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**Hot Wired Guitar: The Life of  
Jeff beck**

**By Martin Power**

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## Chapter 1

### Detective Work

"I thought we'd won."

It was a phrase you heard a lot in the United Kingdom during the post-World War II years. A phrase steeped in irony, pickled in humour but still carrying just the right amount of righteous indignation to ensure anyone hearing it nodded wearily in agreement. "I thought we'd won," said it all, really.

After near six years of bloody conflict, which saw the death of millions on various battlefields throughout Europe and Africa, the Allies formally accepted the unconditional surrender of Nazi Germany's armed forces on May 8, 1945. Adolf Hitler's dreams of a thousand year Reich were left smouldering with his ashes just outside a bunker in Berlin. As King George VI and Prime Minister Winston Churchill flicked victory salutes to the assembled throng from the balcony of Buckingham Palace, the mood was one of celebration - a just and fitting end to what one esteemed historian recently called "The last just war." Happy days, as they say, were here again. Or so you'd have thought.

The reality of life in post-war Britain was somewhat different. Having already been blitzed, bombed, rationed, made to shelter in tube stations or take refuge in hastily constructed sheds under the cover of 'Blackout', the UK's civilian population were due a break. Like their military counterparts, those left at home had witnessed hard times, with over 60,000 dead after Nazi bombing missions decimated cities like Hull, Liverpool, Birmingham, Sheffield, Nottingham, Glasgow, Swansea and many others. London saw the worst of it, the Luftwaffe turning the skies red for 76 consecutive nights over England's capital from September 1940 to May 1941, but most all of the country had been affected one way or another. Yet, it would take nearly a decade or so before things eventually righted themselves, as industry, schools and homes were slowly re-built, and petrol, soap, clothing, fruit and milk again became available to the general public without need of government-stamped coupons. An austerity-ridden, black and white, gritty and grimy time for all concerned then, and one in which the phrase "I thought we'd won" made perfect, horrible sense.

Some 37 minutes' train ride from the bomb damage of London's Victoria Station was Wallington, then in the County of Surrey, now in the London borough of Sutton. Deriving its name from the Anglo-Saxon 'Waletone - which literally means 'Village of the Britons' - Wallington had actually gained a mention in William The Conqueror's Domesday Book of 1086, its eight acres of meadow, two mills and 11 hides worth the princely sum of £10 at the time of the census. And that, more or less, was how Wallington remained until the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century: a moderate-sized community of largely agricultural means dependant on pig farming and the

production of lavender to bolster the coffers of the local populace. But with the expansion of Britain's railway network in the mid 1800s and a growing need for housing outside of London, Wallington and its neighbouring parish, Beddington, were finally fused together to create a unified borough in 1915 - both villages now becoming towns under one, shared motto: 'Fess embattled'. Given the events of World War II and what it brought to Wallington and its surrounds, 'embattled' was an apt word to use.

When the United Kingdom went to war with Germany for the second time in 21 years, Wallington, Beddington, neighbouring Carshalton and their considerably larger first cousin Croydon - just two and a half miles up the road - all took their fair share of hits during the Battle of Britain and subsequent Blitz. Then London's major landing field, and a principal RAF fighter station, Croydon Airport was attacked in the first wave of German bombings, killing six service men and 60 civilians in nearby factories in just one night. Like Croydon, Wallington did not escape lightly. The Dukes Head Hotel, then the busiest pub in the area, was badly damaged during an air raid while Wallington County Grammar School was struck by a V2 rocket in the late summer of 1944, its windows blown out, its roof collapsing under the impact. Thankfully, a nearby field where teachers grew vegetables in an effort to augment rationed supplies for their pupils was not affected by the blast.

Just 600 yards away from Wallington County Grammar School, opposite Beddington Park and but a stone's throw away from St. Mary The Virgin Church was Demesne Road. A straight-lined, if not exactly leafy street of mainly white, mostly pebble-dashed houses, Demesne Road was only 10 minutes walk from Wallington station, with numerous cul-de-sacs and warrens running the length and breadth of its near mile long distance. An old lane that had been turned into something far more substantial in the 1930s, Demesne Road's close proximity to Wallington Grammar must have meant when the V2 struck, its residents might well have heard it - perhaps even waking an infant Geoffrey Arnold Beck from his slumber in the back bedroom at No. 206.

The son of Arnold and Ethel Beck, Geoffrey - or 'Jeff' as he came to be known - was born on June 24, 1944, a war baby who would have to grow used to such nocturnal intrusions for some months to come. By no means affluent, Jeff's parents were still reasonably comfortable in terms of wealth and status for the time, his father working as an accountant while his mother secured a part-time job in a local chocolate factory after hostilities ceased. Jeff was not the first addition to the Beck family, his sister Annetta arriving four years before him and throwing down quite the challenge for her younger sibling to follow as she showed a natural flair for horse-riding, languages, art and music: "My sister," he later said, "is a genius."

As evidenced, the circumstances Jeff grew up in were secure enough, though surely still marked by events of 1939-45. While fish and chips constituted

a weekly treat for most British families, rationing ensured children did not get their grubby hands on a full complement of sweets, biscuits and chocolate until early 1953. They would have to wait at least another year until restrictions governing meat were finally lifted. Perhaps more distressingly, remnants of conflict were littered throughout Wallington's streets and fields. In Beddington Park, the nearest open space for Jeff to play in, hundreds of metal shards continued to be dug up by locals, these dangerous chunks dropped by German planes in an effort to confuse radar outposts as they began their bombing runs on Croydon Airport. Holes in the road, iron spikes in the grass, nearby buildings on the verge of collapse and small portions on the plate - Wallington was part of a scarred, fractured nation, slowly emerging from post-war torpor. No great time to be young, even for one who had experienced nothing else.

Faced with such external uncertainties, Jeff's early world was understandably sheltered, somewhat insular and one he would later refer to as "Net curtain land". Like those around them, the Beck family lived quietly in a 'three up, two down' semi-detached house, a wooden garage at the back used mainly for storage with a small, shared driveway marking the boundary of where their house stopped and their neighbours' began. Space was tight, if not restrictively so, and there was always plenty of room for Arnold Beck to park his car, a rare enough thing in the 1940s: "Yeah, there was a car outside," Jeff remembered, "but it was in danger of being swept away from the oil leaking from underneath." In the living room, taking pride of place was Ethel Beck's piano, a baby grand from which she stole back the odd classical melody learned in her youth: "My mum played beautifully," Jeff later told *Guitarist*, "She was busy bringing my sister and me up, so her playing suffered a bit. But I used to love to listen to her play."

With Annetta already showing real promise on the instrument, it was perhaps inevitable that he too would be forced into lessons at an early age. Despite the best efforts of his teacher, Jeff's response to the piano was lukewarm at best, a boy reluctantly skipping over the odd scale or teasing out a melody or two when prodded or pushed, yet more content to stick his head under its lid and pluck the strings when left to his own devices: "Actually, I'd skip lessons, buy model airplanes with the money and mark my own book in an effort to fool my mother." Having amassed enough cash to purchase all the Airfix toys he wanted, Jeff's solution to ending his weekly torture tutorials was novel to say the least: "I tore one of the black keys off. My mother then got the idea then that I wasn't too keen on it."

In fact, the piano was not the first instrument that Jeff had turned his attention to, having already attempted to master violin following a chance encounter with a mysterious box at his eccentric uncle's house: "[When I was] eight years old, I found my uncle's violins," Beck confirmed. "I looked in a box he'd told me never to look in and there were six in there. And he caught me, and said 'If

I ever catch you doing that again...' He gave me a bit of a slap, and then said 'Well, do you want to learn to play violin then?'" But like the piano, Beck showed no great affinity with the instrument, his uncle's patience snapping before Jeff could do the same thing to the strings: "Learning violin was murder. I was so poisonous on it and my uncle would snatch it away. I don't think he could bear me playing it. [The violin's] the most torturous instrument in the wrong hands." A brief attempt to redirect the young Beck towards the cello met with a similar fate: "I started plucking it because I couldn't get on with bowing and he just stopped me and said, 'Get out'. No patience at all." Evidently, having to sound notes with a bow rather than his fingers got in the way of all Jeff's fun: "When you're a kid, you want to get at the strings and pull at 'em. It's a childhood thing." He would get his chance soon enough.

