

Northwest Indiana
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Local Scene: Reflections of a Yardbird on 50 years in rock 'n' roll



Along with The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, The Yardbirds are among the most impacting of the British Invasion groups of the mid-1960s, because the band was a springboard for three of rock's greatest guitarists – Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page.

Preparing to celebrate The Yardbirds' 50th anniversary, Jim

McCarty, drummer, songwriter and co-founder of the legendary band, reflects back as he prepares to re-invade Chicagoland on Sept. 13 at Arcada Theatre (105 E. Main Street) in St. Charles, Ill. with the current incarnation of The Yardbirds. Tickets and info: (630) 962-7000 or www.oshows.com

A Chat with McCarty:

THE TIMES: The Yardbirds were famous for having been the first band of three iconic guitarists - Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page. What did each contribute to the Yardbirds' sound?

JIM McCARTY: "Eric was a passionate lover of blues music and very dedicated to perfecting his skills on guitar. Eric kept improving after he left us and went to John Mayall and Cream. He brought to The Yardbirds a real passion. It was clear even back then, he was going to be a big star because he had such confidence and star appeal. Jeff brought us a much broader range of sounds. It was Jeff who really gave us the psychedelic sound The Yardbirds were most famous for with songs like 'Shapes of Things,' 'I'm A Man,' 'Still I'm Sad' and others. The band had its most creative and successful period with Jeff. Jimmy took us into more of an early heavy metal direction. But Jimmy also brought organization to The Yardbirds in a business sense. Jimmy brought focus to the band in that way and when he was in the band things ran very smoothly."

THE TIMES: Clapton quit The Yardbirds because the band took a pop direction with its sound. What prompted the change from blues to pop?

McCARTY: "Our motivation was to have a hit record. We weren't

able to do that with the blues covers we'd been doing. We tried, but it didn't seem to work. A lot of the British bands started out playing blues and then found their own sound. We wanted to do the same. The song 'For Your Love' was ear-catching. It was an interesting song with a strange, moody sound. It did well for us. It became our first hit single. Eric wanted to keep playing blues."

THE TIMES: The Yardbirds didn't miss a beat during the transition. How did Jeff Beck come to fill Clapton's slot so quickly?

McCARTY: "We were quite lucky to get Jeff. Jimmy Page was originally offered the job, but he was busy doing session work in London at the time. It was Jimmy who recommended Jeff to us. They were friends. Jimmy introduced us to Jeff and it was a wonderful fit of course."

THE TIMES: In 1968, not too long after Jimmy Page came on board, the group decided to call it quits. How did Jimmy wind up forming The New Yardbirds which evolved into Led Zeppelin? Did he do so with your blessing?

McCARTY: "Yes. We'd simply just run out of steam as a band by 1968. We'd been playing relentlessly for three years non-stop. We were out of steam creatively and physically tired. There was a tour pending and Jimmy wanted to carry on. We were fine with that. Jimmy found other energetic and fresh players to fill those dates and they formed a band. The rest as they say is history."

THE TIMES: Ben King has been The Yardbirds' guitarist for about eight years now. Has it been tough for him to live up to the ghosts of the past and step into the big shoes and the legacy of Clapton, Beck

and Page?

McCARTY: “Not at all. He’s a great talent. Ben is confident and rightfully so. He’s dedicated to making the group the best it can be. When Jimmy Page came to see the band, Ben performed better than ever.

THE TIMES: Yardbirds co-founder and second guitarist Chris Dreja recently took ill and had to stop performing last year. Who has taken his place?

McCARTY: “We’ve brought in Top Topham, the original guitar player who was there before Eric Clapton. Top left the band shortly after we formed because he was very young and was pressured by his parents to finish his studies at art college. He couldn’t really do that while playing in the clubs with us. It’s a shame and tragic really, because Top followed what his parents wanted and missed out.”

THE TIMES: The Yardbirds will celebrate the group’s 50th Anniversary with a massive European tour in early 2014 with other Brit bands of the era like The Animals, The Zombies, Spencer Davis Group and others. Will you bring that star-studded tour to this side of the Atlantic for your American fans?

McCARTY: “It’d be lovely to do that, but I don’t know. It depends. I’m sure we’d all be available and wanting to do that, but it’s all a question of an agency doing the bookings, all the politics involved and the amount of money offered. But we love playing in America and Chicago has always been one of our favorite cities.”

Follow the group at: www.theyardbirds.com and/or
www.jimmccarty.co.uk.