You'll understand my new alternate title when you finish. By the way, Darrell's odd title is a phonetic gag on the pronunciation of Knutsen's name (the “K” being pronounced).

a few more years before Rickenbacher (or whomever it was) would invent the first electric pickup. So there was no way Knutsen himself could be connected to this thing. Or so I thought, anyway.

Reading the auction text more closely, I found that the instrument was called a **Serenader** guitar. It was made by a person named Bud Tutmarc in Seattle, probably sometime in the '40s or '50s. The auction seller also mentioned how Bud Tutmarc's designs were very similar to his father Paul Tutmarc's guitars. These were also made in Seattle, but under the name **AudioVox**. Paul Tutmarc's designs dated back to the 1930s. The seller provided a link to a web essay about the Tutmarc family's position in the history of electric guitars, written by Northwest Music Historian Peter Blecha.²

This was fascinating reading! The article detailed how Paul Tutmarc was an early player and teacher of Hawaiian music – from soon after Chris Knutsen's time. Furthermore, Paul Tutmarc probably worked on an original design for the electric pickup, years before Rickenbacher. The article also showed how issues with patent law and promotion caused Paul Tutmarc's pioneering story to be lost to history while others got the credit for his innovations.³ This is a story that's probably all too familiar to Knutsen fans.

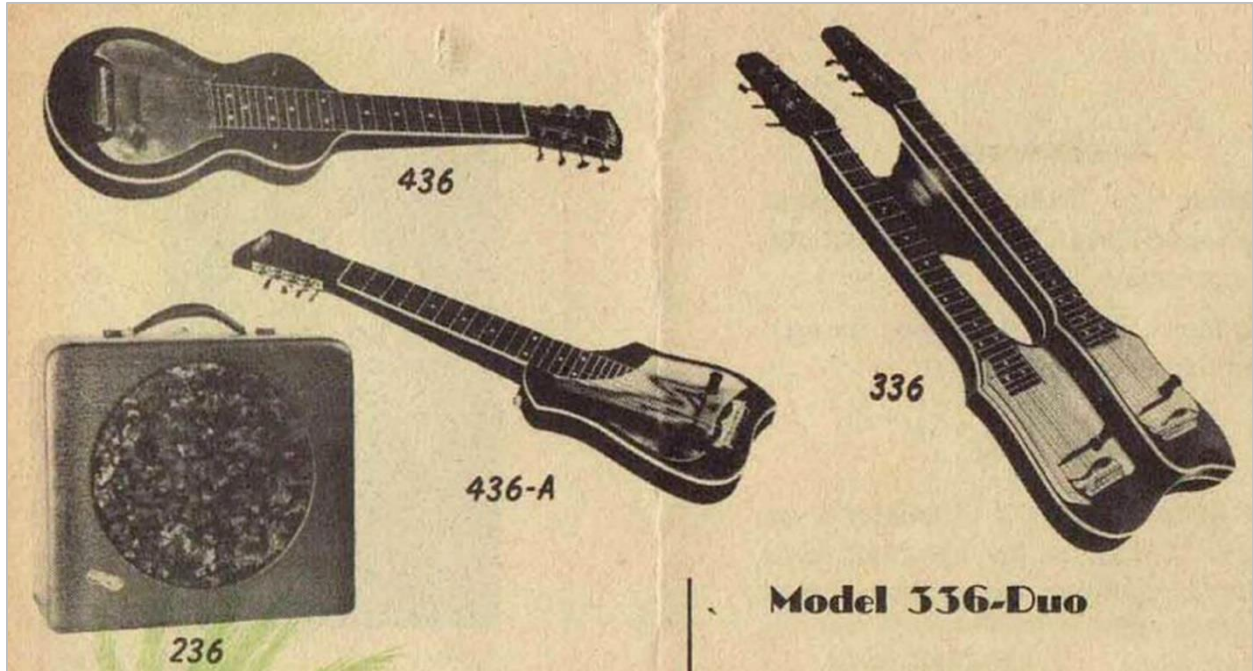
It seems obvious to me that there was some kind of Knutsen influence in Paul Tutmarc's AudioVox guitar design, if only in their outward appearance. Perhaps, when Paul decided to make his own guitars, he remembered the quirky points and flairs on old Knutsens and decided to incorporate them in his own designs. In my opinion this influence was also passed on to Bud Tutmarc's Serenaders. But considering how many electric lap steels had wacky shapes, was there any evidence to link Tutmarc with Knutsen specifically?

