



Yardbirds

They were the progenitors of psychedelic pop. Their sound inspired young Americans to pick up guitars and head for the garage. They launched the careers of three of rock's most celebrated guitarists — Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page — and set the stage, halfway through the Sixties, for the album-oriented hard rock of the Seventies. But in 1964 at London's Marquee Club, kicking off the live recording of their British debut album, they were introduced as “the most *blues-wailing* Yardbirds.”

At the time, the Yardbirds featured Clapton (born March 30, 1945), who had replaced original lead guitarist Anthony “Top” Topham shortly after the group formed in 1963; Keith Relf (born March 22, 1943) on vocals and harmonica; Chris Dreja (born November 11, 1946) on rhythm guitar; Paul Samwell-Smith (born May 8, 1943), who produced many of the group's recordings, on bass; and Jim McCarty (born July 25, 1943) on drums. They were the resident band at the Crawdaddy Club in Richmond, having replaced the Rolling Stones as the house combo in the fall of '63. Like the Stones, the Yardbirds were devoted to the blues — as players, collectors and fans. They were part of a young, hip R&B cult that survived on imported U.S. singles, the occasional visit of an American blues giant, and regular gigs on a circuit populated by older British bluesmen who had emerged, then diverged from the trad jazz revival of the previous decade.

Yardbirds vocalist Keith Relf didn't have Mick Jagger's confidently affected drawl, thick with adolescent come-on. His voice was darker, deeper and more portentous; but it was also pop-friendly and versatile enough to master the moods of Chuck Berry's chugging rock & roll, Manfred Mann-style Top 40, or Chicago blues chestnuts. As a harmonica player, Relf duetted and dueled with Clapton, a nascent guitar hero who had already earned his nickname of “Slowhand” but was still a few years away from seeing “Clapton Is God” spray-painted on London walls.

Five Live Yardbirds documents a band reaching for a blues epiphany. They were remaking the blues in their own image, a

leap of faith that required extraordinary talent, charm and a little naivete. In concert with the audience as much as for them, the Yardbirds stumbled onto that epiphany by the end of the disc, in the fervid call-and-response of “Here 'Tis.” It is as if they were singing and playing in tongues, this foreign sound and spirit conjured up in the confines of a hot and crowded Soho nightclub.

