



YARDBIRD...

How He Became England's

The Yardbirds seem to have a monopoly on England's best guitarists. Their first, Eric Clapton, established the fantastic Yardbird sound before leaving to start his own group. Next, Jeff Beck contributed many innovations. When bass player Paul Samwell-Smith left, Jimmy Page replaced him and recently switched to guitar. Now Jeff and Jimmy play together.

Jeff Beck, of all the British guitarists, seems to have made the greatest impact on American audiences. His incredibly fluid and dynamic sound is a mind-blowing pleasure to listen to and a challenge to imitate.

We sat down with Jeff for a brief private interview (Thanks, Nola and Connie!) a few minutes before a Yardbirds' press conference was scheduled to begin.



Shortly after this interview, Jeff quit the Yardbirds and signed a contract with record producer Mickie Most as a solo artist.

DON: Many of our readers play the guitar, Jeff, and some have asked us what kind of guitar you use. **JEFF:** I play a Les Paul model Gibson guitar. They stopped making that particular model about five or six years ago, so I had a job trying to find one myself. A guy in a record store helped me find one.

The guitar has a fabulous feel. It was hand made. Nowadays most guitars are made by machine. It's a rare guitar because it's made so well. I can play almost anything on it. It has a good sound. Very powerful.

DON: Our readers also wonder if your amplifier is responsible for the amazing sounds you create. **JEFF:** I've got dozens of amplifiers.

The more the merrier. You can't say any one is better than the other. The effects I get are done by the use of fuzz boxes and echoes.

DON: What kind of fuzz box do you use? **JEFF:** I made my own fuzz box.

DON: How did you and the Yardbirds develop your individual sound? **JEFF:** We started experimenting with sounds a long time ago. I was fairly intrigued by a guitarist like Les Paul who was able to get any sound out of the guitar. I was

fascinated by...I suppose it was a perversion of the sound. If a sax could sound like a piano, I suppose I'd start playing the sax.

DON: Who are some of your favorite guitar players? **JEFF:** I love Negro guitarists like T. Bone Walker and Buddy Guy.

Also B.B. King, who is one of the governors of blues playing. He has such great expression. He plays a lot of phrases that are the same, but they ring home every time. He's learned his "stock explosions." That's what I call them. He knows exactly how to tap the audience. There's a basic backbone to his playing and he could never be terrible. He's always great, sometimes even very great. That's what I like about him.

DON: B.B. King is one of Mike Bloomfield's idols, too. **JEFF:** Mike Bloomfield is great. But there are people who can imitate him and he no longer holds the high chair. Eric Clapton, who was previously in this group, is probably the top guitarist now. (Editor's note: Bloomfield just came back from England raving about Clapton.)

DON: What were you doing when Eric was in the Yardbirds? **JEFF:** (Embarrassed laugh) Apart from being a tramp, I was playing



JEFF BECK



Most Influential Guitarist

on records whenever I could. I was lucky enough to be known. Whenever they needed a rock and roll guitar break, I'd play it. But work was limited because there weren't very many rock and roll records being made at the time.

I met Jimmy Page at these recording sessions and he recommended me to the Yardbirds when Eric left.

DON: Can you remember the first piece of music that made a strong impression on you?

JEFF: These are very good questions but they require a lot of thought.

DON: Take your time. I've got lots of tape in my recorder.

JEFF: I've been impressed by all music ever since I've been able to appreciate anything. Classical music impressed me first. Ravel's "Bolero" knocked me out because it had an understandable beat and it went on and on. I still use it as an inspiration for my playing now.

DON: Do you draw on other classical pieces? The other Yardbirds have told us they listen to a lot of classical music.

JEFF: There's no way that any proper musician can't like classical music.

(Then Jeff had to run off to join the press conference. I took a front row seat and when question time started, I asked them who was responsible for the Indian music fad in England. "We were," said Keith Relf. "In actual fact, we were going to use a couple of classical Indian music players on a record, but we found out that it didn't record particularly strong. Jeff fiddled about with certain knobs on his guitar and got a better sound that was still similar to that of a sitar.")

"Who introduced you to Indian music, Jeff?" I asked.

"I heard some of Jimmy Page's Indian albums. When I hear music I like, I store it in my mind for future use," Jeff replied.

"I suppose I was the first pop musician in England to have a sitar," said Jimmy. "I had one imported from Bombay."