If Jeff's uncle was despairing of his nephew's lack of talent on violin and cello, he did provide the boy with other compensations: "My uncle used to look after me at weekends and one of my biggest thrills was having him take me out in his open top 1947 MG (TC). I used to think this was the coolest thing, and he used to open it up on some of the open roads, getting it up to 75 mph. Now my dad's car couldn't even get up to 45 mph, so this was just... I hadn't witnessed anything like it." With its distinctive radiators, sweeping arches and wire wheels, the TC Midget was Jeff's first real exposure to a classic sports car and he was hooked. When the family missed seeing Queen Elizabeth II's coronation on 24 March, 1953, Jeff used his father's sense of guilt to canny advantage, begging him for a copy of *Hot Rod And Custom* to make up for losing out on the sight of all those gaudy carriages, bearskin hats and waving monarchs. The same night, Beck's bedroom wall was newly festooned with photos of hooped up Ford Model A, Bs and Ts. A lifelong love affair with chrome engines, sleek angles and burning rubber had begun.

In perhaps a final attempt to divert Jeff's attention back to more worthy pursuits than stealing money for car magazines and following his "pipe smoking, celibate, violin-playing mechanic" uncle around the garage at weekends, Ethel Beck enrolled her son in the local church choir. Strangely, she seemed to dislike the results of this latest experiment as much as he did, and Jeff's dalliance with morning praise ended almost as quickly as it had begun. Singing hymns about God was duly replaced with a snare drum and set of brushes, so that the ten year old could rattle along to his father's collection of Art Tatum and Fats Waller records, a discipline in which he soon became reasonably proficient: "I [instinctively] knew what the drummer was doing and practised and practised until you couldn't really tell that I was playing along with it." Unlike Arnold Beck, however, Jeff's uncle had little truck with jazz music and hated blues even more, snapping off his car radio when its emotionally charged, evocatively driven sounds crossed the airwaves: "I heard [blues] for the first time and I was transfixed," Jeff later confirmed, "but he immediately turned it off." The next time the boy visited, the radio had been flung in the dustbin. No explanation was forthcoming.

As evidenced, the first decade of Jeff Beck's life in post-war Wallington had been fairly emblematic of the time, a childhood populated with rare treats here and there, with several curiosities allowed to develop into abiding interests. It was quiet but comfortable enough, built on stumbling music lessons, model aircraft, pictures of hot rods and endless games of chess, another hobby that Jeff showed genuine interest in and a level of proficiency well beyond his years. But all this was thrown into serious doubt on November 2, 1955 when Jeff was hit by a car while riding his racing bicycle near the family home: "I was run over and suffered a massive fracture to the back of my head." Pinned to a wall on impact, Beck's injuries were substantial enough to take him out of school for some weeks while he recovered.

The accident could not have come at a worse moment, with Jeff having recently transferred from a small, privately educated faculty to the much bigger and state-funded grounds of Sutton East County Secondary Modern School - where making the right friends quickly was as critical as exhibiting strong academic promise with teachers. Plagued by headaches as a result of his fractured skull, Beck became easily distracted and prone to mood swings - two maladies that would pursue him with some vigour into adult life. The injury also changed the nature of his engagement with formal education, making Jeff doubt the logic, value and worth of his new surroundings: "When I was in the classroom, I wanted to be outside," he later told *Mojo*. "I felt resentment... about being forced by the government into a room full of people I didn't like. But there was just no alternative. To be honest, I found it difficult to get back to normal after that, [though] I think I grew into a strong enough character to resist it." Feeling trapped inside his swollen head, and not much liking what he saw outside of it, it was perhaps unsurprising that Beck turned his attention towards the one thing that had always fascinated him more than models, cars, pianos or chess: the sound of guitars.

While Jeff had loved to listen to his mother tinkling the ivories, or bash along enthusiastically to his father's Art Tatum 78s, such feelings paled into insignificance when it came to the sense of wonder he felt when hearing six strings. It was all music of course, and as such one clear path to one tantalising goal, but something about "the wire and the wood" just did for young Jeff Beck. The signs and augurs had been there for years. As a six year old, he had become temporarily obsessed with a Zither belonging to "a neighbour, next door but one", stroking it tentatively when he felt all adult eyes were looking in another direction. Then there was the failed experiment with the violin, the frustration of having to bow notes rather than sound them with his fingers apparent to both himself and his impatient uncle. The cello was still only a miserable compromise: the boy liked its low, mournful tones, but again preferred plucking the thing like an upright bass rather than drawing a French bow across its strings. Though much better and certainly more immediate, the drums provided only partial succour. Good to hit, yes, even better when used to establish a



rhythm, or impress his father. But drums didn't really provide a tune, and as time would come to show, Jeff loved nothing better than a tune - even if he also loved to occasionally mangle it a bit.

Away from the piano that dominated the Beck household, there was another music generator in the same room that had a profound effect on Jeff's decision to gravitate towards the guitar. "The radio," he confirmed, "was like a surrogate nanny to me." By all accounts as central a feature as Ethel Beck's baby grand, the radio was nearly always turned on when the family were home, a habit established during the war years when government announcements regarding allied progress were many and still diligently adhered to during peacetime. As Jeff was too young to wander the streets with friends, the radio acted as a cheap and cheerful conduit to other more, exotic worlds, and as crucially, it allowed him to hear what probably sounded like an alien invasion in the early 1950s: "I couldn't believe it when I first heard Les Paul," he remembered. "He played so many notes. It was a sound that was new, unlike anything before it."

Part comedian, part genius, Les Paul was America's first true 'stunt guitarist', a fact driven home by the early fifties hits 'How High The Moon', 'Bye Bye Blues' and 'Tiger Rag' he shared with his wife, Mary Ford. A jazz and country player who pioneered the development of electric guitar in the forties, Paul had also been key to the progress of recording methods such as overdubbing, phasing, multi-tracking and other tape effects. Blessed with an inventive, good-humoured technique that included slurs, trills and 'chicken rolls' as well as an extensive chord vocabulary, Les would think nothing of speeding up the reels or piling 'sound on sound' to create his orchestra of mad guitars. By 1952, he also had his own signature model, having worked alongside Gibson to create one of the first production line electric instruments of its kind - a woman-shaped, carved-topped wonder called the Les Paul 'Goldtop'.

"He was the first guy who came out with the really fast, trebly guitar, that slap back echo. Nobody did that before him," said Jeff. "He had some trouble with the press saying it was all tricks, and to some extent it was, but it was also spectacular." The 'trick bag' element of Les Paul's playing was a point not lost on Jeff's parents, who were keen to reinforce the fact that this was not proper music, but little more than audio manipulation. But Beck was smitten by Paul's spark-flying style and would not be deterred. "When you parents try and stop you," he said, "you end up doing it more." In an effort to replicate Les' sonic experiments, Jeff took to building his own demon machine: "It was basically a cigar box with a big, thick rubber band. But I never forgot the thrill of changing the pitch by stretching the band." From little acorns...

After repeatedly petitioning his mother and father for a guitar without success, circumstances finally conspired to provide Beck with the object of his desire. "I had a friend with a TV set and I used to go round to his place on a Friday

afternoon to watch *Popeye*. There on the sofa was a black 'cowboy' guitar... but it didn't have all the strings on it," he later recalled. "And each time I visited him there were less strings on it, so I began to understand he didn't really care about it. When it got down to two strings, he said, 'Do you want to borrow it?' So I took it and he never got it back." Several decades later, Jeff's memory of liberating the instrument from its uncaring owner was still strong. "I remember carrying it home in the rain," he told *Guitarist's* Jamie Crompton in 2009, "and taking off my coat to protect it. Right there and then, I had a protective thing to the guitar." According to Beck, it really was love at first strum. "When I first picked up that guitar, I thought this was the instrument that was made for me."

As the guitar was missing several strings, and Jeff's parents were unwilling to take the chance of buying a new set for what might turn out to be yet another whim, Beck was forced to improvise. His solution was to use control line wire from his model airplane collection to plug the missing gaps. This was hardly ideal, as unlike a properly gauged set of guitar strings, the control wire was all of one thickness. But given that Jeff didn't know any better at the time, it worked well enough. With everything, albeit oddly, in place, he set about learning his first melody, Anton Karas' zithering 'Harry Lime Theme' from the 1949 film, *The Third Man*.