² <https://www.historylink.org/File/7479>

Mr. Blecha is probably the world's foremost authority on AudioVox/Serenader guitars that does not have a last name of Tutmarc. He was also a previous Director of Collections at Seattle's Experience Music Project. He curated several shows at EMP dealing with the history of the electric guitar and bass guitar, prominently featuring AudioVox instruments. He has written many books on music, musical instruments, and Northwest music history. He has graciously allowed me to use the photographs in his collection in this story.

³ The full story (paraphrased from the articles cited) goes something like this (all of it happening around 1930-35): Tutmarc was playing Hawaiian guitar on stage and on the radio but wanted to be louder. He worked on a pickup design with a man named Art Stimpson (and others) in Seattle. Stimpson wanted to sell the design to a large guitar company. Tutmarc wanted to patent the design on his own. Tutmarc paid a significant sum of money to do a patent search. The patent attorneys said there was no way he could get a patent, as the pickup design was too similar to that of a telephone. So Tutmarc stopped work. Stimpson (according to Tutmarc) then took the design to Los Angeles, where he sold the design to National. National eventually patented the pickup – coupled to a new guitar design to get around the similarity to the telephone – and therefore left Tutmarc out in the cold. Former National toolmaker Adolph Rickenbacher then left National and created the famous Frying Pan electric steel, and the rest is history.

In a similar vein, Tutmarc developed what is probably the first electric bass guitar (one with a pickup and frets, played horizontally as opposed to vertically like a stand-up bass). He did this in 1933. He sold a few in and around the Seattle area (as did Bud Tutmarc, who later developed and marketed a similar Serenader version). But they were too far ahead of their time to catch on. Years later, in 1951, Leo Fender would "invent" the Precision Bass.



A sampling from an early AudioVox Guitar Catalog – the double-neck even featured automatic tuning!

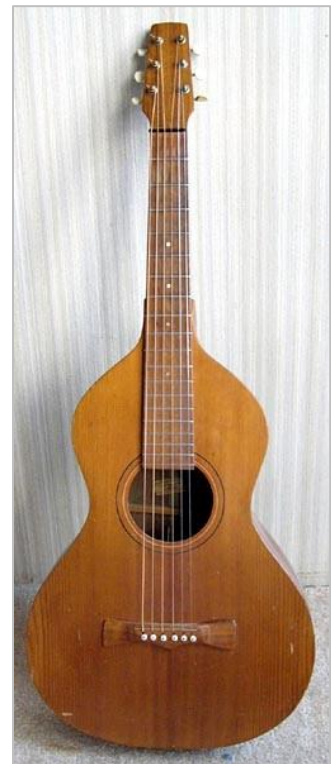
Another web search produced an interview Bud Tutmarc had given to Pedal Steel guitarist Bobby Lee.⁴ Bud discussed his father Paul Tutmarc’s early life and work, as well as his own history as a guitar and amp maker. In this interview, I found what I was looking for. Bud states:

[My dad] started playing the guitar [around 1911]. A few years later [he] got a Knutsen Hawaiian steel guitar and practiced hours and hours every day.

Paul Tutmarc had owned and played a Knutsen guitar! In fact, it may have been a Knutsen that spurred the young inventor-to-be into performing Hawaiian music!

Knutsen “convertible” steel guitar built in Seattle between 1909 and 1914.

