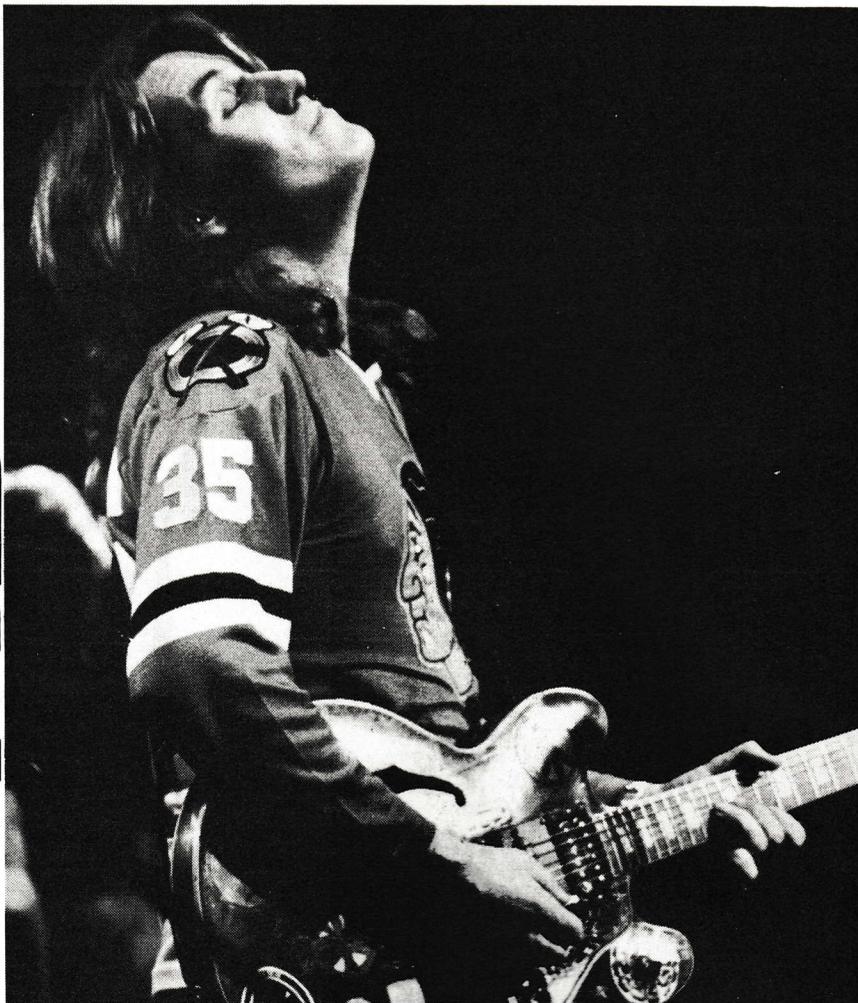


ALVIN LEE



Alvin Lee first hit the music scene in 1967 when a new and untried group called Ten Years After stole the thunder at the National Jazz and Blues Festival at Windsor. Since then, TYA have sold millions of records and toured the States eighteen times; they were one of the featured groups at Woodstock in 1969. This March, Alvin took an independent step with an album on Chrysalis On the road to freedom, in partnership with Mylon LeFevre, and a Rainbow gig with a band called Alvin Lee & Co. But he insists that Ten Years After is not breaking up: he just wants to further his musical interests, which encompass more than rock and roll and blues. He says he is first and foremost a musician, and consequently loves the guitar. I asked him when he first took up the instrument.

I picked one up when I was two! My mother used to play a four-string tenor guitar. When I was 12 I decided I must play an instrument properly. Actually I started on the clarinet; my brother-in-law played one. I had some lessons and my interest lasted for about a year: it made me listen to Benny Goodman and so to Charlie Christian. Christian is still one of my favourite guitarists.

So you started playing guitar?

Yeah, I started having lessons when I was 13; one year later I played in public with a local band called The Jailbreakers. I played rhythm first, and picked up lead lines from the lead guitarist in the group. I had heard a lot of blues because my father had a large record collection of that kind of music. But all that had nothing to do with the guitar music I was playing.

What were you learning on guitar?