In an effort to steer their son on the right path, Beck's mother and father began dropping heavy hints as to what they considered "suitable influences". An avid fan of classical music, Ethel Beck tried to focus her son's attentions towards Spanish guitar, pointing to the likes of Segovia as a fine potential role model. The jazz-loving Arnold Beck, on the other hand, was keen to push Django Reinhardt as someone Jeff might care to emulate, the Gypsy guitarist's magnificent, quicksilver runs with 'The Hot Club' in the twenties and thirties often imitated but never bettered: "My dad would say 'This guy can really play guitar, forget all the others'," said Jeff, "so naturally I ignored him." What Beck wouldn't, simply couldn't ignore was the call of rock'n'roll. Sweeping across the Atlantic in an ever-building series of immaculately pompadoured waves, American rock'n'roll would eventually engulf the British Isles with a force and intensity that has virtually been unrivalled ever since. A mystical hybrid of blues, gospel, country, hillbilly and rockabilly styles aligned to an infectious 'boogie-woogie' backbeat, rock'n'roll was music you could dance, rebel and make love to, its impact on popular culture still resonating even now.

The first splashes of rock'n'roll made their way to the UK in January 1956 with Bill Haley & The Comets' 'Rock Around The Clock', a single that topped the charts and created an immediate dance hall craze. 'Rock Around The Clock' was certainly not the first rock'n'roll single (the other, decades-spanning candidates are simply too numerous to name here), and the cowlick-haired Haley was nearly 30 years old when he recorded it. But 'Rock Around The Clock's 12-bar, jumped up

blues construction, endlessly repetitive, yet infuriatingly catchy chorus and driving, insistent rhythm was enough to ignite the emotions of a nation's youth still used to twirling around ballroom floors to the sounds of crooners like Al Martino, Frankie Laine and Perry Como. As the authorities wept at the vulgarity of it all - pointing to the music's resolutely "black roots" and the fact that such "jungle beats" might incite riots and sex parties outside parliament - England's previously germ-free adolescents simply greased back their hair, donned draped or leather jackets, and in simpatico with their American counterparts, got on with inventing the 'Teenager'.

As ever, the UK soon put its own particular, artful spin on things. While gangs of 'Teddy Boys' manifested on every street corner, happily scaring grannies with their combination of Marlon Brando/James Dean sneers, "Day-Glo socks and Brothel Creepers", Lonnie Donegan was busy introducing 'skiffle' to everyone else. The punk of its time, skiffle required only the most basic of musical tools to make its point: a wildly strummed acoustic guitar, well-scrubbed washboard and 'bass' constructed from bits of string and a tea chest, Skiffle's sparse melding of Appalachian mountain song and Leadbelly-style country/jug blues was easy to play and easier to hum along to. With Donegan's skittering 'Rock Island Line' dominating the radio throughout 1956, and scores of would-be teenage skiffle groups forming in every living room (much to the general delight of their bemused parents), it appeared that the advance of rock'n'roll might actually be derailed by the sound of a tea chest.

Then came Elvis Presley. Metaphorically swivelling his hips across the ocean from Memphis, Tennessee in a perfectly cut pink jacket and well-heeled pair of blue suede shoes, Elvis was young, electrically handsome and possessed of "a black man's voice in a white man's body". Though more strictly 'rockabilly' than 'rock'n'roll', Presley re-ignited the UK's love affair with "rebel hellcat music," he and his band's fusion of raw blues beats and country honk pushing them into the UK singles chart over a dozen times in 1957 alone. The door now truly blown off its hinges, a second wave of US performers that included Eddie Cochran, Carl Perkins and new black superstars such as Chuck Berry and Little Richard were free to flood British airwaves, their supercharged approach to rock'n'roll delighting the young and scaring the old. For a generation that had known only ration books, petrol sanctions and the anodyne pleasures of the Mantovani Orchestra, this was all something worth getting excited about - the first time in their young lives that the words 'I thought we'd won' might be forever discarded in favour of bold new frontiers.

Jeff Beck's personal call to arms came neither from Elvis Presley nor Bill Haley, but Gene Vincent & The Blue Caps. Without a television in their house, Jeff had heard and loved both Presley and Haley on the radio, but unlike most British kids hadn't actually witnessed the miracle of rock'n'roll for himself. "I used to hear what Elvis looked like from friends at school." All that changed with a trip to the cinema in the late spring of 1957, when Beck's mother took to him to a screening of

*The Girl Can't Help It*. "Imagine coming out of school at four o'clock, and by six o'clock there's your Technicolor dreams on screen. It was unbelievable." A slight comedy starring Tom Ewell and then 'It Girl' of the moment, the pulchritudinous Jayne Mansfield, one might have thought that the teenage Jeff's hormones had been inflamed by Mansfield's more outstanding talents in *The Girl Can't Help It*. In light of later escapades, they probably were. Yet, it was the movie's musical cameos by Little Richard, Eddie Cochran, and in particular, Gene Vincent and his Blue Caps that set fire to Jeff's head. "Gene Vincent's voice was so animal like, he was screaming like the heavy metal kids today," he later confirmed. "It was street rock'n'roll... one electric guitar, an acoustic rhythm guitar, drums and an upright bass."

Once Beck had got past the primal roar of Vincent singing the immortal 'Be-Bop-A-Lula', his attention began to fixate on the sound of the guitar behind the voice. "The singing was so high... like manic breathing, like some sort of psychopath singing in the highest register he could get. Then the guitar took two screaming solos. I just thought 'This is where I belong...'" As Jeff was soon to discover, the "screaming" six strings backing Vincent belonged to Cliff Gallup. "Cliff Gallup. Oh God. Wild ridiculous runs. It was like listening to the future." In fact, by the time Jeff saw *The Girl Can't Help It*, Gallup was long gone. A 26-year old married man with no real interest in touring, Cliff had ceded his position in The Blue Caps to lead guitarist Johnny Meeks soon after 'Be Bop...'s initial success; more happy to stay at home and work as a plumber than hit the road with the wild, bottle-swilling and totally unpredictable Vincent. But before making his decision to leave, Gallup had cut 35 tracks with the singer and Beck was determined to unearth each and every one. "I knew then that I wanted to play the lead guitar breaks... the fiery stuff, like Cliff Gallup. I knew I didn't just want to be a strummer."

His mission now clear, Jeff pursued guitar playing with a new vigour and determination, excitement falling away to obsession, and fingers left bleeding as a result. In short, it was time to get serious. Like a prospector panning for gold, Beck raided his older sister's record collection for all the golden nuggets he could find, to analyse and emulate on his own wonky set of strings. Though Annetta expressively forbid such lightning raids on her room - always checking for Jeff's telltale thumbprints on singles - he still managed to unearth the goods wherever she hid them. A priceless copy of Elvis' 'Heartbreak Hotel' here, a rare 78 of Eddie Cochran's '20 Flight Rock' there, Beck found the lot. And when he couldn't find what he was looking for at home, there was always Croydon's Record Rendezvous, where the mock-respectful teenager would persuade the headmasterly owner to play copies of Little Richard's 'Lucille', Roy Orbison's 'Go Go Go (Down The Line)' and Jerry Lee Lewis' 'Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On' while he stood transfixed at the listening post. At night, it was back to the radio, where Beck would attune his ears to the static-laden magic of Radio Luxembourg.

"Radio Luxembourg... was one of those stations that you could *just* tune into, as if it were coming from the far flung regions of Africa or something, when in fact, it was just Luxembourg," he said. "It was all so muffled and indistinct...you had to strain your ears so much to hear the guitar." But when he was just about ready to give up, Jeff would be rewarded with little droplets from heaven. "Glorious cascades of guitar notes would come out and then just fade away again. Radio Luxembourg was like tuning into God or something."

During this bout of frenzied activity, Beck decided to dispense with the services of his friend's now ailing 'Black Cowboy' and build his own guitar. In preparation for the task, he had already been busy expanding his original cigar box design: increasing the number of overall boxes, sticking an unsanded fence upright on top to act as a neck, painting the odd fret marker and putting nut and bolts where he felt the machine heads might sit. Jeff solved the string issue by simply double looping aircraft line wire for the heavier gauges. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it failed to render much of a tune. Next on the building block was an "absurdly out of proportion instrument" made from plywood that weighed a ton, had a neck the length of a football field and sported even more painted frets. Beck was prouder of this effort, and though it was still largely unplayable, he liked to place it on a chair and just look at it. Sadly, his father was less given to 'The Plywood Sports Model' and after an argument with his son, threw it in the garden. "The joints let go and the top of the body just went like two pancakes. That was the end of that."

