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**The current lineup of The Yardbirds includes two founding members: Jim McCarty and Top Topham. (PHOTO: Trevor Heath)**

# Latest incarnation of The Yardbirds lands at the Big Gig

Somewhat like Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers were to hard bop, Britain's The Yardbirds have been seen as something like a university of rock and roll. Among the band's front line across its heyday in the 1960s, were guitarists Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck and Jimmy Page.

The group, part of the British Invasion era that led many U.K. groups to the top of the U.S. charts, scored hits here with songs like "For Your Love," "Over Under Sideways Down" and "Heart Full of Soul."

By the time the band split, Clapton and Beck had moved on and Page was focused more and more on his new band, Led Zeppelin. Meanwhile, singer Keith Relf and drummer Jim McCarty were moving toward a folkier direction -- and would later form the respected English folk group, Renaissance, together -- and bassist Chris Dreya was eyeing a move out of music to pursue his passion for photography.

And so ended one of the most important incubators of 1970s guitar-fueled rock and roll. Until the 1990s. That's when a version of The Yardbirds reunited and has existed to this day, with some lineup changes.

The current incarnation -- which also includes guitarist Ben King, bassist David Smale and singer Andy Mitchell -- performs at Summerfest's BMO Harris Pavilion at 5 p.m. on Saturday, June 28.

We asked McCarty about the band and about its current guitarist Anthony "Top" Topham, who, incidentally, was also a founding member of The Yardbirds and its first guitarist.

OnMilwaukee.com: I'd like to start by talking a bit about Top's time in the group and his return. Why did he leave the band in '63?

Jim McCarty: Top left the band in '63 because he wanted to carry on with his studies at Art College. Actually, his dad wanted him to do that. Consequently, he is now a very good artist!

OMC: Did you always stay in touch with him over the years?

JM: I bumped into him again around 25 years ago, and we decided to form a blues band together. That band eventually morphed into the renewed Yardbirds around 1996.

OMC: Even though he was there first, has it been tough for him to return to the group after it had long since become known for Clapton, Beck and Page?

JM: He jumped at being back in the band and seems very happy playing all the hits that he didn't benefit from!

OMC: Was the fact that music was moving into a heavier direction part of what ended The Yardbirds? Or was it more fundamental than that; had everybody just grown in different directions creatively by that point?

JM: I think it was a bit of your last point -- but a lot of the creativity had waned when Paul (Samwell-Smith, bassist) and

Jeff left. Also we were so intensely tired after all that time playing night after night.

OMC: Have you ever wondered what the band would've been like had it continued into the '70s, which were a much different time in terms of music and the scale of tours and recording budgets, etc.?

JM: It would have been great to step back from it all for a while and take stock -- and then benefit from 1970s budgets for touring and creating.

OMC: What was the impetus for getting The Yardbirds back together in 1996?

JM: The impetus to get the band back together was a lot to do with timing, I think. We got inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1992 and in '96 I had been playing in a blues band for a few years in a London pub, which was fun and attracted lots of interest. We also had many people asking us to re-form the band.

OMC: What are the shows like? Does the band work to recreate the sound of that era or are you happy to just play the music and let it emerge as it will?

JM: I think the best thing about the group is the very strong repertoire, which is played energetically and faithfully by the new members -- plus me and Top, of course!

OMC: Are you having fun? Is there less pressure now than there was in the band's first go-round?

JM: Yes, I enjoy it as long as it's not 350 nights a year like 1966!