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Lee**

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Photo: Bob Thacker

Guitar
LIVING
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Into Stellar Overdrive

Alvin Lee's love for writing and recording shows no sign of decline. The former Ten Years After maestro talks to Lars Mullen about his new album, new-fangled technology and how life is just a beach

Nearly 40 years on from the blazing performance at Woodstock that enshrined his name in the history of rock'n'roll, ex-Ten Years After guitarist Alvin Lee has no intention of hanging up his trademark red Gibson 335. Now living and recording in Spain, he's just produced a brand-new album, *Saguitar*, which contains 14 self-penned songs that veer intriguingly from vintage '50s rock'n'roll to raging blues, and even a tongue-in-cheek rap number. Some of his old fans will be surprised to hear a new technology-savvy direction, perhaps, but one thing's for sure: this man still plays his guitar with heart and style.

First, why the name *Saguitar*?

Well, my star sign's Sagittarius – you know, the half-man, half-horse guy. I thought that the word *Saguitar* represented someone who's always playing guitar and trotting down to the sea quite well. I bought my place in Spain to relax and write songs, and it's right on the beach. All I have to do is draw back the curtains in my studio, and there it is. Mind you, unless I'm careful, all my songs tend to have the line 'Here I am sitting on the sand'! But writing and recording has always been my passion, and today it's even more so. I just felt I needed to make an album that reflects the pure enjoyment I've had from making music over the years.

Was the album fun to make?

Oh, sure. But it took a while to put together... around two years, half of which was spent learning the art of recording with computers, but that's the way to go these days. The whole



'There's still a magic when I write a song, almost as though it's coming through me from somewhere else'

exercise was to try to record an album digitally, but to maintain a warm analogue feel. I love electronic stuff – I always have done. I'm a bit of a boffin. I built my own valve amps and cabs when I was just 15.

Do you have any set ideas or routines when it comes to the business of songwriting?

There are no rules, that's the beauty of it. A song can take 10 minutes, or it can take 10 weeks. I got a lot of ideas for these songs by just messing around with drum loops, letting them evolve naturally. There's still a certain magic when I write a song, almost as though I'm picking it out of the ether and it's coming through me from somewhere else. It's a cool feeling. The whole concept of making music is magic in itself.

Do you mainly write on guitar?

Yes, I keep quite a few around. I used to write on a Yamaha acoustic fitted with gut strings. That was okay for generating ideas, but the tendency was always to write soft songs. It's just as easy to crank up Big Red, my '59 Gibson 335, with the Line 6 Pod and headphones, sat by the pool – or down on the beach, of course!

Big Red's on the cover of the new record, but do you still use it?

I do, but it's become just too valuable to take on the road. I've been offered half a million for it, so it stays very well locked up these days. I have a few of the Gibson Alvin Lee signature 335 models which I gig with. They're really good. They also make a model without the stickers, which some players prefer

Catalogue

ALVIN LEE. THE ANTHOLOGY DOUBLE

It's all here, 24 tracks including such classics as *On The Road To Freedom*, *Hear Me Calling* and the classic *I'm Going Home*



ALVIN LEE IN TENNESSEE

Alvin teams up with Elvis alumni Scotty Moore and DJ Fontana and produces a superb mixture of blues, jazz and rock



ALVIN LEE SAGUITAR

Alvin's latest homegrown album, and in his own words 'a celebration to the sheer fun of making music'



Gear

LIVE

Two Gibson Alvin Lee Signature 1959 ES-335s and two Marshall Jubilee stacks

STUDIO

Alvin's original 1959 Gibson 335 with those very worn Woodstock stickers, plus Fender amps and a WEM Dominator



Alvin Lee with his Taylor stage acoustic and one of his Gibson signature model ES-335's

No 'celebrity' guest musicians for this project, we notice...

That's just what I didn't want. I always say the music should speak for itself. I just used my friends: Trevor Morais for some live drum work – he's worked with Bjork – and I flew in Tim Hinkley, who was originally in Jody Grind, for keyboards. I've never been the type to tell players what to play in the studio, I just find that insulting. Tim adapts to the mood of the song, not like some who play with 10 fingers, Rick Wakeman-style. That's okay, but not for my kind of music. I prefer a more solid feel with a few more spaces.

