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Interview: Yardbirds Guitarist Ben King Discusses the Band's Legacy and Brief East Coast US Tour



Yardbirds guitarist Ben King discusses the band's legacy and brief East Coast US tour.

In the mid-1960s, the Yardbirds revolutionized modern rock by turning super guitar players into superstars.

The British band -- which made a seamless shift from traditional blues to psychedelic rave-ups -- was the launching pad for Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page. Several Yardbirds songs, including "Shapes of Things," "Happenings Ten Years Time Ago" and "Over Under Sideways Down" are considered mini-masterpieces of mid-'60s rock guitar -- prime examples of the power of perfectly placed notes.

When the band broke up in 1968, Page picked up the pieces and formed Led Zeppelin. In the early '90s, original Yardbirds drummer Jim McCarty and rhythm guitarist/bassist Chris Dreja reformed the band, treating the coveted lead guitar spot as a showcase for a string of serious players, including Gypie Mayo and Jerry Donahue. In 2005, that role was filled by the then-22-year-old Ben King, who has since garnered a reputation as one of Britain's most tasteful young guitarists.

The current version of the Yardbirds -- McCarty (drums), King (guitar), Andy Mitchell (lead vocals/harmonica) and David Smale (bass) -- is embarking on a brief East Coast US tour that kicks off tonight, February 1, in Buffalo, New York (The complete tour schedule is listed below). For the first time since the late '60s, the band will tour as a four-piece unit. Dreja, who is still in the band, is recuperating at home in England after a recent illness. *Guitar World* spoke to King on January 30.

GUITAR WORLD: How do you find that balance between showing off your own style as a guitarist and making the sounds you're "supposed to make" as a member of the Yardbirds? Playing what people want to hear, but giving them a bit of yourself, so to speak.

I suppose that's what a lot of people think about as far as the role I'm doing in this band, and to be honest, it came very naturally. I think that was one of the reasons I landed the gig -- because there were so many great guitar players that wanted to do it. I think one of the things Chris noticed in me when I auditioned was the fact that I seemed to have sort of an instinctive nature and feel for the music because, to be honest, most people thought I was completely obsessive over this band and worshiped these guitar players -- and *that's* why I got the gig. But to be honest, I didn't. For me, it was a case of listening to some of that stuff and getting the flavor of it.

What is it like stepping into the shoes of greats like Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page?

What made those guitar players great was the fact they were all quite individual. Jeff Beck didn't try to copy Eric Clapton. He took what had been done and kind of went with that feeling, and his natural thing came out. You're talking about a bunch of players who are self-taught and using their ears to go through with all that stuff. And that's the way I learned how to play. That's kind of what Chris really gravitates toward -- the fact that Jim would start playing something on the drums and I'd be able to pick it up straight away. That was the balance they wanted, I think. I heard guys auditioning who were playing everything perfectly -- you could have sworn Clapton or Beck had been in that room behind the closed door, but they weren't looking for somebody to imitate exactly what it was. They were looking for somebody with a unique flare, and I've always tried to balance that.

The band decided not to replace Chris Dreja on this tour, and you'll be going out as a four-piece. How do you feel about that?

There was all sorts of talk about maybe needing somebody else to replace Chris. And I thought that it seems like a lot of what we've been doing in this band is reuniting the history to the group's past anyway. Why not just go out there and do it as a four-piece? Next year is the 50th anniversary of the group, and I know we all have our hopes for a reunion of some sort; so I thought it would be kind of cool to go out there as a four-piece instead of replacing Chris with somebody who has no relevance to the group. I thought, "You know, I feel like I can do this." I think the four-piece is lending itself that way anyway, because we now have a dedicated frontman with Andy and an amazing bass player with Dave; you've got Jim on the drums -- let's do the four-piece thing because it gives us the freedom to open up and expand on the creativity.

Much like the Jimmy Page-era Yardbirds.