The chord lessons I had were kind of *Sweet Georgia Brown*, *All of me* and *A nightingale sang in Berkeley Square!* I bought jazz records by Kessel – in fact, all the guitarists of that era. After I had learned the basics and adapted the guitar to making the music I liked, I became a big Scotty Moore fan. I played a lot of country-ish material, and this got me into jazz. I went through a country picking phase and a jazz picking phase.

My rock and roll phase started with Chuck Berry: I like his

feel very much, he's one of my all-time favourites. That's basically where my style came out of. Much later I discovered George Benson. He's one of the few who started out as a rock and roll guitarist and went on to jazz. Quite a lot of jazz guitarists go the other way. I find moving from rock to jazz very interesting: you've got the feel and then you develop your technique and go further. Whereas once you've got the technique, it's difficult to develop feel. I've never read music, and I don't think it's a good thing. In most cases it doesn't encourage you to extemporise and form your own style. I never did want to read music. I didn't sit down playing tunes or songs: I sat down and played, and saw what came out, and found sounds I liked and remembered. After a while it develops into your own style.

How long did you practise?

I used to do at least four hours a day, sometimes more. Now I tootle around a lot. I play a lot of acoustic.

What guitars have you collected?

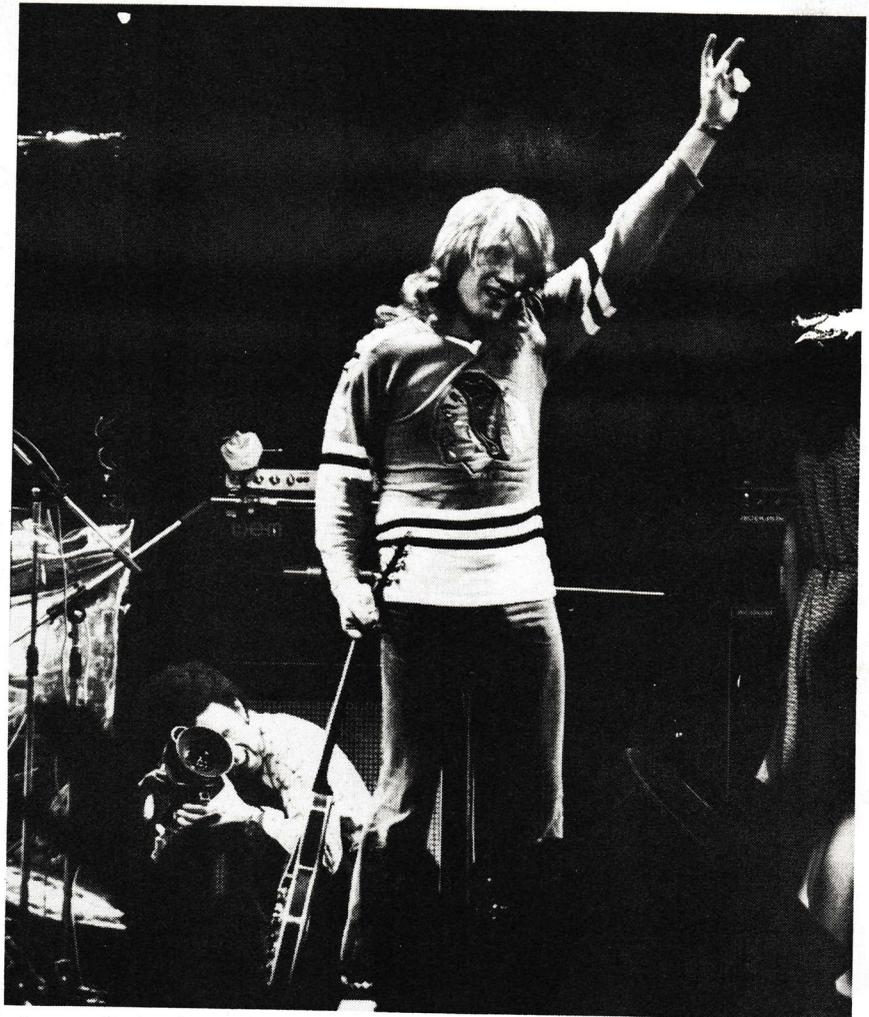
There are quite a few! My stage guitar is a Gibson 335. I've done a bit to that: I've taken the covers off, and put a Fender back pick-up in the middle, so it sounds like a Fender and like a Gibson. That's great – I don't have to swop over! I've also got an ordinary 335 without that extra pick-up. It's about 15 years old. They don't make them as good as that now.