That's probably one of the differences in my playing these days – I'm looking for more light and shade, not so much hotrod go-for-it stuff, although I still do that. Players like Steve Vai are fascinating to watch, but in a way, I'm saying now what people used to say about me – there's not enough resting time. I learned many years ago that if you walk out on stage full of adrenaline and play at 100mph, in no time, you've played all your licks and it all starts to sound the same.

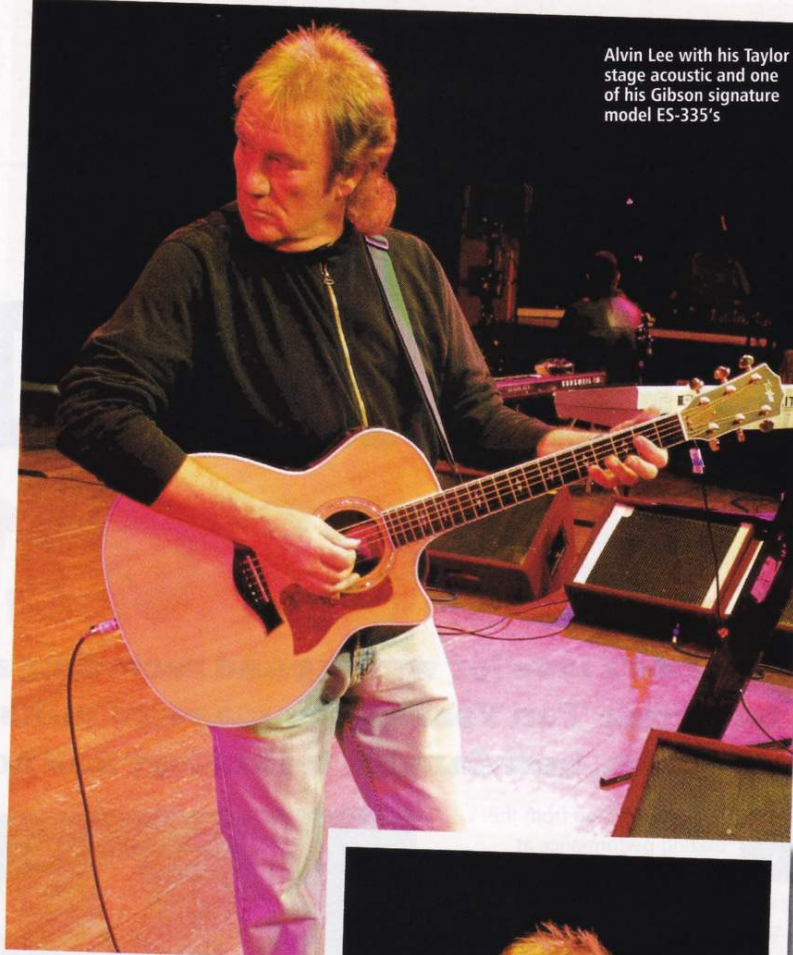
You seem to have done everything on *Saguitar*, from producing it to playing the bass parts.

I've never had much luck with producers, to be honest. If you have an idea of what you want to do and how you want it to sound, a producer is just someone to argue with, and luckily I can avoid that. When it comes to the bass, I would have loved to have used my old mate Boz Burrell, who passed away last year. I miss him a lot, but I tried to think what he would have played to get that feel.

'I'm looking for more light and shade in my playing these days, not so much hotrod go-for-it stuff... but I still do that'

What's the best thing about recording at home?

