

## FENDER PLAYERS CLUB JEFF BECK

Jeff Beck is one unique piece of work. A virtuoso instrumentalist of astounding originality - many call him the greatest electric guitarist ever - he has never been content to rest on his laurels.

Over the course of a career that spans the past 35 years, Beck has consistently moved with the times, setting new musical trends, but never caving in to them.

"I'm still tied by the umbilical cord to drums." Beck's craggy features break into a smile beneath a coif that has magically maintained its Swinging London color and shape. And I always thought that dance music should be inspired by complex rhythms, and not one guy bashing away with one kick drum sample.

The Stratocaster is the guitar Beck started out on, as a teenager growing up in Surrey, just outside London. In fact, the Strat was the catalyst behind Beck's first meeting his lifelong friend and fellow British guitar legend, Jimmy Page. The two men were still in their teens when their paths first crossed.

"My sister gave me the introduction," Beck recalls. "They went to the same college. She came home one day and said, 'There's a guy at college with a goofy-looking guitar like yours.' And I went, 'Where is he? Take me to him!' 'Cause there was nobody else on my block or even in my town who knew what a Fender Strat was. Meeting Jim was great - like meeting your long lost brother. And we've got on well ever since."

The early '60s found Beck wowing the London scene on guitar for groups like the Tridents, Nightshift and Screaming Lord Sutch and the Savages. Playing the mod stronghold Eel Pie Island, he became one of the first electric guitarists to experiment with feedback.

"Eel Pie Island was the spawning ground where I started these noises. Using tape echo to the point where it could play by itself. Just put the guitar up on the amp and it would make these amazing sounds that make people go crazy. You could play 20-minute solos. It was like somebody going crazy with a paint brush, just smacking paint on the wall and watching people enjoy it."

Beck's six-string adventurousness found an ideal outlet when he joined the Yardbirds in 1965, taking over the lead guitar slot from Eric Clapton. The position had first been offered to Beck's old friend Jimmy Page, but Page declined and recommended Beck instead.

"The Yardbirds enabled me to continue experimenting," he says. "[Yardbirds vocalist] Keith Relf and [bassist] Paul Samwell-Smith used to write these very skeletal kind of melodies that enabled me to do tricks that I otherwise probably wouldn't have done. All I needed was three good melodies and away I went."

While the Yardbirds released a string of tightly crafted hit singles, they also pioneered the concept of the extended blues-based instrumental jam, or "rave up." The Yardbirds were a huge influence on mid-'60s garage bands. Some of the excitement of their legendary live shows was captured on Beck-era recordings like "I'm a Man," and "The Train Kept A Rollin". (Freely adapted covers of blues and rockabilly standards.) Beck developed a frenetic manner of soloing: sporadic bursts of notes and sudden, nervous multi-octave leaps up and down the fretboard, an amped-up style that mirrored the rapid pace of Swinging London.

At the same time, Beck took microtonal string bending into the same exotic Indian territory the Beatles were beginning to explore. The Yardbirds' single "Heart Full Of Soul" with its "raga rock" guitar hook actually predated by a few weeks the first Beatles recording to include sitar, the *Help* film soundtrack. Beck's playing on "Heart Full of Soul" and subsequent tracks like "Over Under Sideways Down" and "Shapes of Things" was a major catalyst for late-'60s psychedelic guitar.

"The Yardbirds got this Indian man to play sitar on the date," Beck recalls of the "Heart Full Of Soul" session. "But he

couldn't play in 4/4 time. It was totally magical what he was doing, but it didn't have any groove to it. So I showed him on guitar what I thought would be a good idea, which was that riff with the D-string drone an octave below. And they said, 'That's just great. Let's just leave that.' And we sent the Indian man on his way."

Towards the end of Beck's tenure with the Yardbirds, there was a too-good-to-be-true five-month period when both Beck and Jimmy Page were on guitar for the band. Who knows what this magical combination might have produced had ill health and the rigors of package tour one-nighters hadn't caused Beck to quit the Yardbirds in October of 1966. But the fates had other triumphs in store for both guitarists.