Here, in my opinion, was a direct link between Knutsen and electric guitars. The Noe/Most book lays out their theory tracking “the development of the Hawaiian Steel Guitar” in the following way:



⁴ <http://tutmarc.tripod.com/paultutmarc.html>

Bobby Lee runs the Steel Guitar Forum, whose membership was incredibly helpful to me in my research, especially in regard to Sol Hoopii’s connection to the Tutmarcs.

From Chris Knutsen (via Hawaiians) to

- Hermann Weissenborn to
- general popularity of Hawaiian guitars to
- the desire for players to be louder to
- National resonators to
- National/Rickenbacher electric guitars

I suggest another more direct route, one that may have happened in parallel:

Chris Knutsen (via Hawaiians) to

- Paul Tutmarc to
- National/Rickenbacher electric guitars

Bud Tutmarc goes on to say in the interview:

Before [my father] actually made this solid body guitar, he electrified every instrument he could get his hands on. He electrified zithers and pianos and Spanish guitars. He would break up two guitars, just to get the necks and fretboards and glue them on to a flat top guitar, having three necks with three different tunings.

While this alone conjures up images of fantastic instruments, it also begs the question: Did there exist, at any time, a Knutsen guitar with a Tutmarc pickup installed in it? I don't know, but if you live in Seattle, I would appreciate it if you could check in your closets and under your beds; I would dearly like to find one!

Tutmarc's AudioVox guitars went into production after Rickenbacher's, so Rickenbacher rightfully gets credit for making the first commercially popular electric instruments. Rickenbacher also gets credit for getting his instruments into influential players hands – players like Sol Hoopii, the King of the Hawaiian Steel Guitar.

And here's where the story takes another interesting twist. Paul Tutmarc was a huge fan of Sol Hoopii. Paul was known as a singer as well as a player, and in 1929 he was hired to sing in Hollywood movies for MGM.⁵ Both Hoopii *and* Knutsen were living in Los Angeles at the time. Did Paul Tutmarc meet Hoopii in LA? Could Tutmarc have met Knutsen too?⁶

⁵ Paul Tutmarc was known professionally as *the Silver-toned Tenor*. He played banjo and guitar as well as steel, and led a band on many tours. The movies he sang in were titled *It's a Great Life* and *The Voice of Hollywood*.

⁶ Knutsen was probably in poor health at this stage. Hoopii, meanwhile, was working for movie studios, living in Hollywood, and playing in several nightclubs, as well as on the radio.

Further research yielded an answer and a more concrete date – Bud Tutmarc remembers both he and his father Paul meeting Hoopii in Los Angeles in 1942. Of course, by then, Knutsen had been dead for 12 years. Also, by that time, Hoopii had converted to Evangelism – to none other than Aimee Semple McPherson’s Church of the Foursquare Gospel in Echo Park (which had also been Knutsen’s church!).⁷



L.A.’s Angelus Temple, where many celebrities and musicians went to celebrate.

Hoopii must’ve thought Bud played well, as the two appeared together many times over the rest of Hoopii’s life. Hoopii would often stay at both Tutmarcs’ homes when he would visit Seattle.⁸ Hoopii even posed for photographs with Bud’s Serenader guitars. Bud went on to stardom in his own right, playing Evangelical songs on the Hawaiian steel.

⁷ Another incredible coincidence – or is it? Hoopii converted to Evangelism in 1938. While Knutsen had been dead for years, it would be unlikely that he never met Hoopii during his lifetime in LA. Hoopii was the most well-known Hawaiian player in the country, and it would’ve served Knutsen’s interests to at least know of him. Could Knutsen have introduced Hoopii to McPherson? Or is it more likely that the ultra-famous Hoopii gravitated to the also ultra-famous McPherson? In any case, Hoopii continued in the service of McPherson’s Foursquare Gospel church, as well as other churches, for the rest of his life. ([Miner: See Epilogue.](#))

⁸ While Hoopii actually died in Seattle, his obituary lists an Echo Park address that was within sight of McPherson’s Angelus Temple. Bud Tutmarc also played many times with Hoopii in Foursquare presentations. I would love to know if all three men (Knutsen, Paul Tutmarc, and Hoopii) knew each other personally.