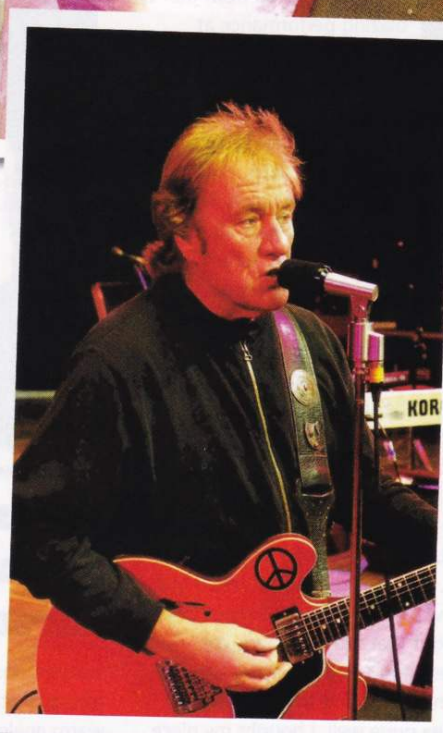
Without doubt, the fact that I can head down to the beach between tracks. Although sometimes, if you have a deadline, it can bring out the best in you. For my last album, *In Tennessee*, I put three weeks aside to



record with Scotty Moore and DJ Fontana, but we had all the tracks done and dusted in just three days.

Are you using digital technology for guitar sounds in the studio?

Up to a point, but I've got this little 15W WEM Dominator which cranks up just like a Marshall and is better than lugging huge cabs about. For the cleaner sounds I have a wonderful old Fender Tweed, or if I need something a little wilder I use the Pod as a preamp, either straight in or through a mic'd-up cab.



Although the album features rock, jazz, blues, country and even rap, the first two tracks have a distinct essence of *Ten Years After*.

Sure, I certainly don't have a problem visiting where I've been before. The opening track, *Anytime You Want Me*, is a vehicle for playing live rock guitar, as is *The Squeeze*, which is a tuneful song with a heavy chorus and bags of light and shade in the structure.

***Memphis* is almost a country version of *Ten Years After's* anthem *I'm Going Home*. Is *I'm Going Home* still part of your live set?**

Yes, *Memphis* is exactly that, and it was completely intentional. There was a

period around '75 when I got a bit hoity-toity and felt I shouldn't be playing *I'm Going Home* any more, but it only lasted a month! I just had to get back into it. I missed that oomph of hot rock.

***Midnite Train* is short and to the point. It seems you've got a thing for writing 'train' songs...**

Yeah, that's exactly what my manager said. I just replied, 'And here's another. We're on that train one more time!'

What's your favourite track?

Motel Blues, without a doubt, although sometimes it makes me miserable to listen to it. It reflects my melancholy moods about touring. I hate the airports and

Photo: Bob Thacker

the long distances, to the point you'd think I was never going to tour again... but that's not the case, not by a long throw. This is one of the best songs I've written. There's a whole bunch of feeling in there. You have to hold on to those notes and let them cry – no widdling about. Tim's keyboards are beautiful, too.

Education seems to look back to a particularly bad time at school.