For effort number three, Jeff enlisted help: "Next door to my bike-racing buddy's house, I heard the sound of a guy sawing in his workshop," he confirmed. "My friend said 'That's Jack, he can make anything'. So I went to see him and got him to make me a guitar." The design shape Beck provided his potential saviour with was that of a Fender Stratocaster, a "thing" Jeff had first seen being wielded by Buddy Holly as he sang 'That'll Be The Day', another slice of early rock n' roll genius that dumbfounded the teenager when he heard it. "When I saw Buddy Holly, I wanted a Strat." Alongside the Gibson Les Paul Goldtop and later 'Custom' models, the Fender Stratocaster was destined to become one of the most famous, genuinely beautiful and eminently playable guitars of all time. Designed by Leo Fender, Freddie Tavares and George Fullerton in 1954, its double-cutaway body, extended top horn, sleek contours and revolutionary tremolo arm made it appear like something out of a science fiction movie - an American guitar truly made for the dawn of the nuclear age.

Unfortunately there were no Fender Stratocasters in England at the time, and even if there were, neither Beck nor his parents could afford one. He was therefore only able to provide roughly drawn pictures, or at best photographs torn from a Fender guitar catalogue as a template for the mysterious Jack to work from. The end result proved predictably monstrous, but surprisingly pretty: "We knew they had to be solid. No guitar could be that thin and be hollow. So I rounded

up (Jack) with a band saw... to cut this piece of wood. I can't tell you what a funny shape it came out. The neck was four times too long, but it was a good bedroom mirror guitar. I had it sprayed yellow." As Beck's co-designer had furnished the instrument with "about four hundred frets", Jeff finished the job himself during woodwork class. But being no luthier, 'pinpoint accuracy' and 'scientific measurement' eluded him. "We found out about fretting scales and stuff, [but I] had to scale up from photographs off albums, or just guess. The annoying part was you'd pick up a piece of crap guitar in a shop - like a five quid acoustic - and it still felt better than [the] home-made one." After several botched attempts to 'guesstimate' the correct fret dimensions, Jeff finally had something that resembled a working model, even if "the scale was so bad, it was only playable with a capo at the fifth fret". With true serendipity, Beck was forced to constantly bend strings to pitch - inadvertently creating one of the strangest, beguiling and soon-to-be most copied techniques in the history of rock.

The second but last piece of the puzzle was to animate Jeff's 'Frankenstein's Monster' by making it into a true 'electric' guitar. "You know, I didn't really know what an electric guitar was," he later laughed. "I thought 'electric' meant steam irons and cookers." To effectively emulate the sounds of his new heroes, Jeff had to dispense with any notions of running on just acoustic power and equip his instrument with a 'pick-up'. Essentially a transducer device that captured the vibration of a string and then converted it to an electrical signal that in turn could be amplified or recorded, pick-ups had first surfaced in the thirties. Then appearing as little more than horseshoe magnets that arched over the strings of guitars such as the Rickenbacker A-22 'Frying Pan', the pick-up's progress was shunted into a different and altogether more important place when the peerless Charlie Christian began using a Gibson ES-150 with the Benny Goodman Orchestra in 1939. Instead of the pick-up being located above the string, Gibson had moved it below "the resonating wires" and into the body of the guitar itself, an elegant and revolutionary solution that allowed an amplified Christian to make himself heard above all the woodwind, drums and brass. With just one flick of the proverbial switch, Charlie was now as much a lead instrument as the trumpet, saxophone or piano, a fact he took full and spectacular advantage of until his untimely death in 1942.

A precedent set, Gibson, Fender, and indeed, many other guitar manufacturers such as Gretsch were soon at the forefront of 'electrified' sound - with mass-production line Les Pauls, ES-335s, Strats, Telecasters and Duo-Jets (both of which will be returned to in due course) soon making their way into the hands of blues and rock'n'roll artists like Muddy Waters, Chuck Berry, Buddy Holly and Cliff Gallup. In such hands, and with the right amplification, the guitar could now be as caressing as a lover or as slippery as a snake, a six-stringed machine capable of seemingly endless tones and only limited by the capabilities of its user.

Of course, the teenaged Beck wasn't quite cognisant of all this as yet. He simply wanted a pick-up. Sadly, as with most things in Jeff's life, his parents were unable (or as likely, unwilling) to provide him with the money for it. Taking the view 'Needs must when the Devil drives', he just walked into a music shop and stole one: "I really couldn't have cared if I got thrown in jail. I had to have my pick-up." Screwing it into place in the hole he had already burrowed into his makeshift guitar, there was now only one thing stopping him from realising his true vocation in life. "When you had the pick-up, you had to have the amplifier."

For Beck, that meant returning to school. Forsaking woodwork class this time for the Science department, he set about building a veritable monolith to technology - constructing a mammoth 15ft by 1ft cabinet crammed with an Axiom 300 speaker and driven by ten watts of power: "It took over the entire house." One can only wonder how Jeff got it home. In honour of his heroes Paul and Gallup, Beck set the treble at maximum and dug in as hard as he could: "I think my mum started to realise there was *something* there, even if the noise was unbearable," he later said. "But it was still a guitar. When you want your son to play piano and impress all your neighbours with Rachmaninov and all you got was Chuck Berry, well..." Impressed by his drive, but driven mad by the noise, Jeff's parents consigned the amplifier to the garage and asked their son to plug into the back of the radio instead. Initially reluctant to compromise, Beck soon realised there was one redeeming feature to the new arrangement: "Well, I could hear myself on the radio." The next step was to hear himself in the concert hall.

Before that, however, Jeff got to see at close quarters what rock'n'roll looked, sounded, and in all probability, smelled like when he attended a Buddy Holly And The Crickets concert at Croydon's Davis Theatre on March 12, 1958. Already a huge fan of the bespectacled singer/guitarist, Beck reportedly didn't sleep the night before the gig, the excitement of actually seeing one of his idols in the flesh proving all too much for his young brain to cope with. The teenager's first concert was a then typical showbiz affair, with Holly supported by an all-round entertainment package that included the on-the-rise crooner Gary Miller alongside singing hoofers of "Stage, radio and recording fame" The Tanner Sisters. Providing compare duties and "Comedy with the modern style" was a young Des O'Connor, his effervescent smile, perma-tan and wobbly way with a ballad as yet unknown to the TV audiences he would duly terrorise in coming decades.

Given that his Davis Theatre appearance was the twelfth night of a 25-date, 'two shows an evening' UK tour with no breaks in schedule, Buddy Holly was probably already tired when he hit the stage, but Jeff didn't notice: "He actually made the effort of coming over to England, to Croydon in the fifties to play for us," he remembered. "When I saw him live, it was the best thing [I'd] ever seen." Wielding a pristine Sunburst Fender Stratocaster, Holly gave Beck his first opportunity to see what the guitar of his dreams could do in the right hands: "On

'That'll Be The Day', it was just 'Oh God'. I never heard another Strat tone like it. He must have been an electrician or something." Duly inspired by Buddy Holly & The Crickets, Jeff re-doubled his efforts on guitar, now determined to learn every chord, slur, double stop and dragged rhythm rock'n'roll had to offer.

The Great British public didn't have long to wait before they could see Beck's progress, the 14-year old making his own performing debut at Carshalton Hall & Youth Centre in May 1958. Exhibiting early signs of the behaviour that would come to define his approach to such engagements, Jeff had resolutely refused to appear on a float as part of the town parade. Instead, he only agreed to appear in front of a captive, indoor audience. Armed with his homemade Strat and a small amp, Beck was accompanied on stage by a six feet, three inch duffle-coat wearing art student who had reluctantly consented to play bass - or more specifically, plucked upright cello: "It looked ridiculous. I kept saying 'Put it on the chair, put it on a chair!'" In the end, the mismatched duo managed to get through half a song (probably 'Be-Bop-A-Lula') before pleading "technical problems" and fleeing to the wings. Astoundingly, their short brush with fame got a positive review in the local paper, though 'Jack the wood-cutter' turned up after the gig demanding the £5 he was still owed for building Jeff's guitar: "He made a complete twat out of me by telling everyone I hadn't paid him for it," said Beck. "I'd just been the belle of the ball, and he said 'Right, I'm going to tell you about your mate Jeff, you owe me £5, you cheapskate bastard!' I thought 'Right, for that, you won't get your money!'" As much as he fought hard against it in subsequent years, the tragic-comic conclusion to Beck's first gig was indicative of things to come, with every step taken towards victory just as likely to end in defeat or downright farce. Then as now, it remains an essential part of his appeal.