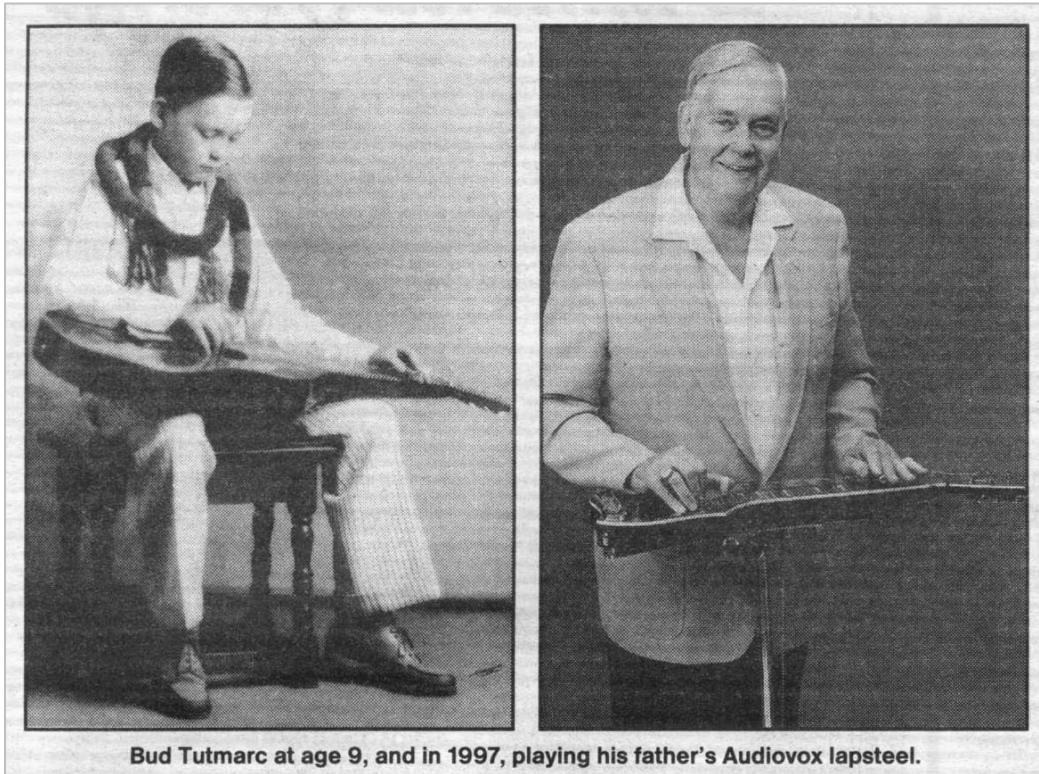


Sol Hoopii in the '50s with a Serenader Steel Guitar

I eventually found even more information about the Tutmarcs published in the March 1999 issue of Vintage Guitar magazine.

It is here where the Knutsen-Tutmarc connection completely fused in my head – the article featured a great photo of Bud Tutmarc, age 9, playing an acoustic steel guitar – [which looks like a Knutsen!](#)⁹

Next to this photo was a similarly wonderful picture of Bud in 1997, playing his father's doubleneck AudioVox guitar. Amazing.



