

Lessons

Under Investigation

Alvin Lee with Ten Years After



BY JESSE GRESS

MENTION ALVIN LEE TO ANY ROCK FAN AND MOST WILL FLASH ON TEN YEARS

After's legendary performance of "I'm Going Home" at the 1969 Woodstock Festival. But Lee's legacy with the band runs much deeper. Firmly ensconced at the forefront of the late-'60s British blues boom, Ten Years After—Lee (guitar and vocals), Chick Churchill (organ and piano), Leo Lyons (bass) and Ric Lee (drums)—stood out from the crowd and created quite a stir with their innovative blend of traditional and jump blues, swing-jazz, and rock and roll.

Particularly noteworthy, though slightly bewildering, was the band's second album, recorded live at Klook's Kleek in London well over a year before Woodstock. *Undead* had listeners wondering whether they were hearing a rock group or a jazz combo, primarily

due to the way the set list was edited to fit the constraints of a vinyl LP, with two swinging jump-blues tunes encompassing the entirety of side one. The album certainly displayed all of the hallmarks of a well-honed jazz quartet—swinging ensemble figures, extended improvised solos, tasty comping, walking bass lines, and updated interpretations of standards like "Summertime" and Woody Herman's "(At The) Woodchopper's Ball"—but the expanded 2002 CD that contains the entire set will come as a bit of a shock to those used to the LP version. It's all well played, but the inclusion of "Rock Your Mama" and "Spoonful" as openers, plus covers of "Standing at the Crossroads" and a 17-minute version of Al Kooper's "I Can't Keep From Crying,

Sometimes" creates a totally different vibe from the original running order.

Nonetheless, you'll find Lee's inimitable fretboard prowess front and center on both versions. How did Lee come to adopt such a high-velocity approach in the first place? Because he *could*, that's why. Weaned on his father's jazz records and '50s rock and roll, Lee developed a supersonic guitar style that drew key elements from both genres, and inspired many to follow suit. He was rock's first shredder, and the first to take major flak for it, but that never fazed Lee. "I was a young guy with young energy, and that's just the way I played," Lee reminisced to *GP*'s Mike Molenda in 2008. "I decided to use my fast licks like a machine gun, with the effect of devastation. I kind

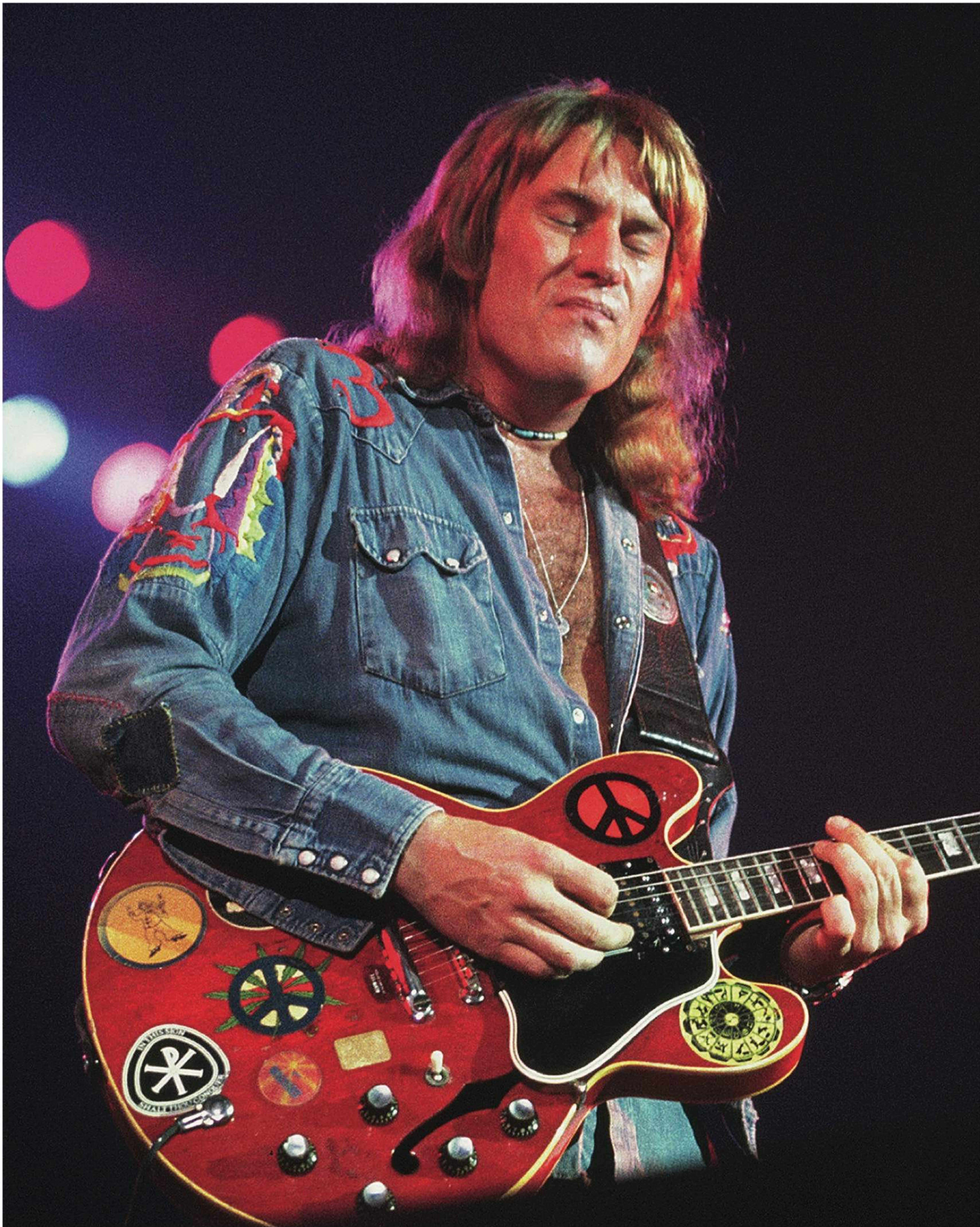
of enjoyed that, and it seemed to get the audiences up."