Back in 1958, however, all was seriousness. Despite not yet acquiring a proper guitar with which to practice, Beck was intent on mastering the instrument, even consenting to his parent's wishes that he take lessons with a Spanish Guitar tutor. It did not go well: "The teacher played acoustic. I wanted to play electric. He told me I was wasting my time. No meeting of minds there. I just said 'Bye...'" Instead, Jeff continued to do his own detective work, a process he referred to as, "Drilling for oil. It became my life quest to find out who made those noises, who recorded them, and how they did it." For Beck, the more he investigated, the more he wanted to know. In Cliff Gallup's case, it might have begun with mimicking the sly twang of 'Be-Bop-A-Lula', but soon moved onto learning about Gretsch Duo Jets, Bigsby tremolo arms, flat wound strings, Fender Tweed and Standell amps and lashings of spring reverb. He also wanted to learn the source of Gallup's inspiration, where the jazz had come from, how he imitated pedal steels or skittered across the neck country-style on tracks like 'Blue Jean Bop' and 'Race With The Devil'.

While looking for such clues, Jeff found Chet Atkins, one of Nashville's most influential country/jazz pickers and a major influence on the likes of Gallup and Les



Paul: "If you listen to Chet, and put a more abrasive edge on his playing, you've got rockabilly," Beck later said. "I used to sit there and wonder how the hell one guy did all that. It was a great blackboard when you start learning how to pick." Atkins' technique - which in itself was based on another country great, Merle Travis - involved using the thumb and up to three fingers of his right hand to play simultaneous bass lines, chords and solo melodies. Obsessed with getting it right, Beck started work on supposedly simpler picking patterns such as 'Windy And Warm' and 'Trambone', only to find they weren't simple at all: "The whole bass, rhythm, lead thing was daunting. [It's the] interaction of the fingers and the brain... everything's accurate, nothing's thrown away."

Having made a major breakthrough with the discovery of Atkins Jeff now widened his net, taking in the work of sailor, boxer and pioneering rockabilly guitarist Paul Burlinson, who as a founding member of Johnny Burnette's Rock & Roll Trio had gifted the world with 'Train Kept A Rollin' and 'Honey Hush'. An early advocate of the one pick-up Fender Esquire (which Jeff would grow exceedingly familiar with in due course), Burlinson's fizzy tone had reportedly come about when he dropped his amp and a tube came loose - thus creating one of the first examples of 'distortion' on 1956's 'Tear It Up' and the following year's 'Rock Billy Boogie'. From there, it was a case of swimming backwards and forwards to find the likes of Johnny Carroll & The Hot Rocks' 'Hot Rocks', Jim Flaherty's Caravan-rocking 'Real Gone Daddy' and Art Adams' 'Dancing Doll': "If you listen to a million rockabilly records," he said, "they're not worth a toss lyrically or compositionally, but the sound [was] just fantastic." Ever the student, Beck's next lesson came from listening to James Burton's seminal 45s with teen-idol Ricky Nelson. Using super-light strings, with the high B and E stolen from a banjo, Burton not only emulated steel guitar bends but skipped around the scales at lightning speed. As fascinated by the Telecaster-wielding Louisiana boy as he was with Cliff Gallup, Jeff's first properly learned solos were Burton's heart-stopping passes on 'Hey Babe' and 'It's Late'. "Burton," said Jeff with some understatement, "was incredible".

From Merle Travis-style claw hammer picking to false harmonics and faux-steel guitar bends, it was all grist for the mill to Jeff Beck, his ever-adapting style pulling in ideas from rockabilly, country, jazz and just about everything else. In fact, the only thing he seemed unconcerned about at the time was emulating the King of rock'n'roll himself: "I wasn't really interested in that Elvis, 'swivelling hips' kind of thing. All I wanted to hear was guitar." Still trying to save up the money for a real instrument, Beck had to content himself with peering through the windows of central London music stores to feed his addiction: "I saw the light by staring in the window through a quarter inch of glass of Jennings on Charing Cross Road, looking longingly at guitars I couldn't afford. Me, separated from them by only a quarter inch of glass. Then, I slowly summoned up the courage to ask to try out those guitars, and after a respectable amount of time, go back to those guitar

shops, hoping that the staff had forgotten you so that you could try out those guitars again. They knew we didn't have the money, but they let us have a go anyway. Well, actually we got banned a couple of times, but it turned out all right."

For Jeff, the longing sometimes got so much, he literally lost his marbles: "When you're a kid of 14 and you see a piece of equipment that you dream about touching, never mind owning... well, I went into a trance [and] got the wrong bus home, it just blew my brains apart. It hasn't been any different since, really." Seeking consolation, Beck would often raid the likes of Jennings and Lew Davidson's stores for the latest Fender and Gibson promotional booklets, salivating over images of the Strats, Teles and Les Pauls he simply could not own: "It was guitar porn, simple as that."

A confirmed 'teenage hot rod nut' who by now sported a quiff, white T-shirt and jeans, and rode around Wallington on a racing bike with his beloved yellow guitar strapped to his back so that everyone could see it, Beck must have been quite the prize for his parents: "Yeah, I remember my mum took to me to the cinema when I was about 12 for a nice afternoon out. It was the worst thing she ever did. The 'B' feature was called *Hot Rod Gang*, and she tried to drag me out of the theatre when it came on. The opening sequence showed Deuce Roadsters racing down the pavement on both sidewalks, and she said, 'This is for hooligans, you can't have anything to do with it.' So I crept back and watched it on my own. [Another] film that changed my life."\*

Though Jeff was doing reasonably well at school, his progressive mania concerning guitars and rods was still a worry for the Becks, with their son's class books and bedroom walls festooned with pictures of modified Ford Model Ts and white, red and sunburst Strats. At the age of ten, he had been a model student and keen chess player, whose worse excesses ran to breaking piano keys. Yet, by 15 he appeared for all intents and purposes like Wallington's answer to James Dean, but with six strings and a spanner in his back pocket. Slowly but surely, Jeff Beck had shed his childhood skin to become a professional rebel who harboured tantalising dreams of also becoming a professional rock'n'roll guitarist.

His world then, must surely been knocked off its axis when, in Beck's own words, "The lights went out." After near five years of unrivalled domination, rock'n'roll and the change in culture it brought seemed to be falling into rapid, inexorable decline. In truth, it had been fighting a rearguard action for some while. In October 1957, for instance, Little Richard found God while on a flight over Australia, and renounced his previously evil ways to become a lay preacher. Worse, Jerry Lee Lewis had married his 13-year-old cousin, Myra Gale Brown on December 12 of the same year, an act apparently reasonable in Ferriday, Louisiana, but not

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\* The movie's name was actually changed to *Fury Unleashed* in Croydon because of worries of violence.

one prying English journalists were likely to view with the same positive spin. Barraged with an unending stream of negative press while on tour in the UK, Lewis' musical career was all but shot to pieces as a result. Tragically, just eleven months after Jeff had shouted his approval at Buddy Holly from the foot of a stage in Croydon, the charismatic singer/guitarist was killed in a plane crash with fellow rockers The Big Bopper and Ritchie Valens, making February 3, 1959 one of the worst days in Beck's young life. Even Elvis had left the building, having been inducted into the army on March 24, 1958 with no way out until March 2, 1960. When Chuck Berry was arrested under the Mann Act for transporting a 14-year old waitress across US state lines in December 1959, one could almost sense the buzzards descending. "I reckon on December 31, 1959, somebody pulled the big 'Off switch' for rock'n'roll," said Jeff. "A certain section of it died right there. 'The Twist' completely broke my heart. I hated it."

