

ANYONE FOR LEE?



STILL CRAZY AFTER ALL THESE YEARS

TYA, from Woodstock to Cricklewood Green

Back in the mid 1960s, before Heavy Metal was even a chromium glint in its daddy's eye, there was British Blues Rock. Bands started out emulating the black American Blues and transformed it into virtuoso, guitar-based Heavy Rock. John Mayall was its patron saint, Peter Green and Eric Clapton its up-and-coming gods, and Alvin Lee its flash-fingered, slippery-necked superstar, the Blues Rock guitarist, the clog-footed, blond-haired Nottingham boy whose Blues-Boogie axework caused an epidemic of air-guitar soloing worldwide.

Lee and bassist Leo Lyons got together at 17 – this was 1964 – and immediately buggered off to Hamburg to play the Blues circuit there. By '67 they were back in England, linked up with keyboardist Chick Churchill and drummer Ric (no relation) Lee, in a band they called **Ten Years After** (apparently being something to do with it being ten years since Rock 'n' Roll was

born). They got a live following, a residency at the old Marquee, and eventually a record company to release their debut album, the one with the legendary 'Spoonful'. A year later came 'Undead' (like it says, a live one; you didn't have to wait five albums to do a live record back in *those days!*) and a year after that two more classics (you didn't take *five years* to do a record back in *those days!*) 'Stonedhenge' and 'Shhh'.

That was the year Ten Years After played Woodstock, and America declared Alvin to be their own guitar megagod. The British Blues purists got pissed off with them for becoming *too* Rockist, and turned to contemporaries like (pre-Budgie-in-chiffon) Fleetwood Mac. But Alvin Lee & Co. were quite busy touring America anyway (they did 28 full American tours by the mid-'70s) and putting out another two albums in 1970, 'Cricklewood Green' and 'Watt'.

They took their first break from the road in '72 – three months off to write and record their most experimental album, 'A Space In Time', not their biggest hit – and their second break in '73 for Chick Churchill to make a solo album and Alvin to build his home studio and make an album with Mylon LeFevre, an American Blues-gospel singer. By that time, Alvin was openly disillusioned with both touring and Ten Years After, which he described as a "travelling jukebox". The record company put out a token live album, and everyone thought the band was over.

But they dragged themselves back into the studio in '74 to make 'Positive Vibrations', even if it was somewhat overshadowed by its frontman putting together a nine-piece band to release his own LP, 'Alvin Lee & Co. In Flight'.

They last played together in the States in '75. And that was it, though there was never an official announcement of a split. There was a brief reunion for the 25th Anniversary of the Marquee, a Reading Festival date and a couple of German shows. Their recent reunion led to the '89 album 'About Time', produced by Terry Manning of ZZ Top fame. It's being backed by extensive touring.

SYLVIE SIMMONS

Something to pull them together."

Something, I suppose, like Woodstock, the festival that made TYA US superstars.

"Woodstock was an accident," says Alvin. "It was disorganised and that's what was great about it. It was never meant to be *that* big of a deal. It was declared a National Disaster Area wasn't it?" he laughs. "To me the star of Woodstock was the audience.

"I've got a jumble of memories. The most vivid is the journey in, because we could only get within about ten miles of the site and no nearer, the roads were all jammed. So we bundled into an army helicopter with an open side and I had a safety harness on. I was dangling out of the helicopter over half-a-million people.

"Backstage, there was a lot of politics and bartering over who was going on before who. I didn't get involved in it. I went for a walk around the lake and joined in with the audience and saw it from the other side of the stage. It was great. No-one knew who I was, but people were offering me food and drink being *really* friendly. There wasn't so much camaraderie backstage. There's been a

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lot more of that kind of thing between different bands since Live Aid. Like the 'Guitar Speak' thing that I did" – the Night Of The Guitars tour, 1988, starring Lee, Leslie West, Steve Howe *et al* – "that was a load of fun... And, guitarists are *renowned* for *not* getting along!

"There were ten lead guitarists there and it was *great*. Maybe it was the age we all were, but there seemed a lot more ego problems in the '60s."

So, what were the egos like when Alvin jammed on stage with Jimi Hendrix one legendary night in New York?!

"He was so far out that I never even *tried* to compete with him! He was too far out for me to even comprehend. Like he was on his own channel and everyone else was on theirs. And he was a larger-than-life guy as well with that kind of *aura* about him. I think he once said he was from Mars," he laughs, "and I thought maybe he was.

"He's left-handed so he couldn't play my guitar, so he took Leo's bass and played it upside-down. But he wasn't playing *bass*. He started playing *lead* bass and taking over. It was so incredible, we actually just stopped and let him carry on, and he kind of went off into outerspace. He took a guitar and went 20 steps further than I've ever heard it go."

And, so to the new album. Were you worried about the original TYA feel living on after so long?

"No. But, there was a danger sticking with the roots that it would sound old-fashioned. I think Terry Manning helped a lot. He encouraged us to keep it simple.

And, as for the ZZ Top comparisons: "A compliment indeed! I thought 'Eliminator' was a great album. In fact when I first heard 'Gimme All Your Lovin'" I was upset, because I thought, 'Why didn't I write that?' There's one track on our album called 'Judgement Day' and the intro sounds just like ZZ, that Billy Gibbons guitar sound and the way he played it. I got to the end of the song and said to Terry, 'That sounded like ZZ Top did it? You're going to get the blame for this as the producer!'"

Yeah. But, what the hell...