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Yardbirds Drummer Jim McCarty on Moving to Provence

The British drummer and his wife found their dream house in Provence—until the tour buses arrived



Philip Cheung for The Wall Street Journal

Jim McCarty, pictured in Toronto.

Jim McCarty, 70, is founding drummer of the English rock band the Yardbirds, which formed in 1963. He is working on solo projects and continues to tour with the current version of the group, which is featured on the new DVD "Making Tracks" (MVD). He spoke with reporter Marc Myers.

For 40 years, London had been my home and base of operations as a musician. But in 2004 my wife, Elisabeth, and I felt we had outgrown our time there. We wanted a complete break—a new living experience. We no longer had family responsibilities in

England, so nothing was keeping us there.

That year, a friend suggested we move to Provence, France. She thought the region would be perfect for what we wanted—privacy and beauty. A short time later, the Yardbirds had a gig in Nice, and my wife came along to spend two weeks driving around the area. Fortunately, we found Roussillon and immediately fell in love with it.

[Enlarge Image](#)



Jade Yeh

A vista from Roussillon

Roussillon is an extraordinarily colorful and bright village—mostly because of the reddish-orange pigment in the soil and plaster used for the houses. The area is famous for its ocher quarries—where there are deposits of pigments ranging from yellow to red. Ocher mines had been in operation there from the 1800s until the 1930s. What makes Roussillon even more spectacular is how high the village is perched—as though it's a natural extension of an ocher ridge overlooking a stunning red landscape.

When Elisabeth and I looked at properties, we fell for a small pink house with blue shutters on the edge of the village that was owned by a woman who had run it as a guesthouse. The 17th-century house and the one next to it—a former convent—had been combined, and the two-story, three-bedroom home was truly elegant. It had lovely original Provençal architectural detailing on the facade and interior. I was quite moved when I first

saw the rooms. There were hand-painted ceilings, a chandelier, French double doors, tall-shuttered windows and a soft, feminine energy. We even had a big double-sided log fireplace that we used in the winters. We kept the wood in an underground cave that we also used to store wine.

[Enlarge Image](#)



Jade Yeh

Mr. McCarty's pink house in Roussillon is shown.

From a musician's standpoint, the rooms had superb local acoustics. The ceiling was high and the floors were covered with original 4-inch red tommettes—handmade terra-cotta hexagonal tiles. You could sing in the rooms and your voice sounded warm and resonant. There was even room for my drums. I asked Jason Relf—son of Keith Relf, the Yardbirds' original lead singer—to come down from London to install the latest recording gear. The space was perfect for meditation and writing music. It's where I wrote all the material for my 2009 solo album, "Sitting on the Top of Time." The room wasn't soundproofed but the house was isolated. Ours was at the end of the street, and the person who owned the place next door lived in Paris and was rarely there.

Under French tax law, I could live there for only a certain number of months a year, which was fine since I often went on long tours with the band. When my wife and I were there,

we loved the silence, the surrounding nature and the panoramic beauty. It was heavenly and inspiring. We didn't have a garden, but the roof terrace had a spectacular view. We looked out onto red cliffs, and there were beautiful pine trees all around. Elisabeth and I would often walk down into the valley to an untouched wildflower meadow.

By 2012, we began to feel we were coming to the end of our stay. A growing number of tour buses had begun to appear, since the former ochre mines were attracting vast numbers of visitors. Traffic picked up and oversize vehicles passed through the narrow streets and occasionally scraped the front wall of our home. Living there became difficult, so we sold our house and moved to another village about 100 miles away that's much quieter and just as charming—in a completely different way.

All of the friends we made in Roussillon were sad when we said we were leaving. The French locals had become used to us. To be honest, I was sad about the move, too, since it had been a magical period in my life and a complete break from how we had lived in London. But I also know that beauty can't always last the way we want it to. Everything changes. That's the nature of life.

Unfortunately, older members of the Yardbirds never made it down to visit us in Roussillon. Everyone was always too busy. Jeff [Beck] nearly came over, but he was staying near Nice, which was too far away. That was fine. Back in the '60s, we were heavy rockers who lived close to the edge. But eventually everyone wants some privacy and peace of mind—even original Yardbirds.

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