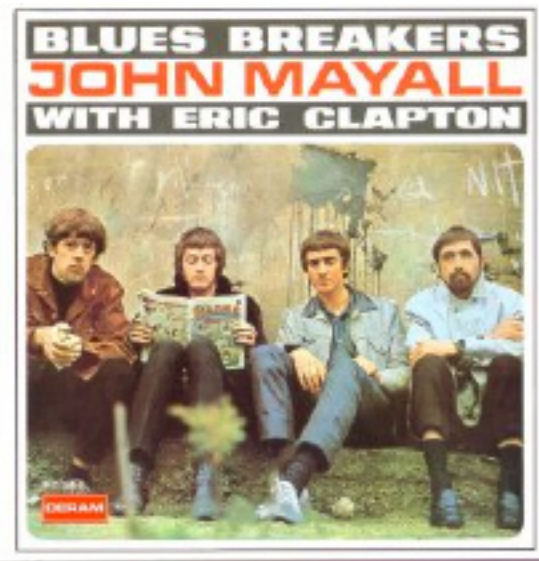


# The Guitar That Changed the World

By Jeffrey Aarons



In April 1966, Eric Clapton set the electric plectrum guitar world on fire when he cranked up his Les Paul standard through a Marshall combo and unleashed the first high tech, fluidly dynamic, virtuoso tour de force of electrified guitar blues.

"All Your Love" begins the famous 'Beano' album, with Eric whipping up the G string with that vicious picking attack and launching into his first theme riff of the album featuring that thick, blistering, yet sweet, Les Paul/Marshall sound with his characteristic Lead toggle switch position in place. His vibrato is lush and fierce even though not as refined as it would get a year later. Eric's playing style is uninhibited and mean, featuring his patented variable picking pressure that articulates notes unlike any player before him. His play featuring speed, control, passion and architecture with such mastery that it would reach the shores of the US like a bomb shell, riveting the ears of wanna be and accomplished blues-rock players alike.

This album shook up Jimi Hendrix and inspired him to take up Chas Chandler's offer to export himself to England (making a condition to meet Eric Clapton). As we can guess, the Bluesbreaker LP inspired Hendrix to reach new heights of competitiveness himself. When Mike Bloomfield, of Paul Butterfield Blues Band, America's preeminent white blues guitar man first heard the Beano Album he was so enthralled and intimidated, he made a special trip to Britain just to witness this guitar wonder in person.

Bloomfield stated, in an interview years ago, he watched Clapton with amazement and was so shook up he claimed "after seeing Clapton on stage, I couldn't play anymore" Bloomfield went on to say that Eric had achieved the quintessential heights of blues guitar and surpassed anything he could imagine being done in the blues idiom. (Bloomfield also said similar things about Jimi and seems to have been perpetually insecure about his own brilliant talent.)

"Stepping Out" and "Hideaway" feature an aggressive Clapton tearing up the fret board with precision control and tasty ferocity. "Stepping Out" became a show piece staple of Cream's live show. I was fortunate enough to witness Clapton blast this tune for close to a solid 40 minutes at the Electric Factory, probably one of his record length versions. "Hideaway", is an example of how he would not only interpret an instrumental, but take it miles beyond. Freddy King's original is good and soulful, but extremely primitive and almost banal when compared to EC's fiery, high tech passionate explosion in the key of E.

This LP literally was the seminal point for legions of guitarists looking for a guitar bible to learn blues/rock guitar from. It so inspired guitarists, that most aspiring players would make it mandatory to sit down and try to learn all of the solos on this LP. There is no doubt that EC went into the studio to make his mark but, unintentionally, created a Frankenstein that would only be surpassed by his majestic

improvising pinnacle during Cream.

The basic Bluesbreaker "style" always remained at the foundation of Clapton's technique and passion. His Bluesbreaker phrasing and technique was the absolute precursor to the more refined and architecturally brilliant Cream style. One can now hear the Bluesbreaker style develop in a linear manner, evolving from "Fresh Cream" to "Disraeli", through the live performances and reaching its pinnacle maturity during the Winterland/Fillmore phase of early 1968. This guitar evolution is even more evident when one listens to Clapton's guitar metamorphosis throughout each live concert featuring a guitar that perfects the art of blues/rock soloing beyond anything that preceded it or would come after. Clapton singularly defined the art of electric Blues/Rock solo guitar.

