

Jeff Beck

BY ROB BOWMAN



It's a Sunday evening in the fall of 1983. Jeff Beck is in a studio at WNEW-FM, at the time New York City's hip 'n' cool powerhouse rock-radio beam. He is finishing up his shared hour on the nationally syndicated call-in show *Rockline*, with Rod Stewart on the West Coast.

They will meet the following year for a Stewart tour with Beck as special guest, reprising their potent union in the Jeff Beck Group from 1967 to 1969. Lest we forget, it was Beck who emerged from the Yardbirds after leaving his six-string stamp on blues rock, pop, psychedelia, and hard rock with the band to all but burn heavy metal onto the musical map with his eponymous group (contemporaneously with Jimmy Page and the far more widely credited Led Zeppelin). In fact, his 1967 recording of "Beck's Bolero" with Page, John Paul Jones, Nicky Hopkins, and Keith Moon could well be pinpointed as the style's ground-zero moment. He later would become the epitome of jazz rock and fusion, and of late would even meld rock with electronica and trip-hop.

As Beck exits the radio studio at the show's end, he is approached in the hallway by a WNEW staffer with a proffered handshake: "Honored to meet you. And, by the way, would you mind taking just a minute to record some promos for the station?" Beck responds with a barely detectible wince of recoil. His manager, Ernest Chapman, steps in with gentlemanly firmness.

"We don't do promos," Chapman says, enunciating the "P" word with just the slightest tinge of implication that it's something a bit distasteful, almost infectious, ergo avoided. Then Beck is quickly off into the night.

Jeff Beck definitely doesn't need to do promos. Since he first emerged as a revered and unmatched player in the mid-1960s, his guitar has spoken more than well enough for him. It has eloquently and forcefully promoted Beck and his musical brilliance to the point that his induction tonight into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame – for the second time, after first being inducted as

a Yardbird, in 1992 – feels like a *fait accompli*, an honor earned and due by being a guitar voice not just of his generation but for all time.

And to adapt a song quote from Paul Anka – cue Sinatra – Beck did it *his way*, to build with his guitar a career whose trajectory and approach resembles his finesse, aplomb, and consistently innovative playing that all but defines both "outside the box" and "pushing the envelope." When others zig, Beck zags. He does the unexpected, as well as the expected in unexpected ways. He can rip, tear, shred, and arpeggio at the speed of sound and toss off atomic blasts of mind-blowing power, but he also knows well the merits of space and even silence. As his fellow guitar avatar Ritchie Blackmore notes, "He's so fresh, so un-show business. That's what I love about Jeff." To wit, Beck would also ankle the much-ballyhooed 1984 reunion with Stewart after just a few dates.

As his biographer Annette Carson observes, "To quantify the essence of Jeff Beck's guitar playing – the tone, the presence, the passion, the unsettling shifts of mood and coloration – is to describe an ever-changing spectrum of sound: from lunatic rock & roll to delicate, filigreed elegance; from blistering ferocity to aching, savage beauty. How can you define a musician whose output, while topping a poll for Best Jazz Guitarist, finds a regular home in heavy-metal catalogs? Yet despite an incredible disparity of styles, he is one of those rare players who have a quality that's instantly recognizable. It may be the unvarnished honesty of what he does. Or the sheer go-for-broke risk-taking that forever pushes the envelope further – not only musically, technically, sonically, but also in terms of what passes for his professional career."

Geoffrey Arnold Beck was born on June 24, 1944, in Wallington, England, on the southern outskirts of London. Taking his musical cues from Les Paul, as well as Cliff



Five live Yardbirds: Beck, Jim McCarty, Chris Dreja, Jimmy Page, and Keith Relf (from left), 1966



Bend down low: Beck on 'The Midnight Special,' 1975

Gallup (of Gene Vincent's Blue Caps), Chuck Berry, and Steve Cropper, he left Wimbledon Art College after a short stint to play with Screaming Lord Sutch and the Tridents. When Eric Clapton exited the Yardbirds to join John Mayall's Bluesbreakers in 1966, Jimmy Page suggested hiring Beck. Beck played on most of the band's notable and hit songs during his eighteen-month tenure as a Yardbird, which included a few months in tandem with Page. He became the focal point of one of the most signal cinematic scenes of rock & roll fury in Michelangelo Antonioni's 1967 film *Blow-Up*, playing the Yardbirds' "Stroll On."

The Beck solo singles "Beck's Bolero," "Hi Ho Silver Lining," and "Tallyman" followed before the guitarist formed the Jeff Beck Group in 1967 with Rod Stewart, Ron Wood, Nicky Hopkins, and drummers Aynsley Dunbar and then Mickey Waller. The band recorded two truly classic rock & roll albums, 1968's *Truth* and '69's *Beck-Ola* — both of which hit Number Fifteen on the *Billboard* pop album charts. After the group disbanded (with Stewart and Wood going on to join the Faces), Beck convened a second lineup under the same banner, which took his music toward R&B and jazz on *Rough and Ready* (1971) and *Jeff Beck Group* (1972). The following year found Beck teaming with Vanilla Fudge drummer Carmine Appice and bassist Tim Bogert as a power trio for one studio album.

Beck then recorded with George Martin two of the definitive instrumental guitar albums in contemporary music, 1975's *Blow by Blow* (a Number Four pop album) and 1976's *Wired* — platinum discs that remain among the best-selling guitar instrumental releases ever. In 1977, *Jeff Beck With the Jan Hammer Group Live* would even reach Number Eleven on the jazz album chart.