⁹ **Miner:** Unfortunately, this instrument remains a mystery. Knutsen's hollow-neck models were never quite this shallow, especially at the end of the neck. Darrell pointed out what look like a pickguard – not the dark shadow to the left of Bud's pinky, but something just touching his fingers near the soundhole. No one but Knutsen added pickguards to his tops – if we're actually seeing one here. There is also what *looks* like one of Knutsen's "puzzle piece" top inlays (between Bud's hands at the top's edge), an even more definitive "Knutsen smoking gun" (used from about 1920-on). The other option is that this is likely a Weissenborn, and those two features are illusions or something else. Darrell's original footnote is thus somewhat moot, though his last statement remains possible. **Darrell:** While this is a major find, it doesn't necessarily support my theory about shared Knutsen/AudioVox design – there are no points whatsoever on this Hawaiian steel guitar. I counter with the following – perhaps Tutmarc owned more than one Knutsen. He certainly would've seen "pointed" Knutsen instruments in or around Seattle.

There are still many questions I would love to ask Bud Tutmarc, especially about my Knutsen-connection theory. But while Bud still lives in Seattle (and is very pleased to know his father's place in history is being recognized) he has been in poor health these past few years. (Miner: Unfortunately, Bud passed away before he could respond.)

Oh, and by the way, I lost the eBay auction. Damn those snipers!

Addendum (by Gregg Miner)

Darrell never published this piece, as he never finished it. One reason was that he “always had more research to do” and also kept finding more clues! In fact, this one turned up immediately after he had submitted his original draft to me.

In April, 2007, Darrell wrote: This bombshell arrived on my doorstep yesterday:



It's from Les Cook's Grass Skirt Records release of *Sol Hoopii in Hollywood* - which reissues Sol's 1920s-era work with Hollywood and Sunset records in Los Angeles. These were the first independent records produced in the area.

There are two Knutsen-related items in the liner notes. The first is the first look I've had at this publicity photograph of Mackie's Queen's Hawaiians, with was one of Sol's L.A. groups. I'd seen the picture many times in my L.A. Times research, but it'd always been poorly reproduced microfilm. This is already half-toned, but you can tell Sol's playing a wooden steel guitar on his lap. The liner notes say Weissenborn. Hard to tell through the screen, but I see: a clunky Knutsen headstock, a chopped-off body and a (convertible?) neck, something happening in the upper bouts (inlay? or pick wear?), and an inlaid pickguard!¹⁰

The other more definite Knutsen connection comes from more info on Sol's first wife, Georgia Stiffler. I knew she was in the Foursquare Church with Sol, but I thought that they were there in the late '30s when Sol "converted" – after Knutsen had died. But the new liner notes place them as involved with the Church in 1921, before the Angelus Temple was even built!¹¹

I can therefore at least say that *if* Sol and Georgia were in the Church in 1921, ***then they knew Chris Knutsen.***

Acknowledgements/Sources:

Many, many thanks go to the Tutmarc family and Tutmarc Records, Bobby Lee of the Pedal Steel Guitar Pages/Steel Guitar Forum, Peter Blecha, Historylink.org, the Pacific Northwest Historians Guild, EMP, Bob Brozman, George Keoki Lake, Les Cook and Grass Skirt Records, Cord International and Hana Ola Records, Paul Teagle, Vintage Guitar Magazine, Gregg Miner and his Knutsen Archives, and that unnamed eBay seller...

Images:

Duane Heilman: p.1 bottom; Tom Noe: p.3 bottom; Bud Tutmarc: p.6; Les Cook: p.7 eBay: p.1 top; all others Darrell Urbien

¹⁰ **Miner:** This is then Darrell's second "mystery lap steel." From these clues, neither Darrell, colleague Ben Elder, nor I could identify the instrument. We seemed to agree that it could be either a Knutsen convertible, a Knutsen-built Kona, or a Kona built by Weissenborn or someone else. The length of the cut-off body section near the neck looks fairly short, which seems to say "Kona." A Kona would have had a neck heel going into the body's square termination; Knutsen's convertible would have had a longer body taper and a metal bracket. Obviously, we can't see any detail there. However, *neither* of those would have had a Knutsen pickguard. He added those – in all different shapes, and often all over the top – to his Los Angeles hollow-neck steels; none have ever been seen on his much earlier convertibles, nor on Konas or Weissenborns. Thus, if it *is* a pickguard, it was custom or added later. Knutsen, or not, it just reiterates for me how all these Los Angeles luthier "neighbors" were copying and trying to top each other, with local musicians like Sol Hoopii most likely familiar with all of them.

