

alvin's years

More than twenty years after he first found fame, **Alvin Lee** is back in the Blues spotlight. Cliff Jones talks to him about Woodstock, past mistakes and his renewed guitar fervour

Like the Blues itself, Alvin Lee's career has been an intense rollercoaster ride through euphoria and despair. From the intensity of the early R'n'B boom through the excess and desperation of '70s progressive Rock scene his has been a single minded attempt to keep true to his first musical love. With a new album, *Zoom*, that features George Harrison amongst its guests and a world tour about to kick off, Lee maintains he's still got them honky electric whiteboy Blues real bad.

'For me it's all about feel. I came up during the purist Blues boom, you had people like Jeremy Spencer from Fleetwood Mac doing real purist Elmore James stuff and Brian Jones doing the same. You'd see people at the gigs in black leather long coats actually taking notes at the front of the stage. They used to have a go at me 'cause I'd play an Elmore James song and I'd interpret it my way. They'd actually come backstage after and moan in this true train-spotter fashion that I'd got it all wrong!

'It got too purist for its own good and I knew I had to break out of their constraints or else I'd be little more than an imitator. For me, being brought up on the Blues was about extending things, breaking out, and the Blues to me was all about taking the form and injecting it with your own soul. That's why I loved people like Hooker, that ethnic feel, sloppy guitar and gravelly voice. I loved the way he used to mike up his foot and just stomp away in time with the music. Great feel. You can't say he's a great guitarist but what makes him so important is the looseness, the unpredictability and the Blues soul to it all.

'That was the essence of the underground scene. People who didn't want to be constrained by the purist notion of what the real Blues was about. My dad was a collector of ethnic worksongs and chain gang songs so I had it earlier than most. Big Bill Broonzy actually came back to our house when I was 12 after he'd done a gig in Nottingham and I can still remember the moment. I was sitting at his knee while he played these fantastic tunes on the guitar. That moment was a very big influence and it inspired me. There's nothing like being two feet away from

something like that and hearing it all coming through in that intimate setting. The Blues was never new to me because of things like that and when I went to America I was horrified to find out that no one knew who they were.

'The thing when we were coming through in the early days was to find the recordings these guys made and actually know which ones were duff and which were hot stuff. A lot of times these guys would do one version of a song for one label then another for some other label that was a million times better. The fanaticism came from knowing which sessions were good and which were crap.

'Muddy did some stuff in '44 with Little Walter, *Can't Be Satisfied* and *Heaven Shuffle*. That had Willie Dixon on bass. You see, that's one thing that I learnt from my old man. Dixon was a bit of a whore 'cause he used to drag these unfortunate unknowns off the street, record their songs and then cop all the publishing royalties. That's why so many songs have the writer as Willie Dixon. Maybe a bit less influential than people think'.

It was late in 1961 that a youthful Lee took his first band off to Hamburg where they played a five week residency at The Star Club, later to be home to The Beatles. It was this grounding in the Blues and the relentless 'two sets a night every night' regime that prepared them for their legendary residency at the Marquee.

'Hamburg. Hmmm. All I can say is that it seemed like five years at the time. It was all pep pills, hookers and gangsters. I wrote a song about it on *Let It Rock*. *Little Boy* was all about my introduction to that wicked world ha ha! You used to get a little star badge to wear at the time that let everyone know you were part of the Star Club and that was your passport to get into any club. I remember Tony Sheridan, of Beatles fame, was there one night and he'd fallen asleep to a Big Bill Broonzy record with a lighted cig in his hand. We all sat there and watched, waiting for this fag to burn his hands. It did! It burnt right round his fingers and he never woke. I didn't realise later it was because of all the shit he was doing. That's what it was like then. You lived from day to day. Albert Lee was at

another club round the corner and I used to go and chat to him because he was the only man I knew who could play the solo from *Hound Dog*. I ran into Scotty Moore about six years ago in Nashville and asked how he did it 'cause it sounds like a load of scaffold poles dropping on the ground! He just laughed and said, "I just pulled a handful o' them strings. If you like I'll tell about another time I fucked up too!" I couldn't believe it. The solo was a mistake that people have been trying to copy for years. Albert had it off perfect but I still couldn't do it.

'It was through that Friday night residency that we got our deal. That was a prestigious night to have and one day this bloke from Decca turned up at the gig. It was funny 'cause we had already auditioned for them and were waiting for the result. We got this letter saying, "We understand you are well known on the Blues scene and we'd like to make an album". Bands didn't make albums straight away then so and we were one of the first to do so without a single. Anyway, about three weeks into the recording this bloke came in and said, "Oh I'm sorry, but you failed the audition and we're not interested". We were in the studio and had been turned down at the same time!

'Decca had John Mayall and the Stones so they saw a great future in the Blues. In those days the blokes did it on 4-track and we'd do a take and they'd say, "Righty ho, onto the next one" without ever letting us hear the playback. These blokes in white overalls would be there and they would have to go and seek permission to actually let us hear a playback! The problem as we saw it was to recreate on record the punch you got inside a club. The old valve compression systems could recreate that.

'I find the way people work nowadays tedious. Our second album, *Undead*, was a live album which we did at Kooks Kleek which was right next door to the Decca studios and I still maintain it's our best. This was what we are about and this is the best I've ever heard us on vinyl. Where do you go from here? From then we had to experiment more to recreate that live feel.'

Cliff Jones