After that, Beck took one of what would be several hiatuses from making music, spending time with his beloved car collection. "The pitch I play at is so intense that I just can't do it every night," he explains. His 1980 return to action on *There and Back* would again find him in the upper reaches of both the pop album (Number 21) and jazz album (Number Ten) charts.

Beck wouldn't issue another album until 1985's *Flash*, from which the track "Escape" won him his first Best Rock Instrumental Grammy. But during the interim, he appeared with Eric Clapton at the Secret Policeman's Ball concert in London in 1981 and teamed up with both Clapton and Page and other rock luminaries for the Ronnie Lane Appeal for ARMS concerts in London and a nine-city U.S. tour in 1983.

The late 1980s would find Beck in semi-retirement again until '89's *Jeff Beck's Guitar Shop With Terry Bozzio and Tony Hymas*, which yielded him another Best Rock Instrumental Grammy. That same year, Beck also co-headlined a tour with Stevie Ray Vaughan. In 1993, he cut a tribute to Gene Vincent guitarist Cliff Gallup, *Crazy Legs*, with the Big Town Playboys. It would be another six years before he released *Who Else!* in '99.

In the time since, Beck has been highly active in both the studio and on the road. He won a third Best Rock Instrumental Grammy for "Dirty Mind" off 2001's *You Had It Coming* and then his fourth for "Plan B" from 2003's *Jeff*. During this decade, he also released essential live albums like his *Official Bootleg* (2007) and *Performing This Week Live at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club* (2008) and appeared at Eric Clapton's 2004 and 2007 Crossroads Guitar Festivals.



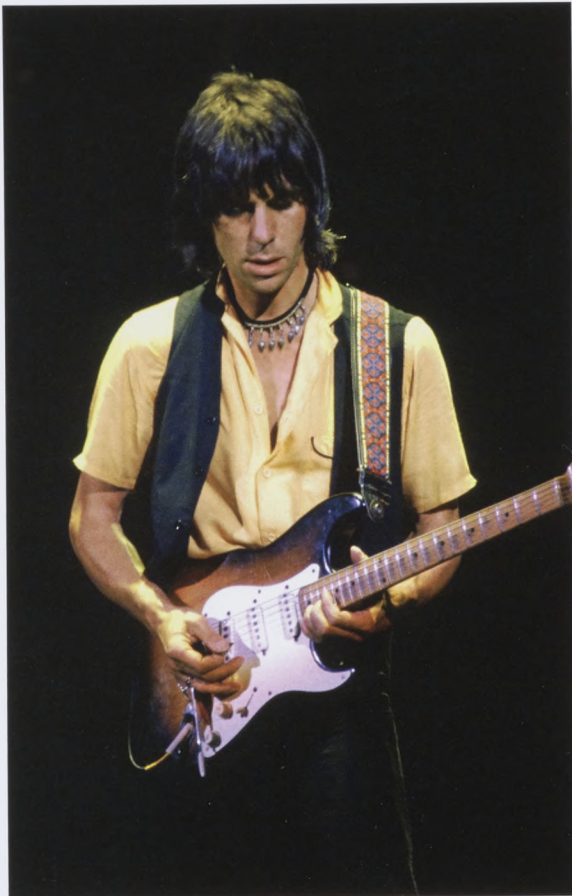
The Jeff Beck Group in 1968: Rod Stewart, Jeff Beck, Ron Wood, and Mickey Waller (from left)



Beck, Tim Bogert, and Carmine Appice (from left) under cover, 1973



Another day, another gig: Beck in the early seventies



Making his Strat sing, 1980



Jazz-rock fusion, seventies style: Jan Hammer and Beck go toe to toe.



Fender benders: Eric Clapton and Beck at the Ronnie Lane ARMS Benefit, 1983



Two serious: Beck meets Stevie Ray Vaughan for a co-headlining tour, 1989.



Audience with the King: B.B. and Beck appear on 'The Tonight Show,' 2003.

And even though Beck has resolutely blazed his own trail in his career, he has also contributed to a wide range of works, including Stevie Wonder's *Talking Book*, Tina Turner's *Private Dancer*, Mick Jagger's *She's the Boss*, and the Hans Zimmer score to *Days of Thunder*, among many other projects. In 2007, he played behind Kelly Clarkson on the Patty Griffin song "Up to the Mountain" on the top-rated *Idol Gives Back* TV special. He also won a 1992 BAFTA award for Best Original Television Music for the score for *Frankie's House*.

A 1990 survey of top guitarists in popular music in London's *The Observer* found Beck rated "the best of the best." As journalist David Sinclair said in his book *Rock on CD* of that

moment, "Jeff Beck is the greatest living rock guitarist, and that's official." Pink Floyd's David Gilmour noted at the time that Beck was "the most consistently brilliant guitarist over the past twenty-five years."

More than four decades into his singular trajectory across the sonic stratosphere of rock & roll guitar playing, Jeff Beck remains a dazzling presence who continues to take the instrument to places it's never gone before. "I play the way I do because it allows me to come up with the sickest sounds possible," he explains. "That's the point now, isn't it? I don't care about the rules. In fact, if I don't break the rules at least ten times in every song, then I'm not doing my job properly." 🎸



Five-way jam, 2007: Tilt-a-Whirl's Billy Pitman, Van Halen's Michael Anthony, Billy Gibbons, Jimmie Vaughan, and Beck (from left)