

## cream

It was always, simply, Cream. No need for a definite article. There were the Beatles and the Rolling Stones but it was never the Cream.

Like all the best names, this one functioned at more than one level. It suggested superlative qualities, an elite grouping of the choicest elements. In America, it implied the defeat of all competition. At a deeper and less conscious level, it invoked the pleasure principle, indulgent, richly satisfying, dionysian.

The three musicians it described were, for their audiences, the best players of their individual instruments, the cream of British rock musicianship.

Rumor presaged reality in the early summer of 1966. Word on the London R&B circuit was that Eric Clapton (born March 30, 1945), so recently raised to divinity by his fanatical coterie of fans, would leave John Mayall's Bluesbreakers to form a group with Jack Bruce and Ginger Baker. Baker (born August 19, 1939) was then playing drums with the Graham Bond Organisation, while Bruce (born May 14, 1943), who'd left Bond to briefly join the Bluesbreakers, was currently with chart-toppers Manfred Mann.

All three enjoyed the high regard of their fellow musicians. But Clapton's preeminence as the country's supreme blues guitarist created the keenest public anticipation and high expectations of the imminent trinity. Such a combination of talent, and its promise of future excellence, caused their followers to talk of a "group's group."

Ironically, in March 1966 the pop journal *Melody Maker* had conducted a poll among Britain's top groups to nominate their ideal six-piece band. Eric Clapton and Ginger Baker were the choices for lead guitar and drums, but Jack Bruce was beaten by the Who's bass guitarist, John Entwistle.

With the idea adrift in the ether, it's perhaps no surprise that a couple of months later, Ginger approached Eric about forming just such an elite band. Driven by similar thoughts of evolving from straight blues into a new kind of pop music, the guitarist's sole proviso

was that Jack Bruce must be the band's bassist.

Speculation was rife as to the music that three such volatile personalities would create. Both Ginger Baker and Jack Bruce had long musical pedigrees, with leanings toward jazz; Baker revered America's Buddy Rich and Elvin Jones and was inspired by England's Phil Seamen, while Bruce had wielded double bass in a Scottish jazz band before joining Baker for a time in Alexis Korner's Blues Incorporated. Eric Clapton's mentors came exclusively from the blues world, but he instinctively sought the freedom of his new partners' more open discipline.

When interviewed, Clapton was adamant: "What we want to do is anything that people haven't done before. Most people have formed the impression of us as three solo musicians clashing with each other. We want to cancel that idea and be a group that plays together."

The band, dubbed Cream by Clapton at its initial rehearsal, made its first major public appearance at the Sixth National Jazz and Blues Festival at Windsor on July 3, 1966. An ecstatic audience overlooked the trio's lack of preparation. "We were just scrambling for the forefront," said Clapton, "and we didn't get much feedback until we played in front of an audience. That was when we realized that they actually wanted to go off somewhere. And we had the power to take them."

Cream's first single, "Wrapping Paper," as subtly disposable as its title, deliberately undercut its fans' expectations. More to their taste, the album *Fresh Cream*, released in December 1966, combined blues standards such as "I'm So Glad," "From Four Until Late" and "Spoonful" with new compositions, "N.S.U.," "Sleepy Time Time" and "Sweet Wine." Vehicles for Clapton's intense blues guitar technique were contrasted with more formally structured melodies from the team of Jack Bruce and Pete Brown.

Both strands met in the group's second single, "I Feel Free," as ethereal harmonies and sustained guitar notes floated over a driving rhythm. It was an original and exciting sound that took them into Britain's Top 20.

Although the band needed the lifeblood of popular







approval, it was literally kicking off into the unknown. "My whole musical outlook has changed," Clapton told *Melody Maker*. "Jack, Ginger and I have absorbed a lot of music, and now we're trying to produce our own music, which naturally incorporates many things we've heard and many ideas we've had. It's hard. It's original. It's also more satisfying and a lot more worthwhile."

Ginger Baker spoke with a bullish confidence that typified the band's stance: "It's a progression, and it

Thanks to the visionary attitude of promoter Bill Graham, Cream had a free hand to play its music its own way, unimpeded by restrictions of time or content. "It was amazing," Bruce enthused, "because the whole place had come to see us. It was the first time we'd had our own audience on that scale." "We seem to be a lot more popular than I imagined," Clapton told *Rolling Stone*. "I knew that we had been heard of through the underground thing, yet I didn't imagine we'd be this popular."



will go on, as we are doing something different all the time. We are three totally different personalities and none of us think alike, but we get more and more together musically. It's world class in my opinion."

For British groups in 1967, that world was America and, in April of that year, Cream appeared on Murray the K's Music in the Fifth Dimension show at the RKO Theatre in New York City. At the end of a ten-day stint, it began work on the second album, in the Atlantic studios. "Strange Brew," cut at these sessions, was released as a single and hit the Top 20 in July. A month later the group opened its first full American tour, playing San Francisco's Fillmore for two weeks on bills that also featured the Butterfield Blues Band and Electric Flag.

*Disraeli Gears*, released in November 1968, consolidated acclaim for what was now being termed the first "supergroup." Cream, with the help of producer Felix Pappalardi, had found its voice. Only "Outside Woman Blues" clung to old traditions. New guitar technology, fuzz and wah-wah pedals, added eerie resonance to songs like "Tales of Brave Ulysses" and "World of Pain." Posterity, though, will remember the album for "Sunshine of Your Love," one of rock's classic anthems, composed by Bruce, Brown and Clapton.

During the grueling months of touring that followed, the conditions that created Cream's burgeoning popularity also sowed the seeds of its own destruction. The relentless pressure to be superlative on stage was matched by tensions



offstage. The arduous work schedule, with each musician trapped in repetitive virtuosity, left no time for them to consider their musical development.

Clapton said later, "We worked too hard, and we didn't get the chance to sit and reflect on where we were going or what we could do to change, to keep up with what was happening, musically, outside us."

In July 1968, it was announced that Cream would disband at the end of the year, after a farewell tour of

participation of George Harrison (identified on the sleeve as "L'Angelo Mysterioso"), hinted at one direction the band might have taken.

Two compilations of concert recordings, *Live Cream* and *Live Cream Volume 2*, the latter containing a 14-minute version of "Hideaway," graphically illustrating the burden of extended improvisation, were released in 1970 and 1972, feeding public demand for further commemorative material. By then, all three members had



America. One month later, their brilliant swan song, *Wheels of Fire*, was released. The double album combined a record of studio productions with one of live tracks from their March 1968 Fillmore dates. Each contained definitive performances: "White Room," "Politician" and "Deserted Cities of the Heart" from the studio sessions and "Crossroads," the supreme moment of the band's live career on record.

Cream's last tour ended on November 26, 1968, at London's Albert Hall. It was an emotional event, filmed by the BBC and transmitted on January 5, 1969. A final album, *Goodbye*, was released two months later, once again combining live and studio recordings. "Badge," written by Eric Clapton with the active par-

moved on to new projects, leaving behind them a legion of imitators who struggled, with lesser gifts, to emulate their creative impetus.

It's not only hindsight that identifies Cream as the band that first embodied "progressive music" and the "super-group." For a brief moment in time, three singularly gifted musicians carried the burden of rock music's aspirations and epitomized the questing spirit of their art.

"That's how it was between the three of us," Jack Bruce said later. "Eric, Ginger and I wanted to turn each other on. The only good music is when good musicians play for each other. That was my philosophy, still is, and I believe that's what made Cream so *different* from the other rock groups."

- NEIL SLAVEN