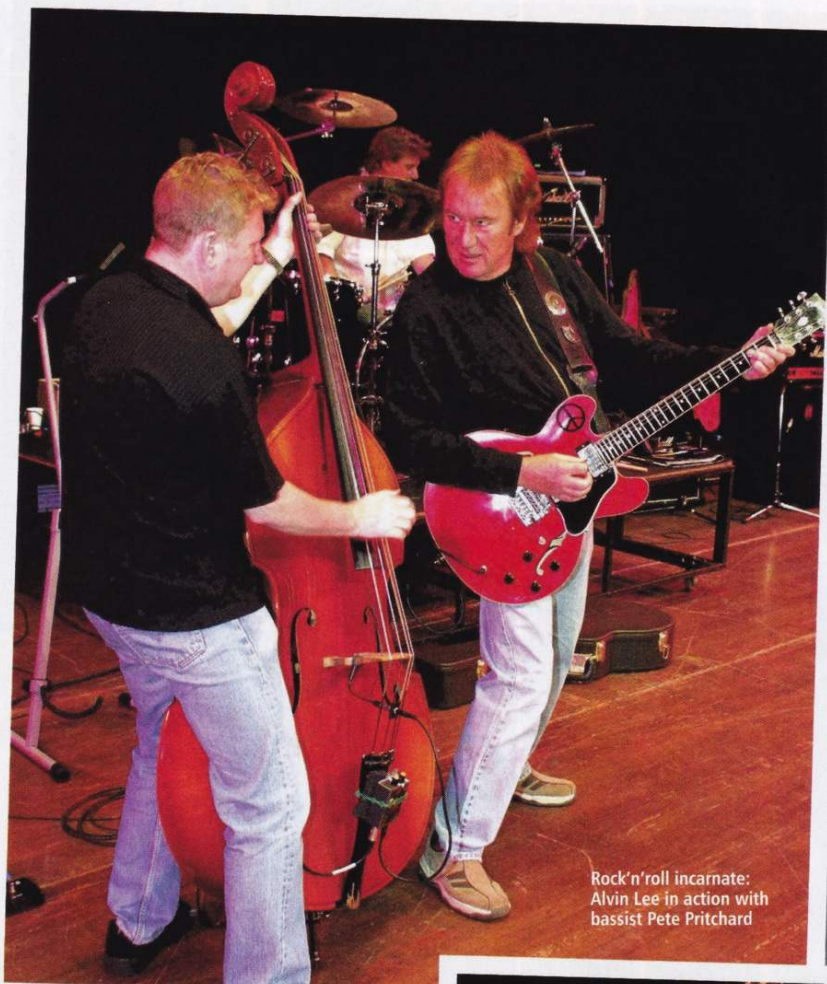
You bet. My early school years were dreadful. I was a bit of a rebel; a rebel without a clue, in fact. I just wanted to play the guitar, but there was no outlet. Musical education was learning the words to hymns – what's that got to do with music?

I actually started on clarinet, listening to my dad's Benny Goodman records. He was also a Big Bill Broonzy fan, and I remember he went to see him at a club in Nottingham and brought him back to the house. I was about 12 years old, and they dragged me out of bed to meet him. I sat on the

'There's too much choice these days, too many racks and pedals that weaken the sound. There's no need for it'

floor watching this giant black man stomping away playing guitar in our living room. The very next day, I swapped the clarinet for a guitar. I even built a guitar neck about six inches long with half a dozen frets, and walked about practising chord changes. That's all I wanted to do, just play the guitar. I loved that bluesy slide stuff.

I do play some slide guitar on the new album on a song called *Smoking Rope*, though slide isn't really my forte. Live, I just do it with the side of the harmonica. Talking of which, I did have a guest harmonica player, so to speak, on that track. He was a passing biker called Eugene Fritz from Switzerland. He said he could play, so we just put him in front of a microphone, and away he went!



Rock'n'roll incarnate: Alvin Lee in action with bassist Pete Pritchard

The song called *Rapper* is perhaps the biggest surprise on the album. That's the magic of songwriting again – it also surprised me! I had all these drum loops running and kept adding fills. I liked the way it was happening, and put on some hot guitar. It's mad – a bit old-school meets new technology.

Has any digital technology replaced the old analogue gear within your stage set up?

No, I feel there's just too much choice nowadays, too many racks and pedals that weaken the sound. They just make the player look at his feet all night. There's no need for it. For now, I'll just remain old-fashioned, with at least a couple of full Marshall stacks behind me. It's an old habit... I like the feel of that wall of sound, and the crew like it because they can hide behind them!

May just we say, in conclusion, you're looking very chipper...

I've had no side effects! I live well in the



sun, just doing a few open-air festivals and concerts between recording projects. I've been lucky... but rock'n'roll keeps you young.

Saguitar is out on R.A.R.E. Records. See www.alvinlee.com

SOME OTHER FACTS

Alvin recently took up flamenco guitar, but wore his callouses so low that he couldn't play electric for ages

When Alvin was 14 he joined the Elvis fan club just to look at Scotty's guitars

His first instrument was not guitar, but clarinet

After Alvin Lee's legendary Woodstock performance of *I'm Going Home* in front of 500,000 people in 1969, he toured the US 28 times in just seven years