Popularity that eclipsed the Yardbirds years awaited Beck as head of the Jeff Beck Group. A nascent supergroup with future Face and Rolling Stone Ron Wood on bass, and future Face and international pop star Rod Stewart on vocals, the Jeff Beck Group were at the vanguard of rock's new heavy aesthetic, sharing front-runner position with Cream and the Jimi Hendrix Experience. Beck was a year ahead of his old friend Page, who didn't form his own heavy guitar group, Led Zeppelin, until 1969. The Jeff Beck Group's 1968 debut album, *Truth*, has become a classic rock milestone, spearheaded by Beck's remake of the Yardbirds' "Shapes of Things."

"That became the precursor to a lot of power rock and roll," the generally self-effacing Beck acknowledges. "That plodding sort of rhythm that we nailed. I suppose whenever I get named as a heavy metal innovator that's probably one of the best examples of heavy metal in embryo."

Beck received a hero's welcome when the Jeff Beck group played New York's Fillmore East in 1968. It was his first American gig since leaving the Yardbirds. Needless to say, the whole band was nervous. "Rod wouldn't even come and sing to the audience direct. He was hiding behind some curtains. I actually had to say, halfway through the set, 'There is a human being actually making those noises in the building.'"

Jimi Hendrix became a friend and confidant of Beck's during this period. The Jeff Beck Group played a residency at Steve Paul's Scene in Manhattan, and Hendrix would often join the group onstage for encores.

"He'd come onstage and completely undermine and overshadow what we'd done," Beck recalls. "But nobody cared. It was just great. And to have Rod singing was, well, two guitars blazing away-forget it. The club was crammed to capacity every night."

In the early '70s, he worked his way through a second incarnation of the Jeff Beck Group, a one-off songwriting collaboration with Stevie Wonder and a short-lived band with drummer Carmine Appice and bassist Tim Bogert of Vanilla Fudge and Cactus. He settled into a permanent relationship with the Strat right around the time of his landmark *Blow By Blow* album, which came out in 1975.

On *Blow by Blow* and its followup, *Wired*, Beck embraced the mid-'70s fusion jazz movement with unreserved passion, injecting a much-needed dose of rock attitude. With Beatles producer George Martin at the production helm, Beck recorded two of the best selling instrumental albums ever.

"A lot of people liked *Blow by Blow* because it simplified [John] McLaughlin and complicated rock and roll," Beck reckons. "It was just one of those albums that was so easy to make. There were great players, willing to play, and decent material. In four days, we tracked the whole thing. Then the overdubs took four years! George Martin certainly didn't know what he was getting involved in. I put some tapes on his desk one day. He saw through the mists and said there might be something there."

Beck discovered guitarist John McLaughlin's Mahavishnu Orchestra, then at the height of their popularity, at an outdoor concert in New York's Central Park. "I began to develop wings because of that," he says. "Because it seemed to me that

everyone was getting so involved in and in love with playing music. It was a vital thing for me to have that.”

Beck's collaboration with Mahavishnu synth wiz Jan Hammer on *Wired* and subsequent albums had a lasting impact on the guitarist's style. He meshes so beautifully with Hammer on *Wired* tracks like “Blue Wind” and “Led Boots” that it's hard to tell who's who at times. Some of Hammer's unique pitch wheel techniques on the Moog analog synthesizer seem to have had a permanent impact on Beck's own distinctive wang-bar style.

Beck put his energies into a variety of projects during the '80s. He played on albums by Tina Turner, Diana Ross, Stanley Clarke, the Honey-drippers and Mick Jagger, among others, and toured with Jagger as well. He performed at major charity events like The Secret Policeman's Other Ball, the Prince's Trust Rock Gala and ARMS (Action for Research into Multiple Sclerosis). He released three albums of his own *There and Back*, *Flash* and *Jeff Beck's Guitar Shop* with Terry Bozzio and Tony Hymas, picking up a Grammy in '86 for “Escape,” a track from *Flash*.