### **Prelude: Bluesbreaker Days**

In April 1966, Eric Clapton recorded the classic "John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton" (aka 'Beano'). It was a seminal recording that established Eric as a master guitarist, especially due to his revolutionary sound. He forced the engineer and producer to record him with his Marshall Combo at live performance volume. The Les Paul/Marshall sound was born.

The above is the simple version that legends require. The reality is somewhat different

When Eric left the Yardbirds and joined John Mayall in April 1965, he also adopted a new set-up to enhance the change. He moved from the Telecaster/Vox to a Les Paul (58-60)/Marshall JT45 head and flat quad (4x12) box. In June 1965, the Bluesbreakers entered the studio to record a single ('I'm Your Witch Doctor'/'Telephone Blues' + 'On Top of the World'). The producer was Jimmy Page who was gob-smacked by the sound Eric was getting with the Les Paul combined with the over-driven Marshall. The engineer demanded that it be turned down as it was noise, not a guitar, but Page, to his everlasting credit, told him to record it. They did it with distance miking as the mike overloaded with the volume.

When Eric returned from his ill-fated 'world tour' in November 1965, he had his prized Les Paul but no Marshall JT45. He went to Jim Marshall's shop in Hanwell and bought one of the very new Release 2,

50 Watt combos. In November or December 1965, Eric and John Mayall entered the studios and recorded 'Lonely Years' and 'Bernard Jenkins'. Once again Eric was at high volume but the Producer, Mike Vernon acquiesced – they were only a duo so they could manage his volume. He also played on some sessions for Champion Jack Dupree and Otis Spann but at noticeably reduced volume.

Eric had joined Mayall for his more purest approach to the blues. He had left in August due to increasing ennui. The November Bluesbreakers contained a new bass player – Jack Bruce. They hit it off immediately and Eric was musically stimulated as never before. Some of that rapport is in evidence on the "Live at the Flamingo" recorded in November 1965. In December Jack joined Manfred Mann simply for the money as he had a wife to support.



Over the next few months of intense touring Eric's integration of his sound developed. The new combo was theoretically only marginally more powerful but with slightly different electronics that gave it greater attack. When turned up to maximum (at a guess probably only 9 but with what tone control settings – presence full, treble high?), in conjunction with the Les Paul, the sound was absolutely original. Eric's legend began to develop with the "God" graf-

fiti appearing on walls. One should be cynical about this – management often-paid people to do this sort of thing!

While touring Eric would occasionally run into Ginger Baker. Ginger was becoming increasingly disenchanted with Graham Bond and his mind was turning to organising his own band. As Eric became more bored with the Bluesbreakers, he too began to think of his own band and sounded out some people including Stevie Winwood. No one took the young, moody Eric seriously – at this time he was no band leader.

In early April Ginger Baker deliberately travelled to Oxford to sit in with the Bluesbreakers. Eric was so bored he was, according to different witnesses, playing either lying or sitting down! He immediately invited Ginger to sit in – they clicked. Afterwards, over a pint, Ginger invited him to join his band. Eric agreed but with one stipulation – Ginger's old sparring partner had to be the bassist. Ginger swallowed his pride and invited Jack on board.

Soon after Eric, Jack and Ginger were invited to do some recording in a 'supergroup' session called "The Powerhouse". Jack was so shocked that he let the cat out of the bag to Paul Jones, the session organiser, who he swore to secrecy. Ginger never turned up and Eric put in a disinterested, lack lustre, but still interesting, performance even on "Crossroads".

Later in April, Mayall was booked in by Decca to record an album. The producer was again Mike Vernon but with a new engineer, Gus Dudgeon. Gus couldn't balance the sound as Eric was playing at full live volume and he couldn't get Eric to relent. When Vernon arrived he too tried to convince Eric to turn it down as this time it was with a full band. Eric refused outright against everyone's pressure – he had nothing to lose as this would be the last recording with Mayall. John told Vernon to let it go and record as best he could. It was planned as a quick 'live' session so they recorded. On playback both Vernon and Dudgeon realised that they had captured a new sound even though it was technically incorrect.

The album has its weak points specifically Mayall's show pieces and the superfluous horns. One critic's complaint that Eric's volume "left McVie and Flint barely audible" is arrant nonsense. McVie solidly underpins the session while Hughie Flint provides very effective accompaniment on the drums. The sound balance, in fact, set the style for quite a few years – guitar dominance.

On release in August, "John Mayall & the Bluesbreakers with Eric Clapton" raced up the charts. It also turned ears in the USA when released there, including Jimmy James. It was one of the key albums in the summer of 1966 that began to define a new music genre called Rock. However, Clapton was now recording with his new band called Cream.