

ULTIMATE CLASSIC ROCK

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Jim McCarty Talks About New Yardbirds Lineup and Tour: Exclusive Interview



Arnie Goodman

If you find yourself in Toronto and you come across somebody who looks a lot like legendary [Yardbirds](#) drummer Jim McCarty, chances are good that it might actually be the real deal. Working on solo music in recent years, McCarty ended up in Toronto after receiving an invite from a musical associate to work on an album there and when he arrived, he quickly discovered that he really liked the

change of scenery. “It’s a bit like the scene was in London in the ‘60s,” he tells Ultimate Classic Rock. “It’s a nice place for me.”

McCarty says that he’s “gradually working up to doing another album there” sometime in the near future. But first, he’ll be heading back on the road this month for [tour dates](#) testing a brand new lineup of the Yardbirds featuring guitarist [Johnny A.](#), bassist [Kenny Aaronson](#), singer/harpist/percussionist Myke Scavone and guitarist/singer John Idan.

The veteran drummer has logged more than a half-century of road work with the group, and we spoke with him on the eve of the upcoming tour to find out how he put the latest version of the band together and he also shared some memories of the group’s formative years.

The history of this band spans more than 50 years, and you’re the guy who has been a constant presence through it all. It doesn’t seem like it would have been an easy task to keep things going all of this time.

It’s had a few ups and downs. But in a way it’s a lot easier than it was because it was very full-on in the old days. We got really knocked out and quite knackered at the end of it. But since we’ve been reformed, we can have a bit of time off so it’s a bit more civilized.

As of December of last year, you put the lineup that you had at that point [to the side](#) and now you’re back with a new lineup. How did this new lineup come together?

Well, it’s still quite an experiment, I have to say. We’ve still got to rehearse and we’re still going to have to work together on the set. I vaguely know the guys. I know Johnny A. better than the other two guys. I know John, who is coming with me, he was the singer on the Birdland album, so he’s fine — he’s been in the band a long time. I think the thing is that it’s such a great repertoire and I don’t think we’re going to have any trouble with that level of musicianship — it’s going to be good. It’s quite energetic and it’s such a good body of songs that really stand the test of time.

Johnny A. is a guitarist that a lot of guitar aficionados know. How did you and Johnny first connect?

We first connected through the Favored Nations label and [Steve Vai](#), because he had an album right around the time of the Birdland album in the early 2000s. He came and jammed with us a couple of times on the Birdland tour which was 2003 and since then, he’s come and played with us a few times and I’ve met him and he’s a very nice guy and very nice player. He’s very into the Yardbirds and he’s perfect for us.

How did Kenny Aaronson come into the mix?

He was recommended by Jon Paris. I didn't really know him. I had heard about him, but Jon Paris, I know vaguely and he said, "You know, Kenny's a great player — he would suit you." So we went from there and he seems like a really sweet guy. He's got all of the credentials, so I'm looking forward to playing with him.

That's something which has been consistent as the Yardbirds have evolved over the years. The group always has an interesting musical pedigree with the players that are involved.

Yeah, we've had some good people, obviously. It always seems to work. Whoever comes in, it works in a different way and it can shift a bit and it can move around and there's always a bit of space to be spontaneous and improvise and make it slightly different. That's something that's been quite exciting for me.

The music of the group is legendary at this point. How have you seen that music evolve over the years that you've been playing these songs live?

It's funny how it stands up. Of course, the origins of some of the songs go right back almost into the '50s, "Smokestack Lightning," "Drinking Muddy Water" and things like that, some of these old blues classics. If they're played with energy and the right attitude, they really do still stand up. And of course, the hits [like] "For Your Love," "Heart Full of Soul," "Shapes of Things" and "Over Under Sideways Down," they've had other people covering them, so they're still sort of alive in the memories of people. People know the songs and they've seen them in a movie [and people like] David Bowie have really kept the music alive. It's very gratifying from my point of view.

It's interesting to see the individual legacy that some of these songs have. You guys weren't the first to record "Train Kept A Rollin'" but certainly it has taken on a life of its own since you recorded it.

Well, yeah, it was always [Jeff Beck](#)'s idea. He brought it to the table and it was a great rockabilly classic at the time, quite different from the original, which was just a sort of 12-bar shuffle. And yeah, it seems to have held up, [with the versions] by [Aerosmith](#) and even other people.