¹¹ **Urbien, 2007:** Hoping to confirm this with my contact at the Heritage Office, I went down immediately. She had heard of Stiffler but wasn't sure when she was active or what part she played. I confirmed through other Church members who remembered Stiffler that she was Sol Hoopii's wife and that they were both in "The Church Hawaiian Band." OK, that was the first I'd heard of *that*, so now I have people looking for the other members of that band and when it played. If not exactly confirmation, this is at least acknowledgment. **Miner:** Les Cook told me several people had a hand in the liner notes, and the Shiffler source has not yet been determined.

Timeline

Here is a time line of important dates in the three men's lives - note the interesting parallels (dates taken from articles cited and the Knutsen Archives):

1865	3-year-old Chris Knutsen immigrates to Minnesota from Norway.
1896	Paul Tutmarc born, Minneapolis, MN.
1897	Knutsen moves to Port Townsend, WA.
1902	Sol Hoopii born in Honolulu, HI.
1906	Knutsen moves to Seattle, WA.
1908	Tutmarc singing and playing guitar and banjo in Minneapolis.
1911	Tutmarc begins playing guitar and touring on Chautauqua circuit. "Some years later," he purchases Knutsen Hawaiian steel guitar and begins performing on that.
c.1914	Knutsen moves to Los Angeles, CA. PPIE in San Francisco.
1917	Tutmarc moves to Seattle.
c.1919	Sol Hoopii arrives in Los Angeles.
1921	Tutmarc marries, family lives in Aberdeen, WA.
1922	Hoopii appears on KHJ Radio (first of MANY appearances/concerts).
1923	Knutsen appears on KHJ Radio, Angelus Temple founded in Echo Park.
1924	Paul "Bud" Tutmarc Jr. born (Tutmarc family living in Centralia, WA).
1925	Hoopii makes first recordings in Los Angeles.
1926	Paul Tutmarc appearing on Tacoma Radio, in Theaters.
1927	Hoopii's makes landmark recordings (with National resonator guitars) in L. A.
1928	Paul Tutmarc moves family to Seattle, WA.
1929	Paul Tutmarc visits Hollywood to sing in MGM movies.
1930	Chris Knutsen dies.
c.1930-1950's	Paul Tutmarc performing and teaching in Seattle.
c.1930-1931	Paul Tutmarc and Art Stimpson develop electric guitar pickup.
c.1931	Stimpson takes pickup design to Los Angeles, hoping to market it.
c.1932-1933	National/Rickenbacher (with Stimpson) patents electric guitar.
c.1932-1933	Sol Hoopii switches to Rickenbacher electric guitar.
c.1932-1950	Paul Tutmarc creates AudioVox Manufacturing Company (in Seattle), makes and markets electric guitars, steels, amplifiers, and, in 1933, the FIRST electric bass.
1938	Hoopii joins Foursquare Gospel Church in Echo Park.
1940s	Hoopii appears regularly on KFSG Radio, tours US doing Evangelical shows playing a variety of electric steels.
1942	Hoopii and meets both Tutmarcs in Los Angeles.
1945	Bud Tutmarc marries, begins making Serenader steel guitars and basses patterned after his father's AudioVox models – distributed by L.D. Heater Music Co.
c.1945	Bud Tutmarc playing rhythm guitar in Hoopii's band.
c.1940s+	Bud Tutmarc, playing AudioVox and Serenader steels, records over 18 religious Hawaiian steel albums.
1951	Leo Fender "invents" electric bass.
1953	Sol Hoopii dies.
1972	Paul Tutmarc dies.