When Chubby Checker's catchy but puerile 'The Twist' introduced a new, parentally approved set of dance steps for the UK's youth to follow in the summer of 1960, rock'n'roll suddenly seemed as passé as Doris Day's 'Que Sera Sera' or Frank Sinatra's 'Three Coins In The Fountain', a fad whose days were not only numbered, but rubber stamped 'Dead': "It just got extinguished," Beck confirmed to *Guitarist*. "Everything started to turn around, and for bands in [the UK], all that kind of 'Be-Bop-A-Lula' stuff just wasn't worth pursuing. Things were running at a million miles an hour and radical changes were being made."

In general, this was a terrible time for Jeff Beck. Now 16-years-old, and committed to rock'n'roll, cars and guitars as if his life depended on it, the rug was in imminent danger of being pulled from beneath his feet, leaving him to face an uncertain future, and worse still, the prospect of a proper job.

It was time to get busy.

## Chapter 2

### Two Big Fish, One Small Pond

If rock'n'roll had been pronounced dead at the end of 1959, nobody was brave enough to tell the corpse, which continued to twitch away in semi-animated fashion throughout the spring and summer of 1960. In the UK, this amounted to a couple of fine singles, including the glacial thrills of Johnny Kidd & The Pirates' chart-topping 'Shakin' All Over' and the B-side of Vince Taylor's 'Pledging My Love', the marvellous 'Brand New Cadillac', which continued to pick up some airplay at the time. But in comparison to just two years before when Elvis' 'Jailhouse Rock' and Jerry Lee Lewis' 'Great Balls Of Fire' traded number one spots in consecutive weeks, it was small beer.

Even Cliff Richard, once touted as England's answer to Elvis Presley with his scorching debut 45 'Move It' had given up the ghost, now more content to sing about 'Livin' Doll's over a somnambulant musical background than burn up the floor in his brothel creepers. The same was almost true of Richard's backing group, The Shadows. Led by the highly esteemed and hugely influential British guitarist Hank B. Marvin and his partner in rhythm Bruce Welch, The Shadows had once lit a real fire behind their singer, Marvin's precise, echoing and tremolo-heavy solos issuing forth from his trademark red Stratocaster, the very first of its kind in Britain. Yet by 1960 and the group's debut instrumental 'Apache', it was all change. A beautiful, even haunting melody perhaps, but 'Apache' was light years away from the growling chug and bristling lead lines of 'Move It'.

For those like Jeff Beck, who still held out hope that rock'n'roll was simply suffering from a bout of 'flu rather than a fatal heart attack, news that Gene Vincent was to tour Great Britain in April 1960 must have been an absolute godsend. One of the 'original architects', Vincent's hell-for-leather image, bone-rattling voice and hell-raising Blue Caps had sent Beck into spasms of delight in 1957, and he was now gifted the opportunity of seeing them in his own backyard. Sadly, the group had recently disbanded, meaning that Jeff was not only denied his chance of communing with the long absent Cliff Gallup, but also his white Strat-wielding replacement, Johnny Meeks. He survived: "I was a naive, trusting kid and [Vincent] was playing with these guys who looked like they had just walked in from a bar," Beck remembered. "They were pretty good though, but when Gene appeared it was amazing. He was so menacing that you forgave him that he didn't have his own band. One always naively assumed that it was Vincent's choice not to have his band but he probably didn't have a say in it. Then, tragically, I watched [his] demise. He got overweight, lost his hair, and drank too much... typical rock'n'roll."

While Gene Vincent would soon enough descend into alcoholism, various legal battles, and an ever-dwindling career that almost saw him desert his roots in

favour of folk music, there was still enough life in the medallion-wearing, black-gloved holy terror in 1960 to give Jeff fresh hope. Having already chanced his arm in a number of local bands on the youth club circuit, Beck struck out for his first professional audition with The Bandits. An instrumental act from Hampshire who had won a contract backing various Presley and Vincent impersonators for a UK summer package tour, The Bandits had no knowledge that Jeff had changed his surname to 'Mason' for the audition. In the end, it didn't really matter. He got the job. Donning a grey suit, tie and freshly bleached pompadour, 'Mason' struck out on the road with the group - getting a real taste of driving up and down motorways in the back of a small van, and if reports are correct, witnessing a fight or two for his troubles: "We basically backed Gene-alikes."

To mark his passage from spirited amateur to semi-professional musician, Beck also got a halfway decent guitar, persuading his father to purchase a Guyatone LG-50 from Lou Davies' music shop on Charing Cross Road for the then not inconsiderable sum of £25, seven shillings and six pence: "It had purfling around the body and a maple veneer, so it wasn't such a bad old thing." Branded as an 'Antoria' in the UK, the Guyatone was a respectable enough Strat copy and regularly used by Hank Marvin in The Shadows until Cliff Richard gifted him the real thing: "The Guyatone felt great in comparison to the homemade one I'd had," said Jeff, "so it was good enough for me."

Despite earning his first real crust in a working band, Beck's tenure with The Bandits was brief. By Monday, September 19, 1960 he was once again back in full time education, having left behind the unsatisfactory experiences of Sutton East Secondary Modern for a new life as a student at Wimbledon College of Art. Then among a growing wave of teenagers seeking a career outside the more conventional perimeters of a nine-to-five existence, Jeff had enrolled on a two-year fine art course that might provide him with the skills to enter advertising, graphic or even costume design, if he so wished. But like so many of his time and mindset, Wimbledon College really represented little more for Beck than an opportunity to appease his parents while figuring out how he might find a permanent way into the music business. "If I took it seriously, I'd probably be designing cornflakes packaging now," he later confirmed. "So many English musicians came to their music by going to art school. It was an excuse not to work. You got a grant and you'd dress up in silly clothes. You didn't really have to answer to anybody, and you were part of this elite group. You could walk around with a Van Gogh under your arm and pretend you did it. A Van Gogh, some paint brushes and a Miles Davis album... those were your tools. But art school was a dead loss to me. It was just a rude awakening to all the art forms: painting, sculpture and so on. And you then realised that you didn't know anything about that, so my dedication to music took over."

What Jeff failed to make clear in his self-deprecating, though exceedingly accurate remarks about his time in the art school system was the degree of talent

he brought to Wimbledon College. By his own admission not exactly a model student while at Sutton East Secondary Modern, Beck had nevertheless shown genuine flair with both brush and pen, being one of the more promising fine art pupils in his year. But a wilful streak had frequently seen him doodling Strats and Deuce Roadsters rather than following the more stringent assignments set by his teachers. Again, Jeff's head was not set on a traditional course: "I only used to go to [art school] because they had good meals." As Beck reluctantly dragged himself out of bed five days a week to travel the six miles to Merton Hall Road for oil painting classes, he was simultaneously planning his long-term escape into stardom. That plan depended on securing the lead guitar spot with an up-and-coming local covers band, The Deltones.

Jeff's first impressions of The Deltones were both ascetically pleasing and musically sound. Having regularly seen the group's van - their proud name emblazoned on the side - parked outside various concert venues in Croydon and Wimbledon, Beck had ventured inside once or twice to actually check them out: "They had pink jackets, which I thought were great." A friend of the band's left-handed guitarist Ian (nee: Jim) Duncombe since his early teens, Jeff began to attend the odd band rehearsal at the Trojan car factory where they practised, their resultant noise neatly muffled by a nearby Tizer bottling plant and 'Power's Accounting Machines'. Aside from Duncombe, an (unknown) bassist and drummer, The Deltones also boasted a cherub-faced singer called Derek Burchell, whose name had been changed to the more pop-friendly 'Johnny Del' by the group's manager. All Tom Cruise-teeth and greased black hair, Del's image was wholly indicative of the Cliff Richard, Marty Wilde and Billy Fury school of 'Cheeky, but moody chappies' then drawing screams from schoolgirls across Britain, a fact mirrored by The Deltones' impressive drawing power in South and West London's dance halls.

Unlike Beck, The Deltones were also seasoned semi-professionals, all in their early twenties with their own self-pressed promo disc and a residency at the famed Hammersmith Palais already behind them. In Jeff's eyes, this was the big time: "Around our way, they were a hot item." His chance came when Duncombe announced to his colleagues he was moving to Germany to play nightly spots at Hamburg's Top Ten Club, leaving the position of lead guitarist potentially wide-open. Though there were real doubts that the spotty sixteen year old had either the skills or experience to fill Duncombe's place, a hastily arranged audition where Jeff unveiled his latest acquisition - a brand new red and gold Burns Vibra Artiste - and an astounding gift for mimicking Cliff Gallup put paid to all such concerns.