Later in the conference Jeff said, "When we make a record we all discuss what's going to be the great "in" thing on it, but nobody really knows if it'll come across. We still don't know if the beauty of our records has come across in a big way. Our music has something undefinable that we don't completely understand ourselves."

Jeff also revealed that he hardly ever plays a record at the right speed on his phonograph. He gets ideas for new sounds this way. Toward the end of the conference I was able to talk with Jeff privately again.)

DON: Have you and Jimmy played guitar together on a record yet?

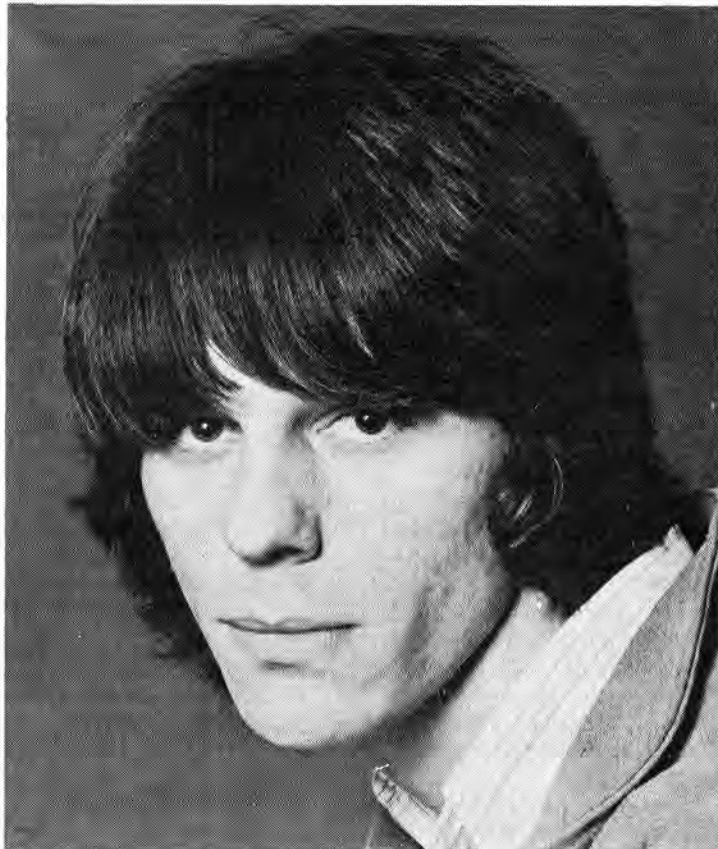
JEFF: (Smiling with obvious delight) Yes. On "Happenings Ten Years Time Ago" we both play lead. We have a ball onstage, too. I think we must be the only group with two featured guitarists playing together.

DON: And two of the best guitarists in the world.

JEFF: (Blushing) Thanks.

DON: I suppose it's not easy for a guitarist to explain how he became one of the best.

JEFF: Well, the reason I seem to be able to get away with my playing is that I use a guitar more as a solo voice than as a backing instrument. Other groups seem to use a guitar just as a necessary tool they hang around their necks. I decided that if I was going to have this weight around my neck, I'd make noise with it. So I never put my guitar down. I practiced all day long.



DON: Did you play along with records?

JEFF: Yes. That's how I learned intonation. I listened to how a song goes from one key to another.

DON: What were some of the records?

JEFF: Early rock and roll. Bill Hayley & The Comets. In fact, Bill Hayley & The Comets were in Paris last week and they stole the show from the Walker Brothers. I love the old days of rock and roll. It's amazing how a 12-bar blues has lasted in pop music.

DON: Do you think things are progressing toward a universal music that includes jazz, pop, blues, country and everything?

JEFF: That's partly our scene. We love to take other people's music and put it into what we're doing and hope that we've complimented it.

DON: Have you thought of producing records?

JEFF: I'd like to do that. But to do that you have to cut everything out and concentrate on just producing. I'm basically a guitarist now and I have to stick with that alone; otherwise, I'd be a loser at playing and a loser as a producer.

DON: Apparently Sam (Paul Samwell-Smith) felt that way, so he left the Yardbirds to produce records.

JEFF: Yes. Also, he was more interested in folk music than the rest of us. We wanted to explore other areas.

DON: What are the musical aims of the Yardbirds?

JEFF: Basically we hope to keep playing on and on and on till we die. □