

ALVIN LEE~IN SEARCH OF

by GARY COOPER

WHEN Alvin Lee finally decided to take a rest from Ten Years After, back in the early part of 1974, a lot of people must have thrown up their hands in horror. Was this the end of Alvin Lee as Guitar Super Hero? Well, in some ways it was, but it certainly wasn't the end of Alvin Lee as a creative musician. In fact it is quite possible to see his new moves as being in the direction of a renaissance — and a rest — for a perhaps jaded palate. After all, you can only belt out *I'm Going Home* just so many times before you become totally bored with the whole thing. When you get to that stage there are two things you can do. One is to give up any pretensions to creativity and just work for the bread (the coward's way) or you can take your courage in both hands and move on into new pastures (and that takes guts). Fortunately, Alvin took the second route and we saw his solo live album *In Flight* as a direct result.

To see what lies ahead for him, I met Alvin in London shortly before Easter. The interview was full of surprises; to start with, Alvin told me that his current band (that's the one that was featured on *In Flight*) will shortly be finished.

"This was my journey into experimentation with funky, souly, R&B" he explained, "You see, I think I'm ready for something else now. I have to look now for somebody who gets me off in a different direction, but whatever that direction is, I don't think it'll be jazz. This present band has gone off in that direction and I enjoy it, but it bores me to play it a lot. I've got a feeling towards a more chunky-funky rather than a slick-funky, style, because what I like about music is a beat."

In a way, that sums up a lot

of people's feelings about the band and there are sure to be a lot of people who'll be glad that Alvin is returning more to rock rather than taking a route into a sort of jazz jungle.

Perhaps the most depressing thing that can happen to any follower of an individual musician or group is that the desire for new thoughts and ideas dies. You watch them collapse into a rut and sense a bitter feeling almost of betrayal. It was nice to hear from Alvin that he doesn't head in that direction at all. Despite having a tremendously relaxed personality, it became obvious that, while he may be immediately without specific plans, there is no way that he has stopped looking for new inspiration.

Directions

"I'm still looking for my thing, to be honest. It's all a matter of experimenting with different directions. I suppose that I'm at some sort of multi cross roads now — prepared to go in all sorts of directions."

One of the main factors in Lee's popularity has been his reputation as one of the fastest guitarists around, a reputation which he's never been particularly happy with, as he explained.

"Look, I know a lot of guitarists who can play a lot faster than me. What brought all this on was that my style was to over-play. It wasn't that I was playing fast but that I was straining — turning bright red and playing every lick I knew. Someone like George Benson can play twice as fast as me but does it so easy that half the people don't know it's that fast. There's something about "the limitations of your own technique form your style". By improving my technique I'm losing my old style somewhat, but it'll re-shape and be a new style."

Nevertheless, what was miss-

ing from the *In Flight* album was that speed-freak feel. Alvin was quite specific that he missed it too. "Yeah, a lot of what I've missed was sweating and working out on the guitar. Now, in the present band, I do one solo spot when I break-out. In some ways it's more effective like that."

To give an idea of the sort of thing he's trying to put over, Alvin cites George Harrison as an effective guitarist.

"Harrison doesn't play fast solos, for example, but what he does is to write a piece and make a solo round it which is more like a tune. Often that has more effect than me playing eight thousand notes and doing all sorts of double-octaves and things. You see, that's all very well, but that's self indulgence. I've been through that phase. I know that when TYA started in the Marquee playing second spot to people like John Mayall the attitude was to go out and show them. I think that was probably what got us off. Now, though, I don't feel that sort of aggression. It was good in some ways but bad in others, and now I'm more interested in playing with taste."

It seemed natural, having talked a lot about style of playing to ask Alvin about his guitars. Always recognisable for his red Gibson 335 I asked him what he was playing now. "I've still got the Gibson. I've had it for 15 years now, which is not bad seeing as I paid £45 for it back in Nottingham. I've had a couple of others for seconds but that's always been my favourite because I'm so used to it."

Despite trends and fashions over the years, Lee has never been renowned for his use of effects units, not even a single solitary fuzz box. Why was this? "Well, I've always found them a bit confusing to tell the truth," he grinned. "You can get most of the sounds you need just by

using the volume control on the guitar. The gimmick machines and effects boxes always seem to overdo everything, fuzz being an example of this. It's great for sustain on a single note but on a chord it grinds and grunts. You can get the same effect by over-loading an amp and it doesn't affect the chords."

You might well expect that a player in Lee's class would be playing through a series of stacks, but not so. At the moment he's using a Watkins Dominator, 15 watt combination amp which he first used for recording. Now he's even got round to using the WEM on stage, wired up through a Marshall to give the extra volume needed for stage work.

Hard work

Like any of today's best musicians, Alvin didn't suddenly shoot to fame overnight. There's a background of hard work behind his style which many of the younger players today just don't seem to have. He started playing clarinet, but after a year found that he and the instrument just didn't seem to have hit it off. At that time he was listening a lot to jazz greats, Benny Goodman and Charlie Christian (influences which were to become apparent in later years). Then he moved on to guitar and took lessons between the ages of 13 and 14. From a knowledge of chords he worked out his own solo technique, which has developed to comprise a wider range of influences in its style than many of Lee's contemporaries.

Lee too has a lot of feelings about some of today's players.

"I think a lot of guys nowadays start playing lead and learn to play an Eric Clapton solo without any concentration on chord work—they can't play rhythms. One guy came up to me in the States with a tape he'd made saying he'd moulded