Epilogue (by Gregg Miner)

Darrell's original premise – a possibly Knutsen influence on Tutmarc (or even just “awareness”) – remains an interesting, geeky, “What if?”

I'm more fascinated by his theories on the relationship between Hoopii and Knutsen. While Darrell's sleuthing unearthed no “smoking guns,” he was pretty sure they must have crossed paths. In further investigating (see the following excerpt), I am convinced that they not only knew *of* each other, but knew each other well, whether they were friends or ever socialized or not. There is every chance that they could have performed together in the same “Hawaiian band” in the Angelus Temple on occasion. We know that Knutsen played his “harp steel” there (his convertible steel guitar with extra sub-bass and super-treble strings), and we now know that – at some point – Hoopii and his wife played in “the Church Hawaiian band.” Proof of them seen together, or playing together, would indeed be a Holy Grail image.

This excerpt of Peter Blecha's article on Historylink.org reveals more about Sol Hoopii's Los Angeles period, concurrent with that of Chris Knutsen:

Hoopii, Sol (1902-1953) by Peter Blecha, 6/07/2017

In 1920 he ([Hoopii](#)) headed south to Los Angeles, where he scored a modest gig playing at Chinese restaurants with Decker's Hawaiian Serenaders. The following year he married a fellow entertainer, the dancer and ukulele player Georgia Stiffler, who became deeply involved in Aimee Semple McPherson's (1890-1944) Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

In 1922 Ho'opi'i joined the trio Mackie's Queen's Hawaiians. The group was led by George M. Mackie, who had originally formed it back around 1918 before moving to Seattle in 1920. During his Northwest interlude, Mackie bought a house at 3608 Palatine Avenue N in the Wallingford neighborhood and taught ukulele and Hawaiian guitar at a downtown music studio well into 1922. Moving back to Los Angeles that same year, he re-formed Mackie's Queen's Hawaiians, playing ukulele alongside Lani McIntyre on Spanish guitar and Ho'opi'i on steel guitar, and they began to get their first taste of stardom. The popular trio began performing on pioneering L.A. radio station KHJ, and by 1923 they were being touted as "Radioland's most consistent Hawaiian Trio" (Rockwell, 9).

By that December, Sol Hoopii, as he simplified his name, had formed a new band, the Hoopii Novelty Three, with McIntyre and a new ukulele man, Julian "Glenwood" Leslie. Hoopii's star was now ascending rapidly, in part because he was able to play a wide variety of musical genres, including pop hits and blues tunes -- often with a notably jazzy edge -- in addition to the expected Hawaiian favorites. In 1925 the trio began performing regularly on the Hollywood nightclub scene, as well as on Hollywood-based radio station KFVB. They also began cutting discs -- under the name Sol Hoopii and his Hawaiian Trio for one of the earliest West Coast labels, Sunset Records. Interestingly, this made future Washington resident Hoopii a label-mate of another early Hawaiian-guitar star with ties to Washington -- John Coppock (1899-1959), who grew up in Peshastin in Chelan County, was active around Los Angeles in the 1920s and 1930s, and also recorded with Sunset.

Next came Hoopii and his band's appearance in numerous movies, beginning with *His Jazz Bride* in 1926. That same year, the Sol Hoopii Trio signed with a major record label, Columbia. Their first songs on the label, "Farewell Blues"/"Stack o' Lee Blues" (Columbia No. 797-D), featured the debut recording of a brand-new invention: the National String Instrument Corporation's tri-cone ampliphonic resonator guitar. The Los Angeles-based manufacturer wanted to draw attention to its shiny metal-clad square-neck hollow-body guitar and chose Hollywood's most celebrated steeler to introduce its unique sound to the world. National gave Hoopii a prototype and, between the series of Columbia recordings up through 1931 and Hoopii's gigs at such prominent venues as Grauman's Million Dollar Theatre, accomplished this mission: Resonator guitars became a standard tool for legions of subsequent Hawaiian steelers as well as southern bluesmen.

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