"That Burns [had] about six pick-ups and about a hundred knobs on it," he later said. "I never knew what any of them did." \*

In a perfect world, when The Deltones gave the thumbs-up of approval, Jeff should have simply taken the gig there and then. But he held back, only agreeing to join the group if John Owen accompanied him on rhythm guitar. The story behind Beck's stalling tactic was actually a touching one. Friends since childhood, John had often boosted Jeff's esteem during frequent periods of self doubt, persuading him to reconsider packing in the guitar in favour of drums during a particularly low period when in his early teens: "Even then, [John] believed in me." Reluctant to cut their wages five ways, but mindful of securing Beck's skills, the band agreed to his request and Owen was in.

Now officially a Deltone, Beck was introduced to life on the road with a semi-pro act. As later published photographs confirm, he took to the sartorial side of his responsibilities with real enthusiasm, dressing in a natty blue suit, white shoes and splashed blonde quiff, a pink handkerchief stuffed in his jacket pocket nicely setting off the whole ensemble. But Jeff was less enthused with the material the band had to play nightly in concert halls throughout the South East. "All the pre-59 stuff had become a bit passé and taboo, you know. It was like 'Don't touch that, it's gone.'" Instead, The Deltones' set was peppered with tearjerkers of the day, Johnny Del more likely to break hearts when singing the likes of The Everly Brothers' 'Cathy's Clown' or Elvis' '... His Latest Flame' than scaring those in attendance with Gene Vincent's 'Double Talkin' Baby'. The closest thing Beck could really get to showing off his guitar skills was throwing down a few lead lines during their cover of The Shadows' 'Apache'. "Hank Marvin tended to pick the string near the fretboard end, and that gave him a very pure, round kind of sound - that and a very clean amp [setting]," Jeff later said. "He hardly ever clanged it and I admired him. You never heard him make a fluff." But away from the moderate treats of emulating Marvin's bell-like tones, the opportunities to rock out remained few for the guitarist. "It was easy stuff that any band with some proficiency could learn in a day."

There was the odd comedic moment or two to be had among the disappointment. Though Beck was enormously fond of John Owens, he wasn't above pointing out that his friend's white Fender Telecaster was a far better instrument than the Burns "Tri Sonic" he owned - and as lead guitarist, he should really be playing it. For a while Owens agreed to swap, though when confronted with the difficulties of controlling the Burns' seemingly endless knob configurations each night, soon asked for his Telecaster to be returned. Beck was again left with a model he was growing to despise until fate intervened. "I was standing at a bus

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\* Actually the guitar in question had three pick-ups, six knobs and a vibrato arm that looked like it could cut bread, but one shouldn't quibble too much.

stop and a gust of wind from the bus knocked the case over and smashed the (Burns') toggle switch, so that was the end of that." Jeff's choice of replacement, the Futurama, at least sounded promising from the advert he saw: "Go Modern, Go Hofner 'Futurama', the world's most advanced electric guitar... microscopic tuning, a cambered fingerboard with nickel silver frets, a vibrato arm that flattens and sharpens by half a tone, and seven tone changes from three matched pick-ups, instantly selected by three simple push button controls." Sadly, the Futurama, which was made in Czechoslovakia and imported into the UK by Selmer, hence its inclusion in a Hofner catalogue, didn't quite live up to its hype. "The switches were useless," said Beck. "The vibrato arm was a disgrace to technology... it was just rigid."

Rather than murder Owens to reclaim the Telecaster, Beck went cap in hand to his mother after seeing the guitar of his dreams in the window of a West End music store: "It turned out Fender Strats weren't £1,000, but actually £147. I thought maybe if I sold everything I had, I might be able to get the money together. In the end, I got it on HP." With Ethel Beck co-guaranteeing the agreement, Jeff finally had a sunburst Fender Stratocaster of his own. "A marriage," he later remarked, "made in heaven." With the purchase of the Strat came a whole new set of challenges, not least of which was finding the cash to make the monthly repayments. Now bored beyond measure by having to drag himself out of bed after a night's gigging to attend classes he hadn't the faintest interest in, Jeff made the decision to follow the money, go for the fame and pack in art school. "The standard was so outrageously high there, it just wasn't worth staying." There was a back-up plan of sorts. "Well, I thought 'If it all goes wrong in two years, I'll go back and learn how to paint properly.'" Though his parents probably wanted to throw a bucket of water over his head, Beck left Wimbledon College on May 22, 1961 to pursue his interest in 'the alternative arts'.

Over the coming two years, he probably wished he hadn't as his new career as a musician skittered, stopped, restarted, only to stop and then start again, leading to a bewildering number of associations with bands, artists, paint shops and golf courses along the way. For Beck, it was a true introduction into the joys and perils of a life less ordinary. Within months of throwing his lot in with the local promise offered by The Deltones, the group had splintered in two with Johnny Del taking his half of the name to another West London-based act, The Crescents. Unsure of what to do, Jeff followed Del into the line-up, again scratching a living by playing soppy ballads and Shadows covers to courting couples and singletons from Heathrow to Richmond. One good thing did come out of his decision, with Beck making his recorded debut on 'Wedding Bells', an old Deltones tune The Crescents demoed and then shopped to record companies in the autumn of 1961. Though no-one bit, 'Wedding Bells' had at least one, albeit dubious fan. When Jeff



played an acetate copy to his mother, she thought the song so good, she refused to believe he had played on it.

After Beck drifted away from The Crescents (or as plausibly, the band folded in late 1961), he seemed to enter his wilderness year, with rare sightings confined to pick-up bands and favours done for old friends. During 1962 Jeff was certainly seen loitering with Brian Howard & The Silhouettes - an act put together by Brian Somerville, who Beck knew from art school days and was now trying to follow a similar path to Cliff Richard around Sutton and its surrounding areas. When this failed to work, Somerville formed the brilliantly named, but similarly doomed 'Im & The Uvvers, who again used Beck's guitar skills on an occasional basis throughout the summer of '62. Other sources have Jeff playing with Kerry Rapid's Blue Stars around the same time, though tracking his movements during this period are akin to finding Jesus when he went on a 40 day stroll around the Sinai desert.

One thing that remains certain is that Jeff was by no means a full-time musician at the time, having to earn a crust by several other means, and sometimes by any means necessary. According to Beck, his first 'proper' job was driving a tractor around a golf course, which he enjoyed principally because it left him on his own for long periods. However, it was not without its drawbacks, with Jeff having to leave home at six in the morning for a long walk to the course. When he got there, he was also in some danger of serious injury: "The [golfers] were a right bunch of snooty bastards, I can tell you that," he told *Record Collector*. "They'd shout 'Fore!' after they hit the ball and then it'd go bouncing off my tractor. Having a ball coming in from 58,000 feet, it was murder." Reluctant to be used as target practice, Beck soon left for a spell as a painter/decorator before once again gravitating towards cars and bikes. At last finding regular work with a garage near his home, he settled into a variety of vehicle-related jobs, including panel-beater and paint sprayer. "The money wasn't that bad," he said. From now on, Jeff would become renowned for turning up to gigs covered in paint, grease or worse, another endearing if somewhat messy addition to his curious legend.

By the start of 1963, building slowly on the back of the trad jazz and Leadbelly-influenced skiffle boom of the previous decade, interest in urban American blues was about to reach fever pitch in Great Britain. Since the mid-Fifties, jazz band leader and trombonist Chris Barber had been tireless in his promotion of American folk and blues forms, arranging the first UK tours of Big Bill Broonzy and Muddy Waters (even if audiences expecting to see the latter strumming a plain acoustic box top were shocked when he arrived wielding an thoroughly electrified Fender Telecaster). As the import record market continued to grow for such sounds - electric or otherwise - so did demand for home-grown alternatives. First to take up the challenge were former Barber employees Cyril Davies and Alexis Korner: The former, a pale, balding labourer's son from Buckinghamshire, who nevertheless sung and blew harp as if he was born at the

proverbial crossroads, the later a Parisian-born immigrant whose own spare gifts as a singer/guitarist did little to obscure a colossal and overwhelming love for black music. "All I ever wanted to do," Alexis once said, "was play the blues."