What have you done to that, anything?

Everything! It's got a different neck on it. All it's still got is the basic body. I've done all the pick-up changes, rewired it inside. I've got a stereo Gibson too, but I don't use it a lot. Stereo is a bit fiddley – there are too many things to muck around with. With a stage guitar I just like to use the front pick-up or both: there's enough variation there without having to go to a six-position switch.

In the studio I use a Martin acoustic, a metal Dobro, a Yamaha acoustic and a Yamaha nylon-string, two Ovations, one nylon, one steel-string, and an old Gibson Melody Maker which has a really good tone. If I see an old Martin in a guitar shop, I buy it. You can do things with it because the basic body is there. Nowadays they're much lighter. The old ones were heavy.

tells Tony Jasper: 'The music is the focal point'



Let's talk about you and Ten Years After. How do you find the musical relation?

Well, it has to be done where they don't tell me what to play and I don't tell them. If we play a number and one of us doesn't like it, then it's unsuitable. I mean, I'm doing my own thing my way at present. I like a lot of country stuff, for instance, while Leo likes something more meaty.

If you could choose to jam with a group, who would it be?

J J Cale. I love the feel. You know, I've been through practically every kind of guitar, even classical and Spanish. I like to adapt and play with all kinds of musicians. As far as rock goes, TYA are a great band.

Some rock guitarists have named the Stones as one band they would like to belong with . . .

I've never thought of the Stones as much of a group, as a musical group. They're more of an image than a sound. I don't know . . . I mean . . . No, I won't knock the Stones.

Well, who impresses you on the current scene?

Steve Miller. I've got all his albums. Then I've been getting into Mahavishnu and Chick Corea. Really, I can get enjoyment out of anything, but then I like playing. Anything I can do to learn more licks and more feel, then it's obviously a help. I listen to simply anything I can do in the jazz field. On the other hand, at the moment the people in my band — that's Alvin Lee & Co — have been turning me on to some R & B, Phil Upchurch, a lot of stuff I once missed out on. I love its simplicity. I think all artists go through a phase of doing their utmost and then return to find the essence of being simple. A simple guitar lick, just a couple of notes, but it sits and fits right. Like a hemi-demi-semi-quaver run is all very clever, but often it can be tasteless: it's a question of fitting it in rather than letting it come. You have to have the feel — a matter where every note counts without overstating. Like The Band. I really enjoy listening to them: they don't put an extra note in unless it's needed. Very tasteful.

Yes, their lovely laid back feel is very American, lots of ease, seeming to go with the country.

Well, most of this music was American in origin — blues and

jazz. English forms have developed, but I think from American origins. English folk seems about the only pure English music.

How do you like your audiences to react?

I've always enjoyed *listening* audiences, but you take them as they come. In the end you don't have any control if you play in public. I play my best to come over, but I play better if I feel they are with me. Then again, I like them to jump around a bit. I mean, you can play quiet and people listen, play loud and let them jig — you have that kind of control. Ten Years After don't need gimmicks. The music is the focal point. I don't want to be involved in the entertainment side, jokes and all that.

If you want to improve as a band, it should start with the music. So many bands are out on the road with thousands of pounds-worth of props, trucks, their own stages, fifty roadies . . . Somehow, current music seems less musical to me. What's coming out of Britain, I wonder? What's Gary Glitter all about? Years back, bands associated with the music; they were into that. A lot of the newer bands move in vogues and trends and keeping the kids happy.

Do you see quadrophonic sound offering anything?

I don't see it affecting our music. We mixed a quad album with *Space and time*. To my mind it's not much better than stereo, just a bit more complicated. On a live record, you can have more effects, but basically I prefer to mix live in mono. You have such a wide speaker set-up and many miss the stereo mix. To give everyone a reasonable listen, then mix in mono.

Finally, let's imagine you're throwing a feast: who from the guitar world — dead or alive — would be sitting at your table?

A meal of guitarists? Sounds delicious. Dead or alive? Django would have to be there. George Benson, Ollie Halsall, Scotty Moore . . . (long pause) Rock musicians, hmm . . . Oh, Hendrix — he was an innovator. It's difficult, this one. I get a lot of enjoyment from any music when someone picks up a guitar. Sometimes it can be frustrating to listen to a great player, knowing it will take you another ten years to get anywhere near them! ●