Yes. I was listening to the Anderson Theater show [the 1968 New York City show heard on *Live Yardbirds! Featuring Jimmy Page*], and some of those jams are as exciting, if not more exciting, than a lot of early Zeppelin. The melting pot of what was going on was very lively and frenetic. My plan for this tour is to get as much of that out as possible, whether it's improvising or jamming or just really knocking in and recreating some of those classic tracks. It's a great challenge, certainly for me, having to fill all that space with a guitar, but Jim really has to open

up in the rhythm section. I really think it's going to be exciting. I know Jim is very much looking forward to it. I think it's exciting for him because it's the first time this has happened since the late '60s.

Of the three classic Yardbirds guitarists, whose era is most fun to revisit?

That's a good question. I suppose I don't have a favorite era. Possibly Jeff Beck, just because his stuff is always fun to recreate because it stays essential to the tracks he played on. I feel Jeff Beck's parts were so clever and so well written that I couldn't do anything else to expand on that. The other Yardbirds stuff was more blues-oriented, and you can feel the need to improvise naturally. But with Beck, I really like the way he constructed all the parts.

What gear are you using on this tour?

I normally use a Telecaster. I did venture into Strats and kind of went into Gibsons, but not live. I've been experimenting with using a Gibson, especially now with the four-piece, but never really got around to it. It's always been kind of easier with a Tele, and I think that is the guitar of the band, if you look back. I love Telecasters. I'd only acquired my first Telecaster about six months prior to joining the band. I'd use many things before that were definitely easy to play, but I found a blank canvas with the Telecaster, and that can be really quite inspiring. And it's great for that kind of combination of rhythm and lead. I find the Strat never really got on really well with rhythm.

So I use a Telecaster, which is custom built, and one of the new hand-wired Vox AC-30s. And I'm kind of excited about using Divided By 13 amps from California (model FTR 37). I was lucky enough to plug into some of their stuff in a shop in England, and they really just did everything I wanted it to do. It delivered.

I also was looking for a Tone Bender pedal, naturally, because that was the pedal of the Yardbirds. Getting this combination of what we've used in those days and stuff I gravitate toward with my own ears, trying to get a combination of both of those things. [Williams Audio is a very small boutique builder in England](#). The guy is really passionate about it. He doesn't make a living from doing what he does; he does it because he loves it. He's got one based on the MK-2 Tone Bender. I'll probably feel them out in sound check for awhile for these shows, just to figure out what I'm gonna stick with for the four-piece. [EDITOR'S NOTE: According to the Williams Audio website, King is touring with an [OC81D Williams Vintage Tone MK11 Professional](#).]

What is your favorite Yardbirds song to play?

Probably "Shapes of Things." It still feels really fun and energetic and lyrically relevant. Timeless, I think. That would be one song, I suppose. God, it's really difficult. I love to do "Dazed and Confused" and all that stuff too, just because it's a chance to open up. I love playing blues as well. It's kind of a great gig to have, in that respect.

Is the band working on a studio album?

As the Yardbirds, we're not working on a studio album. We are, however, all actively writing music and sharing ideas, particularly the new members. So we're working on stuff we can present to Jim and Chris, the original Yardbirds, to potentially do something with. My idea is to go more on the kind of download, digital single idea -- doing individual tracks rather than trying to make some sort of epic record that has to stand up against the band's back catalog. That's one of the reasons this band hasn't, in my mind, really created all that much. Just because, when you have a back catalog that strong, it's difficult to feel the right sort of inspiration to go and create, because this is a band that stopped working at the end of the '60s, pretty much. They've done a few bits and pieces since then. So it's quite a daunting prospect, you know.

We are, however, working hard on a live Yardbirds DVD that hopefully will be out sometime within the next six months. Jim and I are actually staying behind after the tour to edit it.

THE YARDBIRDS' FEBRUARY 2012 US TOUR:

*The Yardbirds will co-bill with Vanilla Fudge at the venues marked with *.*

2/1/12 - Buffalo, NY - The Tralf *

2/2/12 - Nichols, NY - Tioga Downs Racetrack

2/3/12 - New York, NY - Irving Plaza *

2/4/12 - Glenside, PA - Keswick Theatre *

2/6/12 - Alexandria, VA - The Birchmere

2/8/12 - Tarrytown, NY - Tarrytown Music Hall *

2/9/12 - New Brunswick, NJ - State Theatre *

For more about The Yardbirds, [visit their official website](#). For more about Ben King, [visit his official website](#).