Photos of the Klook's Kleek gig included in the expanded edition of *Undead* show Lee playing "Big Red"—the soon-to-be-iconic Gibson ES-335 that he eventually retro-fitted with a single-coil middle pickup and its own dedicated Volume control, and festooned with peace signs and other hippie-era stickers—through what appears to be an early Marshall or Park head and four WEM 4x12 speaker cabs. (Gibson's Custom Shop honored Lee with a Woodstock tribute "Big Red" replica in 2003.)

"Captain Fingers" may have departed, but his licks are alive and well. Let's investigate Lee's groundbreaking work on the appropriately titled *Undead* album.

ALVIN COMES ALIVE

The first track on the album's original running order, "I May Be Wrong, But I Won't Be Wrong Always," is a jazzy 12-bar blues in C that swings hard out of the gate with Lee's



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Ex. 1a

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = $\frac{r3\tau}{2}$)

(B \flat)C6(I) E9 F9(IV) N.C. F9 C6

Ex. 1b

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = $\frac{r3\tau}{2}$)

C6 G9(V) F9 C6 G7 \sharp 5 \sharp 9 C6

opening chorus shown in **Ex. 1a**. (Note that this and other examples have been notated in half-time, so each measure is equivalent to two bars in a double-timed 12-bar progression.) Lee begins with partial I- and IV-chords (C6 and F9) approached by half-steps, and two signature moves over the I and IV chords: an ascending hammered chromatic triplet and descent built from the root, $\flat 3$, 3, 4, and $\flat 5$, followed by a string of syncopated sliding sixth intervals. **Ex. 1b**, which covers the last four bars, provides a virtual compendium of Lee licks, from the slippery position shifts throughout the pickup and bar 1, to his often-quoted, eighth-position turnaround that wraps up this chorus. (Remember, each measure here covers two bars of the progression.) We'll be seeing much more of that $\flat 3$ -5-6 hammered triplet (E \flat -G-A) as we break down Lee's lines into more easily digestible bites, so let's get modular.

IZZAT JAZZ?

"I May Be Wrong..." continues with four verses during which Lee answers his

two-bar vocal phrases in bars 1 and 2, 5 and 6, and 9 and 10 with amazingly fluid lines that often recall jazz greats like Charlie Christian and Barney Kessel. **Ex. 2a** features Lee's pull-offs applied to one of his typically swinging rhythmic motifs built from the C Dorian mode (C-D-E \flat -F-G-A-B \flat), plus an added 3 (E). Drop this line or any of the next five into bars 3 and 4 or 7 and 8 of the 12-bar form and follow up with the appropriate anticipated IV (F9) or V (G9) chord (or I chord [C6] when used in bars 11 and 12 as a turnaround.) Again, each half-time measure covers two bars. **Ex. 2b** shows a similar run with a hammer-on preceding each double pull-off before we target a very Christian-like A, the 6. The first half of **Ex. 2c** takes us out of the eighth-position C Dorian/blues box with another move we'll be seeing more of, while the second half employs a pair of quirky slides to return to home base. **Ex. 2d** combines Ex. 1b's bluesy chromatics with the targeted 6 from Ex. 2b. **Ex. 2e**, set to another swinging triplet rhythm, provides an alternative way to hammer from

and pull-off to the $\sharp 4/\flat 5$ (F \sharp /G \flat) by relocating it to the second string, and you'll find the same moves incorporated into the flurry of hammered chromatic triplets illustrated in **Ex. 2f**, albeit one beat later.