Listen to the Yardbirds Perform 'Train Kept A Rollin'



Looking back at the beginnings of the band, the Yardbirds had released a couple of singles leading up to the release of that debut album, which was live. What led to the decision to make the first full album from the group a live one?

I think the decision was made because in those days, the sound that we got in the studio in London didn't really match our live sound. We couldn't get the right feeling and it was always very cold. It didn't have much warmth to the sound. I don't think the studio engineers were quite up to the levels of the American ones, you know, the old rock and roll ones. That's why we decided to do a live album. It really had much more of a feel to it and a sound to it as well. It wasn't really until we got to the States and we recorded "Shapes of Things" and "Train Kept A Rollin'" in American studios that we really got that rock and roll, bluesy sound. So that was the reason that we did the live album at the Marquee.

Looking at the pacing of how things were moving for the group from the time that record was released to the two albums that followed it, like a lot of bands, it seems like you guys working hard to keep up with the touring demand for the group, which didn't leave a lot of time for recording.

No, it didn't. It was all about being on the road. It wasn't really until the '70s that the album sales came into the picture, so it was all based around the hit single and we never really got much backup from the record companies. There was no loyalty and there was only the single to go by. By the time [Led Zeppelin](#) [came around], they didn't even need a single — their albums were selling a lot and they didn't really have to work night after night like we did.

Working with [Eric Clapton](#), did you get a sense that his time with the group was going to be short-lived?

Not initially. He was quite different to the rest of us — he was quite focused and very dedicated and quite focused in an ambitious sort of way. He obviously had what it took to be a sort of star player, even though when he was with us, he was just learning it all. But he took it very seriously and he worked very hard on it. He succeeded and he became what he is now and he worked very hard to get there.

How did the [arrival](#) of Jeff Beck change things for the group?

I think that Jeff changed it because he was a broader player. He played with a much more different sound — he didn't stick to the blues so much — he could play jazz, rock 'n' roll, rockabilly and he had an interest in all sorts of different sounds. He liked electronic music and [Les Paul](#)-like double tracking and all of that stuff. He had a much wider sound, which suited us at the time. That's sort of the way we went, because we wanted to develop our sound out of the blues to become something a bit more original and it suited us. We were all lucky to be part of that and produce that original sound that seems to be the Yardbirds trademark.

It was a time that thankfully allowed for a lot of experimentation.

Oh, yes. There was plenty of room for that! And we liked to do that and we were always really interested in doing something different, experimenting and changing rhythms and getting into sort of Gregorian chants and in the end, people called it psychedelic and it was just creating pictures in the music, I suppose, really.

Briefly, Beck and [Jimmy Page](#) were both in the lineup. Do you think that long-term, would there have been room for both of those guys in the band?

Well, that took a bit of doing. It sort of worked occasionally, but it was quite hectic with both of them. There wasn't a lot of space. Yeah, that was quite a difficult time. There was a lot of competition going on. You know, they were both trying to outdo each other and actually, they were really different

characters, so Jimmy of course won that battle. Jeff couldn't take it really — it was very hard on him. In some ways, Jeff's probably the better guitar player.

What are the key moments for you when you look back at the catalog?

“Shapes of Things” was a great moment. It was a time when we had quite newly come to the States and we were already on the charts with a couple of records and it was very exciting to be in Chicago and go to Chess Records where all of the blues that had been made and do that song. We worked it out in Chicago and got a great sound. That was a pivotal moment for me, a song all about what was going on at that time, a sort of semi-political song. And then of course, getting in the Rock and Roll of Fame was really nice in 1992.

Album-wise, what's your favorite album?

Probably Roger The Engineer, the one that we did in London with the Jeff Beck lineup, with Paul Samwell-Smith, Chris [Dreja], Keith [Relf] and myself. That was a great time. It was good fun to do that and we were having fun making a lot of stuff happen in the studio. It was a nice time and I enjoyed that because we got the engineer, Roger Cameron, first of all, from my point of view, he was spending a lot of time on the drums, making the drums sound good and that always worked for me. You know, when I knew my sound was good, it would sort of make the whole band sound good. We had a lot of laughs doing it and there was some good stuff in there. You know, it shows — it's still one of those albums ... one of those cult albums, really.