

alvin & his cherry

Alvin Lee's famous cherry red 335 is his one and only stage guitar. In his own words, 'nothing else has ever come close'. The unique sound is the result of the installation of some single coil pickups, along with the familiar humbuckers and his trademark Marshall combo. It was a match made in heaven as far as he was concerned although, in true musicians' style, he's always on the lookout for that elusive combination that might prove to be one notch better.

'The 335 came from Chuck Berry really and, I suppose Scotty Moore, although he used the fatter version, the 355. If you cranked the 355 up loud you just made it uncontrollable and the Les Paul was too heavy while the Strat was too thin sounding. The way I play, my little finger sort of floats over the strings and below. When I solo'd on a Strat I found I used to turn the volume down by accident till you couldn't hear me. I thought it was my amp or just my hearing that was going for a while.

'My guitar's a 1958 Gibson 335 that I bought for £45 including a case. Until recently I only used my Marshall 50W combo. I find the output of my guitar matched the input of the amp perfectly and if you ever find a combination like that you have to stick with it. I avoid effects. I think the only one I really use is a Tube Screamer in the studio for a little presence. I'm just a curly lead into the amp kinda bloke.

'I recently got into the Marshall Jubilees. They're the only ones I've found that do the job as well as my 50W. I used to take it down there, 'cause I've known Jim Marshall a while, and do comparisons. Finally one came up I liked.'

Having spent much of the last decade playing and touring, including several sessions in country capital Nashville, there's now a return to the fervour that first made Alvin Lee pick up the guitar. Europe in particular has been thrilling to Lee's demonic solos and back to basic Blues. With the recent revival in electric Blues there's a new album, *Zoom*, a return to the sort of hard hitting guitar attack he's famed for, and a world tour in the offing. Among the guests who turned up for the album sessions were George Harrison and ex-Deep Purple organ grinder John Lord.

'It's funny really 'cause George has played on a few of my records but he never liked *Ten Years After* much, it was too Heavy Rock for him. His involvement came about through this bloke Mylon. He was a real holy roller and I got him on one of our *Ten Years After* tour packages. I was building a studio at home at the time and thought, "Now all we need is a band to try it out". Mylon asked me, "Where do all the musicians hang out, man?" "The Speakeasy," I said. With that he was gone. When he came back he had Steve Winwood with him, Jim Capaldi, Mick Fleetwood and George Harrison in tow. "Here's your band," he said. I was dumbfounded.

'George's slide is superb but he's not a jammer; he writes his solos so they have a beginning, a middle and an end, very precise. He's the very opposite to me, he has it very well mapped. My soloing has that jazz sensibility to it where I bring it down and bring it up, return to the themes and stuff. My style comes from experimentation; the more you do it, the longer you jam a solo, the more inventive you get.

'Basically I play patterns. I play 'em and fit 'em together. I'm good at fitting these little patterns together seamlessly. I just think, "a triangle here, a square there and a diamond there".

'George plays slide on the new album - I was lucky he was in town at the time - and John Lord plays Hammond organ, the man's keyboard. George is fantastic in the studio, since *Cloud 9* and *The Wilburys* he's found himself a renewed confidence in what he does. He was never a frontman but when he sets to with a solo they're the sweetest most beautiful things. I don't think he sees it himself. Mind, he's his own worst critic. No matter what you play yourself you always admire what other people do and he probably thinks he's not as good as everyone else. Lord knows why, 'cause his slide is amazing. I think we'll be seeing a lot more of him soon... and me as well come to think of it.'

woodstock: end of an era

With their particularly frantic brand of electric Blues, *Ten Years After* were among the first progressive Blues acts to successfully make the crossover with American audiences. Lee's fevered soloing and the extended improvised passages made them a popular live attraction and one of the most in demand support acts around. It was, however, their appearance at the Woodstock festival that catapulted the band to instant superstardom. For Lee, that legendary performance marked the beginning of the end.

'Bill Graham heard the Kooks Kleek *Undead* album and said if we ever got to the States he'd have a gig lined up at the Fillmore West in San Francisco. That first gig was with Big Brother and the Holding Company, one of the more inspired bands from that time. Janis Joplin was a real shit kicking woman, one of the boys and no mistake. I remember I was watching from the wings and all these bottles of Southern Comfort were being ferried onto the stage, one after another, and she'd down half of one at one go. No messing about, just straight down, then on with the song. I thought, "This stuff can't be very strong, she's drinking it like it's Coca Cola. I'll have me a try of that". She came off stage and handed me a bottle and veered off into her dressing room. I took a few big slugs and woke up at four in the morning on the floor backstage, this bloke sweeping up round me and everyone gone home! I had no idea where the hotel was, no money and the worst hangover ever. Big Brother were an exception really. I didn't like the US bands that much 'cause they all used Fender amps which were just too pingy and weak for me. The Jefferson Airplane and all them bands were too limp, they had no real sustain to the guitar sound, while the Brits all had bloody great Marshalls which really sang. Later on they cottoned onto Marshalls and by '67-'68 people would be offering to buy them off you as the tour came to an end. Ridiculous money too.'

At the end of one such tour, *Ten Years After* were asked to appear at one of many festivals planned for the late summer of 1969. For the band it was nothing special. Just another in a long line of gigs. Its place in popular music culture resulted from the film made to commemorate the gathering, *Ten Years After* seen playing their mindblowing party piece *I'm Going Home*: 'Hendrix was great, so were the Who, the rest pretty average really; the point being that it had no real significance until the film came out a year later. We suddenly went from doing fairly successful 4,000 seat places to doing 40,000 seat hockey rinks. Woodstock came out it and booted us into the stadiums so fast I had no time to adjust. I was just 23 and I didn't enjoy it one bit. I always wanted to be a musician not a popstar, and I kinda sabotaged my career deliberately because I couldn't handle it. You become stadium-ised and the music suffers. The Blues, the pure Blues got left behind. Looking at it now, Woodstock was the beginning of the end for me. So much emphasis was being placed on that one track *I'm Going Home* that people weren't really into listening to the other stuff. We got typecast as this English Rockaboogie band and the Blues fans who came to listen to the solos and the extended improvisations that we were really all about stopped coming. We turned into this teeny bop act where all these 13 year old girls were screaming and you got applause for just walking on stage. Before that you knew when you were good or bad because the audience would only applaud something that merited applause. By that stage I could walk on and play any old shit and get a huge ovation. It was all going terribly wrong. It took away the very reason for me wanting to play. I stopped doing interviews and really just wanted to be left alone.

'It was a sanity thing. I seriously believe that it saved me from going insane. I found myself looking at country houses and huge cars and it was all wrong for a working class boy. I need to feel I'm earning my keep and deserving it. I'm a jobbing guitarist at heart and that's when I'm happy. The whole thing, the drugs, the escape was all just this inability to cope with all the bullshit that was going on in my life. I was prepared to retire until I realised that the music was the biggest drug of all and that I had to play.

'All the guys I knew had the same problem. The pressure of interviews, press and all that goes with it really fucked a lot of people up. Some made it through, others didn't. I'm convinced that's what destroyed Peter Green. I was getting pissed off with this Captain Speedfingers tag too. *I'm Going Home* had me typecast as this person that played at a million miles an hour and couldn't do anything else. I knew I could so I stopped doing all that material and concentrated on a new Blues direction. The critics loved it but the public didn't. I missed those *Ten Years After* tracks too.'