CAPTAIN FINGERS

One important element of Lee's style (and one source of his speed) was his use of repetition. Lee frequently employed ostinatos—one- or two-bar motifs that can be repeated over the course of an entire 12-bar blues progression—as well as hemiola, in which a three-against-four motif of some sort is repeated until it recycles every three measures. (Note that all of the following hemiola-based examples are notated at their full tempo, not in half-time. Play each one four times to form a full 12-bar chorus.) Sometimes there's a matter of adjusting a motif to fit each chord, as is the case in the sliding-sixths fest portrayed in **Ex. 3a**. Check out how in **Ex. 3b** we simply lower the bottom note of the first sixth and the top note of the third sixth one half-step to adapt to the IV chord, and how the same

Ex. 2a

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = ♩)

C6(I) F9(IV) or G9(V)

T A B

Ex. 2b

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = ♩)

C6(I) F9(IV) or G9(V)

T A B

Ex. 2c

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = ♩)

C6(I) F9(IV) or G9(V)

T A B

Ex. 2d

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = ♩)

C6(I) F9(IV) or G9(V)

T A B

Ex. 2e

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = ♩)

C6(I) C7#9 F9(IV) or G9(V)

T A B

Ex. 2f

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = ♩)

C6(I) F9(IV) or G9(V)

T A B

Ex. 3a

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = ♩)

C6(I) F9(IV) or G9(V)

T A B

Ex. 3b

♩ = ca. 95 w/Double-time feel (♩ = ♩)

F9(IV) C6(I)

T A B

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hemiolas perfect for riding over all 12 bars. The former utilizes a bluesy flat-fifth based motif similar to the one in Ex. 2e, while the latter consists of an alternate-picked chromatic 5-#5-6 motif (G-G#A) played twice. See how long you can keep it up. (Tip: You can start it on any of the three notes, with or without the pickup.)

SLOW DOWN

Side two of *Undead* commences with “Spider in My Web,” the album’s only slow 12-bar blues, and its opening chorus, which displays Lee’s knack for beautiful phrasing and melodic development, shows that his playing wasn’t all about sheer velocity (although he does rev it up later in the

song). Still in the key of C, the song begins deceptively with what sounds like an intro consisting of three bars of low-level, double-chromatic approaches to sustained C7, F9, and C7 chords played for one bar each. (They’re not notated, so use your imagination.) When Lee enters with **Ex. 5**, he creates the impression that it’s the top of an oddball nine-bar progression, but he’s actually coming in on bar 4. Lee’s pickup alone is worth the price of admission as he hammers and trills $\flat 7$ -over- $\flat 5$ -to-5 and 5-over- $\flat 3$ -to-3 double-stops respectively, and then chromatically targets key chord tones, all valuable blues tools. The next eight measures read like a blues primer à la Lee and present a golden opportunity

to decode many of Lee’s signature licks in relative slo-mo.

THE LEGACY

As much as it melded with the Woodstock vibe, “I’m Going Home” seemed oddly out of place on the original version of *Undead*. But even though it was the least jazzy tune of the lot—it’s built on a 12-bar, Chuck Berry-style rhythm figure—Lee and company turned the song into an album-closing rave-up and, eventually, a festival favorite.

Ex. 6a documents Lee’s signature two-bar chorus response lick as played at Woodstock. (The earlier *Undead* version omitted the first E and last A in bar 1 and replaced the gradual bend with a grace-note bend.

Ex. 5

$\text{♩} = \text{ca. } 59$

System 1 (Bars 1-4): Chords: C7(I), F9(IV). Includes pickup bar and first three bars of the 12-bar blues.

System 2 (Bars 5-8): Chords: C7, G9(V). Includes a gradual bend instruction (grad. B1/4).

System 3 (Bars 9-12): Chords: F9, C7, F9, C7, G9, B7, C7.