In the '90s, Beck found some new outlets for his prodigious talents. He made his first stab at television scoring in the 1992 Australian miniseries *Frankie's House*. And he teamed up with London rockabilly revivalists the Big Town Playboys in '93 to record *Crazy Legs*, a tribute to one of Beck's earliest and most enduring musical heroes: Gene Vincent and his band, the Blue Caps. Beck was inspired to buy his first Stratocaster all those years ago when he saw a photo of Vincent holding one. And countrified cats like Carl Perkins, Blue Caps lead player Cliff Gallup and his successor Johnny Meeks were the original influence behind Beck's decision to pick with his fingers rather than a plectrum.

“My picking is all from those days,” he says, “when I had to learn how Chet Atkins could play a bass line and a melody at the same time. But I was heartbroken to learn that Chet Atkins, Cliff Gallup and all those guys in the '50s used finger picks! You can't possibly get that crispness and clarity without fingerpicks. So for the Blue Caps tribute, I had to learn to use them. It was ghastly. They kept falling off and springing across the room.”

After the completion of *Crazy Legs*, it was high time for Beck to get back to doing what he does best: cutting edge guitar music that's completely in tune with contemporary idioms, yet unmistakably Beck's own. *Who Else!* proved that, 35 years into his career, Jeff Beck still had the ability to surprise and astound us.

“As much as I dearly love rockabilly,” he says, “I don't think there was much more for me to gain by pursuing that. The lay of the land is gone. One can't progress forward by going back too far.” If you are a student of the history of the electric guitar, you can not afford to ignore Jeff Beck's contribution to our art. From his early work with straight Chicago blues and rockabilly, to Swinging London pop, through his '70s supergroup era, to the shred years and beyond, Beck's done it all and remained a most versatile, expressive and simply amazing guitar player.

The three-disc *Beckology* set on Epic Records covers almost 30 years of Beck's fantastic six-string journey. This essential collection has been around a few years, but it's still the best way for players and music fans alike to sample Jeff's enormous discography. Since Beck has most often preferred to wait several years between recordings, the music of each era represented on *Beckology* represents a completely different feel.

Guitarists will find *Beckology* a goldmine of ideas to tap into—a little spelunking into this set will reveal a wealth of cool things to try. From the traditional slide guitar on the opening cut (when Jeff was just 18 years old) to the Telecaster tone-knob revelations of The Yardbirds' take on “The Train Kept A-Rollin'” to Jeff's pioneering use of the “Bag” (or talk box) in the early '70s, the collection demonstrates how a diversity of techniques can be blended together into brilliant music.

Though Beck is the king of guitar tricks, his work is testament to how tricks can become tasteful technique. For the most part, there aren't a whole lot of outboard effects on Jeff's guitar tracks - it's usually just a guitar, an amp and his hands. He's got 10 fingers like the rest of us, but even on quasi-pop tunes like “Cause We've Ended As Lovers,” his tones and interpretation are astounding. His note choices throughout his Jazz-Fusion period, the stunning harmonics on “Where

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Were You” or the whammy attacks on “Going Down,” it’s all uniquely Beck.

So next time you’re in a musical rut, slap on *Beckology* and listen carefully.

-- Alan di Perna, from *Fender Frontline* Vol. 26 (1999)

Some of the albums referred to in this article, and recommended listening:

The Yardbirds, *Over Under Sideways Down* (Epic, 1966)

The Yardbirds, *Greatest Hits Volume 1: 1964-1966* (Rhino, 1986)

Jeff Beck, *Truth* (Epic, 1968)

Jeff Beck, *Blow by Blow* (Epic, 1975)

Jeff Beck, *Wired* (Epic, 1976)

Jeff Beck, *Flash* (Epic, 1985)

Jeff Beck, *Who Else!* (Epic, 1999)

Jeff Beck, *You Had It Coming* (Sony, 2001)

Jeff Beck, *Beckology* (Epic, 1991)