



JEFF'S Future Beckons

by VALERIE WILMER

Jeff Beck, ex-Yardbird and a happier person because of it, walked across the room and picked up his Gibson Les Paul. He indicated the places where out of bitter, soul-consuming frustration he had smashed his favourite guitar into four or five pieces. "This is where the Yardbirds career ended for me," he said, and went on to explain the feeling of utter desperation that can set in at the end of an exhausting tour when the atmosphere is tense.

"The thing I hate most about playing with groups is the travel. On our first American tour we hadn't got two pennies to rub together and yet we spent what we did earn on flying. This was great because we stayed sane, but on the second and on the last tour we were going everywhere by bus which is stupid. We were doing 600 miles a day in a bus that had no air-conditioning, with a few crummy nowhere people playing guitars against each other all the time, day and night. You can imagine."

I imagined. What with this and every climatic change affecting Jeff's tonsils and, consequently, his ability to sing, it was not surprising that his apparently/successful

career came to such an abrupt and violent halt.

When the Yardbirds returned to the States without their popular lead guitar-man, both his face and sound were sorely missed by audiences who continually asked "Where's Jeff?" The others found it difficult to talk about the frayed tempers and the fractured Gibson but Jeff, who is currently forming a combo of his own, was willing to explain.

"I don't think anyone in a minor successful group would leave unless there were a whole bunch of reasons," he said. "Basically, three of the Yardbirds were friends before I joined and that's fatal. They went to school together and virtually lived together and so no matter how much friction there is in the band, they'll always swallow it and go back together. But the person who joins as an outsider - no matter how good he is - will get into these arguments and be left out all the time."

Jeff has few qualms about revealing his true feelings and the frustrations that being in the business have brought about in his life. Describing the Yardbirds as a "pointless group" he went on: "Basically they didn't know much about music

which is terrible. The drummer couldn't keep time, not even in the studio."

In spite of what he says, Jeff insists that he has no personal axe to grind. He is just an unusually frank person. "Don't get me wrong about them," he pointed out, "I think they're great people. But when they get on the stage and play it's the end of the world."

He elaborated. "With all the good groups that there are about now, you've got to make the move one step ahead rather than sticking it out and going down with a sinking ship. And that, for me, is what the Yardbirds are. It's really amazing to think that only a year ago all the sickening DJs and writers were raving about the fantastic Yardbirds' sound. It was all 'Jeff Beck this' and 'Keith Relf's great harp playing that'. And then it just goes 'zonk!' Right down the drain.

It's a funny business, I accept that, but then people just don't accept my reasons for leaving. As far as I'm concerned I can split from 20,000 groups if I want to. If a person's not happy with a job he leaves."

Jeff does not want to talk about his plans for his own group in case things don't turn out according to

plan, but looking at other musicians who had left established groups when everything appeared to be going well, he considered the case of organist Alan Price. "Now he's probably done better on his own because of what's happened to the Animals," he said. "Eric Burdon's doing a lot in the States but you can't vanish for six months or even six weeks and expect to be fresh in everybody's minds. It's not a case of 'hello, where have you been?' because they just don't want to know."

The relief Jeff feels from being released from his moral obligations to a group he was too good for is obvious. Generally considered one of the most talented 'faces' on the British scene, he is by no means big-headed about his talent; just aware of his ability. Right now he is longing for a chance to experiment with sound, any sound for its own sake, especially since he was doing so before he felt limited by being the only interested one.

A completely self-taught guitarist with tastes ranging from Les Paul to Bo Diddley through Barney Kessel, Charlie Byrd and classical works, Jeff is exceptional in his



honesty about the music business. Pop music is for him "a joke, a good fun thing." He says he is prepared to work hard, "But if I'm prepared to work I'm entitled to make a joke of it. If I can't make a joke of it, I don't want to do it."

"There is nothing I hate more than standing on stage playing my latest 'disc' - I hate the thing that it stands for. I want to do something more than that."