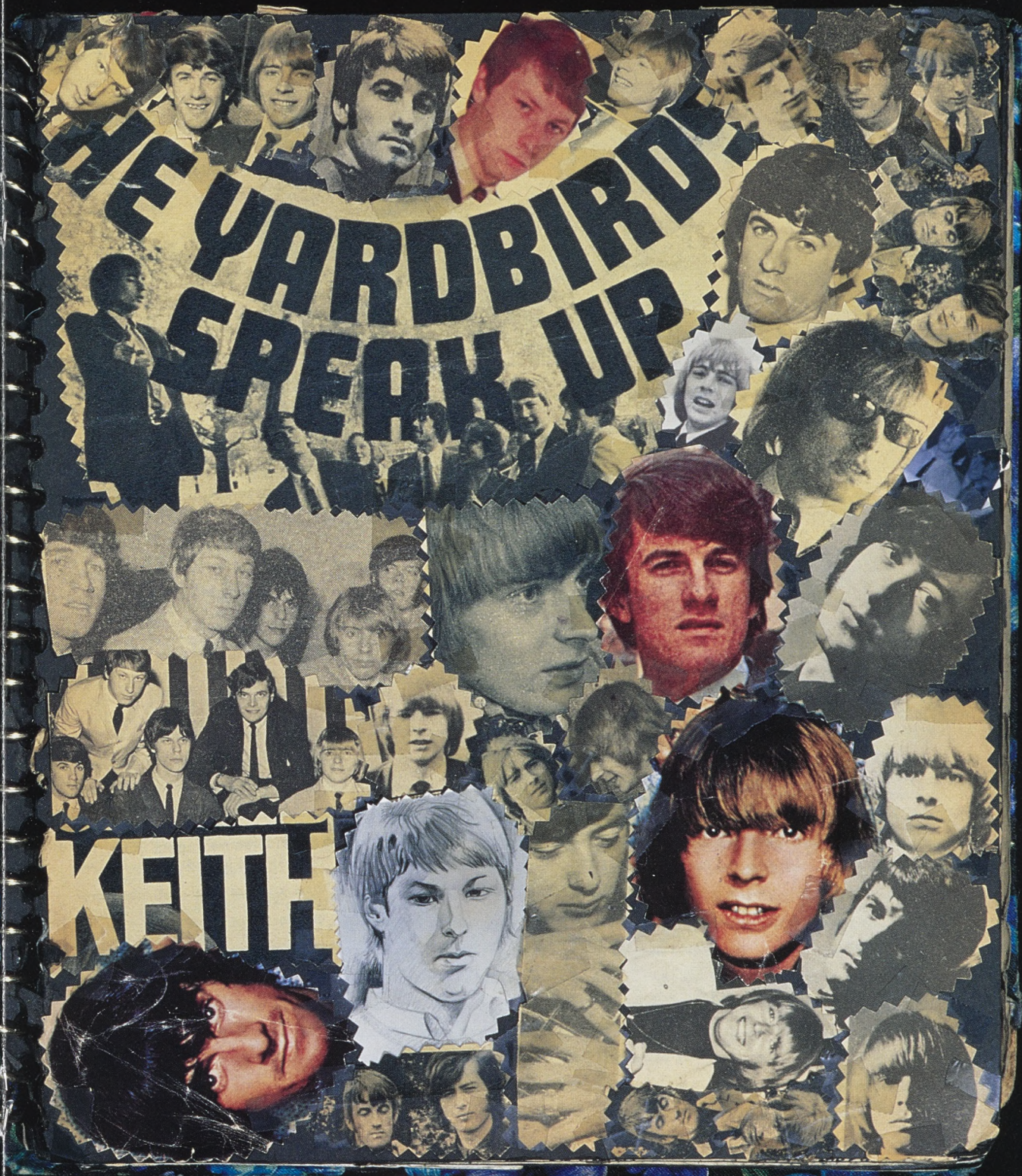
Although Eric Clapton would eventually transform his feeling for the blues into the heavy blues-rock of Cream, he remained a purist during his tenure with the Yardbirds. The group toured Europe with Sonny Boy Williamson II (Rice Miller) and recorded a live album as the backing band for the great bluesman. But Clapton grew uncomfortable with the group's commercial direction when the Yardbirds careened into the pop charts in 1965 with “For Your Love” — at #6, their highest-charting U.S. single. Clapton left to join John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, where he rapidly established his reputation as a guitar virtuoso before forming Cream in 1966.

The Yardbirds found a formidable replacement in Jeff Beck (born June 24, 1944), who had an affinity for jazz and rockabilly as well as the blues. With Beck, the group scored another hit, the moody, minor-key “Heart Full Of Soul.” In America, the Yardbirds were promoted as yet another fashionably mod English beat group. They could have been the Animals or the Dave Clark Five, with their shaggy bowl-shaped haircuts, tapered black suits, skinny black ties and white button-down shirts.

But on their American debut LP, *For Your Love*, once past the hit single and lead-off cut, the group returned to crudely recorded blues and rock *a la* the early Stones, distinguished by stinging guitar leads played by Clapton but credited to Beck. The set climaxed with a goofy extended jam on “My Girl Sloop” a/k/a “Hang On Sloop.” The second U.S. album, *Having A Rave-Up With The Yardbirds*, was a pastiche of singles, a few new studio tracks, and four numbers culled from *Five Live Yardbirds*, once again featuring an uncredited Clapton.

Over *Under Sideways Down*: The Yardbirds circa 1965, with [left to right] Jeff Beck, Chris Dreja, Keith Relf, Paul Samwell-Smith and Jim McCarty.





THIS IS TO CERTIFY THAT

IS AN OFFICIAL MEMBER OF

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Yardbirds

CO-PRESIDENTS SHELLY HEBER
LINDA HILL

Two pages from a 1967 scrapbook kept by Shelly Heber of Los Angeles. As president of the Yardbirds' U.S. fanclub, she attended some two dozen live gigs by the band on various American tours.



Circa 1963: With [left to right] Relf, Eric Clapton, McCarty, Dreja and Samwell-Smith.

The Yardbirds were an appropriating an American sound; this time, however, Americans were taking it back — sort of. As a member of Chicago's Shadows of Knight put it: "The Stones, the Animals, and the Yardbirds took the Chicago blues and gave it an English interpretation. We've taken the English version of the blues and read it a Chicago touch."