Not surprisingly; considering his disenchantment with the Yardbirds, the guitarist feels that his best work was done back in the dark ages when he was an unknown part of an equally unknown combo. "You're not conscious then of how famous you are or anything like that, and so you're being influenced by the people around you. The drummer does something creative and you copy it, that sort of thing. But it just seems to me that that's not what pop music is about. It's repetitive but you can't educate the public musically, all you can do is entertain them and the one that does it the best is the winner - or so it seems to me."

"The Beatles are the only people who can get away with doing a few way-out things like playing stuff backwards and all that."

Jeff feels, though, that there is a way of playing to entertain "rather than for them just to sit there like a duty to use up their six bob or whatever they've paid to see you. But there is a tremendous interest

now in guitar playing. People want to see how many ridiculous sounds you can get out of it. How badly you play it doesn't matter, it's how much noise you can get out of it, and this is great because I like noise."

Even so, the guitarist often finds himself wondering whether it is worth trying to be an innovator, or a creator of new sounds. "Even in clothing, someone invents something outlandish and the next thing you know everybody starts wearing it and nobody really knows where it's coming from," he explained. "So why be an inventor - why not copy someone? All you can possibly get is self-satisfaction."

A pessimistic attitude maybe, but not a surprising one coming from one of the first guitarists to use feedback from his amplifier, only to have the credit for it claimed by someone else and a million and one other guitarists start copying that person. Jeff described this comparatively new method of sound production as "ear-catching although it's simple. But it does take talent to control."

"But if it's simple, so what? If a little kid can do it, why not? Just because it's not hard doesn't mean to say it's bad or worthless - some of the most beautiful pieces of music are simple."

Jeff's preoccupation with the idea of experimental sound stems from the fact that he feels that every other field of music has been well-

explored. "A friend of mine has this record of an American guy who stands on stage with loads of tape machines and people sit in the auditorium looking at him working them. There's sounds coming out of women talking, interviews with prostitutes and bombs and stuff. If you listened to it about twenty times you'd probably know more about the world than you would from listening to a whole bunch of other albums."

He took an aggressive stand when he saw my eyebrows rise. "Who's to say what's music and what isn't?" he demanded. "It's not music in the eye of the serious music critics but it's music technically speaking. A musical note is a musical note, even a dog can make one."

"There's music written for this abstract stuff, too. It's great - looks like an abstract painting. Who wants to sit down and laboriously learn what someone was playing better than you can, 1,200 years ago?"

Not Jeff Beck for one. He gave up piano lessons as a child when his tutor refused to allow him to practice his 'honky-tonk' style. But now, with tastes from James Brown to Charlie Byrd, ("And they probably wouldn't even play in the same place together!"), the guitarist has an open mind and an enquiring attitude to life in general and the music business in particular.

He claims he does not particularly care if his own group is not a raving success, what he dislikes is

the idea that he may find himself playing small clubs again without the recognition he has enjoyed of late. "That's something that would bring anybody down but you have to get used to it," he said. "It's a sickening thought, but even if I was the best guitarist in the world, and I'm certainly not, it could be the same. I could go on stage and the person who was the star could be a useless critter about so high who couldn't sing or anything, but just because he's popular, that's it. Well, I'm accepting this."

You are, I suggested, an unusual kind of person. Jeff smiled: "I couldn't be terribly hip if I tried. I mean I could be hip in guitar playing, yeah - I could challenge anybody, but that's what I'm supposed to be. But I could never be finger-popping hip like the phonies in the business. You can't mention any names but the place is full of 'em."

"No, I reckon the one who makes the most money is the winner. But then," he mused, "I don't think man's mind is ever contented." □

Valerie sent this last minute flash a couple of weeks later.

In conclusion, you might like to know that Jeff Beck's new group debuted Friday, March 3rd. The line-up is Rod Stewart (vocals - ough!!!), Ronnie Wood (b), Ray Cook (d). All I can say is God help him with Stewart aboard, a class Z-singer!