Part of what made the Yardbirds both an inspiration to the garage rock subculture and a prototype of late-Sixties psychedelia was the slightly dark and weird streak that colored even their most pop-oriented creations. "For Your Love" opened with, of all things, a ghostly harpsichord (played by Brian Auger); "Over Under Sideways Down" sported as its hook an urgent, sinuous Beck guitar lead suggestive of an amplified snake charmer on speed. The American album of the same name featured a different kind of rave-up: the instrumental "Hot House Of Omagarashid," with its raga-rock overtones and hypnotic percussive effects, could be the forerunner of today's trendy English "rave" music, wordless incantations for chemically-driven revelers. "Jeff's Boogie," on the other hand, foreshadowed Beck's Seventies adventures in jazz-rock fusion.

In 1966, Paul Samwell-Smith left the Yardbirds to pursue record production. Rhythm guitarist Chris Dreja switched to bass, and studio session star Jimmy Page (born January 9,

1944) was brought in on rhythm. When illness sidelined Beck, Page took over on lead; when Beck returned, the group found themselves, for a brief time, with two superb lead guitarists.

Page's memories of the Yardbirds, recounted to *Rolling Stone* interviewer Cameron Crowe in 1975, are fond ones: "Any musician would have jumped at the chance to play in that band. It was particularly good when Jeff and I were both playing lead guitar. It really could have been built into something exceptional at that point, but there's precious little on wax of that particular point. There's only 'Stroll On,' from the *Blow Up* film — that was quite funny — and 'Happenings Ten Years Time Ago' and 'Psycho Daisies.' We just didn't get into the studio much at that time."

Neither "Psycho Daisies" nor "Happenings" (with its explosive freak-out break) made it onto an American LP at the time. But "Stroll On" was included in *Blow Up*, Michelangelo Antonioni's coolly oblique look at Swingin' London, and in a key sequence the Yardbirds are seen performing the song on the stage of an actual R&B club, the Ricky Tick. The *Blow Up* soundtrack album was mostly post-bop jazz by Herbie Hancock, but "Stroll On" (actually the Johnny Burnette Trio's "Train Kept A-Rollin'" with altered lyrics) is pure careening rock & roll with an incendiary Beck/Page guitar duel at its



Little Games: The final four, with Relf, Dreja, McCarty and [center] Jimmy Page.

heart. It is one of the great "lost records" of its time, and one of the few to capture the experimental thrills of the Yardbirds' best live performances.

This two-guitar lineup was short-lived, and in late 1966 Beck left to go solo. He recorded a few singles before forming his legendary first Jeff Beck Group in 1968, a tumultuous alliance with Rod Stewart, Ron Wood, Nicky Hopkins and Micky Waller. The Yardbirds' recording career was essentially over, although new LPs were being released in the States. *Little Games* was pieced together from studio odds and ends by high-concept pop producer Mickie Most. The most notable track, "White Summer," was a haunting acoustic showcase for Page that later would become part of Led Zeppelin's repertoire.

The Yardbirds' career on vinyl ended as it had begun, with a live recording. *Live Yardbirds!* was taped at New York's Anderson Theater on March 30, 1968 and then burdened with canned applause that make the humble Anderson sound like Madison Square Garden. The band sounds tough and ragged, with much heavier and more improvisatory guitar work by Page: With his renditions of "I'm Confused" (better known today as "Dazed And Confused") and "White Summer," he seems to be willing into life his own future with Led Zeppelin. *Live Yardbirds!* had barely made it into the bins before the band members, who had never consented to

its release, demanded that it be taken off the market. The result was an instant collector's item that has been widely bootlegged ever since.

By July, 1968 the Yardbirds had officially disbanded. Page put together a group called the New Yardbirds to fulfill concert obligations in Scandinavia. His cohorts: Robert Plant (vocals), John Paul Jones (bass), John Bonham (drums). Thanks to a joke cracked by Keith Moon, they decided to rename themselves Led Zeppelin — and the rest, as they say, is rock & roll history.

Keith Relf and Jim McCarty turned to Celtic-flavored folk music, first as a duo called Together, then as part of the first incarnation of Renaissance. They were produced by Paul Samwell-Smith, who found international success with his productions for Cat Stevens, Carly Simon and most recently English singer/songwriter Beverley Craven. Keith Relf died of an electric shock on May 14, 1976. Chris Dreja became a photographer and shot album sleeve photos for *Led Zeppelin I*. In the late Eighties McCarty, Dreja and Samwell-Smith played pub gigs and recorded two albums as Box Of Frogs. A broad sampling of the Yardbirds' collected works, from the Sonny Boy Williamson days through 1968, is currently available on two Sony Music compilations, *Smokestack Lightning* and *Blues, Backtracks, And Shapes Of Things*. — Michael Hill