Together, Davies and Korner formed Blues Incorporated, "a revolving door" of a band whose various line-ups provided inspiration for a host of young disciples eager to hear the sounds of the Mississippi Delta performed on their own doorstep. Taking over a residency at London's sweaty, but seminal Marquee Club in 1962, Blues Incorporated gigs became a training ground for the likes of rising stars Long John Baldry, Graham Bond, Danny Thompson (and many others mentioned in due course throughout these pages). Always keen to nurture talent, Korner also implemented an 'open mike' policy for those souls brave enough to mount the boards backed by his ever-changing group. As a consequence, a promising slide guitarist named Brian Jones (then trading under the blues-friendly non-de-plume 'Elmo Lewis') became friends with fellow stage crashers Mick Jagger and Keith Richards, the trio soon planning a band of their very own, The Rolling Stones.

Like any burgeoning cult, the blues boomers were destined only to grow. While Korner and Davies ruled the roost at the Marquee, other venues and halls sprang up or consolidated their appeal, catering for an ever-growing audience keen to escape the insipid pop then sugar-coating Britain's radio airwaves and make the blues their own. In Richmond, Surrey for instance, the Crawdaddy Club opened for business - giving the now fully formed Rolling Stones a chance to perform their occasionally irreverent, but always furious brand of up-tempo blues and R&B covers on Sundays to packed houses. By the time the Stones broke into the UK charts with a cover of Chuck Berry's 'Come On' in the summer of 1963, giving the 'Thames Delta' its first real hit, the Crawdaddy was simply too small to house their army of fans - the band now forever lost to the club, its manager and the locals who pushed them up the hill to stardom. But as time came to show, the Crawdaddy's loss would soon be Jeff Beck's gain.

Though he was first mesmerised by the low, insistent moan of the Mississippi Delta as a nine year old when his uncle's car radio began inadvertently spilling out some still unknown melody, Beck had fought shy of exploring the blues until lent an LP by a friend named Ian Stewart. A founding member of The Rolling Stones, Stewart had lost his spot as the group's pianist on the grounds of image, his "brickie jaw and wide shoulders" deemed unsuitable and six in a group considered one too many by their newly-acquired manager, Andrew Oldham. However, 'Stu' remained within the Stones' inner circle, working onstage with the band as an 'unofficial sixth member' and offstage as their road manager.

Liking Jeff's down-to-earth attitude and mightily impressed by his playing, Stewart lent the guitarist a slew of blues albums, providing proper introductions to old school giants such as Big Bill Broonzy, Robert Johnson and a pre-electric Muddy Waters. Suffice to say, Beck devoured them all, using their example to extend his

vocabulary of licks and further inform the slide guitar technique that was to become a key component of his signature style. "It was *Folk Festival Of The Blues*," Jeff later confirmed. "I just wore out the album." A riveting live snapshot of all the Chicago blues scene had to offer, *Folk Festival...* featured cuts from the untouchable Muddy Waters, sly-sounding Sonny Boy Williamson and snake-charming Howling Wolf, as well as two tracks by Waters' 26-year-old protégé, Buddy Guy. As with Cliff Gallup, Beck was astounded by Guy's talent, his superb, imploring voice accompanied by some of the most experimental lead guitar work ever let loose on a 12-bar. "It was total, manic abandon that broke all the boundaries. Long, developing solos, just the opposite of all the pop stuff at the time."

Buddy's mastery of a Fender Stratocaster on songs such as 'Worried Blues' and 'Don't Know Which Way To Go' was a persuasive and compelling route into the blues for Beck. Crucially, it allowed him to connect the dots from fifties rock'n'roll right back to Rolling Fork, Clarksdale and Lettsworth, Louisiana, while also squaring a circle with the crisp, new soul and R&B sounds offered by Irma Thomas, Stevie Wonder, Otis Redding and Booker T & The MGs: "Steve Cropper's playing on 'Green Onions' was just exquisite."

As ever with Jeff, initial contact with something he loved led to exhaustive exploration. Though not immediately drawn to the soul-sucking, pre-war acoustic country blues of legends such as Robert Johnson, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Tampa Red and Son House (too little electricity for Beck), he did become duly obsessed with many others; the likes of Otis Rush, John Lee Hooker, and his cousin Earl Hooker all landing on Beck's turntable at some point or another. "My interest in blues," he later told journalist Tom Hibbert, "really started when the Chicago albums began to reach England. Muddy, Buddy Guy, Howlin' Wolf... there [was] a special way the guitars sounded, tinny and rough."

Another venue that did exceedingly well from its association with the British blues scene was Twickenham's Eel Pie Island. Set up by former junk-shop owner turned promoter Arthur Chisnall in 1956, Eel Pie Island was originally a down at the mouth hotel in the middle of the Thames that - under his guidance - became a home-from-home to the trad jazzers of the time. By 1963, Chisnall had turned his eccentric, but captivating club into one of the biggest draws in the South East, catering for a thousand mad-eyed blues, soul and R&B fans each weekend. Dubbed by the media a "Beatnik-infested vice den" where young men "went on the pull" and "the girls didn't seem to mind", Eel Pie Island might have been a smelly, even pungent location with a rotting dance floor that bounced like a trampoline, but it was also great fun. While Chisnall was more than happy to accommodate the likes of Acker Bilk, Cy Laurie and George Melly & The Temperance Seven, he was also quite the bluesman, booking Jesse Fuller, Howlin' Wolf and Buddy Guy to appear on Eel Pie's swaying stage - all witnessed by an enthusiastic Jeff Beck.

For The Nightshift, a group Beck helped put together with vocalist/harmonica player Brian Wiles and drummer Dave Elvidge, both the rise of Brit-blues and the flowing hundreds that crossed over Eel Pie Island's rickety, narrow bridge on a Saturday night to see it for themselves was very good news indeed. Unlike any of the acts that Jeff had previously dabbled with The Nightshift were, by all accounts, heavily influenced by the blues and R&B movement sweeping across London and the South East at the time. Though not destined to become a serious, long term proposition, The Nightshift established enough of a following to gig regularly, not only at Eel Pie but also several notable London venues, even grabbing a much coveted spot at the 100 Club on Oxford Street.

The Nightshift continued to perform on the South East concert circuit until 1965, and released two singles 'Stormy Monday'/'That's My Story' and 'Corrina, Corrina' on Piccadilly Records\*. While Beck reportedly returned to play on at least one 45 as a favour to the group, he had actually left their ranks during the autumn of 1964 [see below], with several key factors behind his move, most of which were driven by his newfound status as a married man. In something of a whirlwind romance, Jeff had married Crawley-born Patricia Brown in July 1963. A music-loving teenager like Beck, Pat was an attractive, doe-eyed girl with a mass of brown hair and a love of fashionable clothes, which she turned to her advantage by securing a job as a dressmaker. Again like Jeff, she also shared a love of animals, in particular horses and dogs, the couple's first real acquisition being a huge Afghan hound, who would bring both joy and havoc to the newlyweds in times to come.

With marriage, of course, came increased financial responsibility and Beck's regular gig with The Nightshift - while satisfying enough - simply didn't pay enough to cover the couple's rent, let alone the price of dog food. Thankfully, his increased profile on the Thames Delta meant that other job offers were coming in. A spot with future Manfred Mann bassist Tom McGuinness' then promising group The Roosters duly considered only to be turned down on grounds of cash. Elsewhere, a new relatively new band led by John Mayall called Bluesbreakers were also seeking a lead guitarist, but again, Jeff was reluctant to commit. "John Mayall phoned me up (when) I was still living with my mum," he later told journalist Douglas J Noble. "My mother said, 'This John Mayall sounds a very nice chap!' I remember being pestered by a lot of phone calls though. In the end my mother would say, 'Answer the bloody phone, we all know who it is!' It would have been a great experience but you can't be two people. Those days were really crazy, every day something new

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\* **'That's** My Story' was actually written by Tim Rice, who later found fame with Andrew Lloyd Webber as the lyricist behind the musicals *Joseph And The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita*.

would be happening." In the case of both The Roosters and John Mayall's Bluesbreakers, another Surrey-born guitarist would soon come to the rescue, his talent with six strings closely rivalling Beck's own.

After a period of hesitation, Jeff finally solved the dilemma of 'Where next?' by throwing in his lot with The Tridents - a band The Nightshift had already supported once or twice at Eel Pie Island. The Tridents were led by two brothers, Paul and John Lucas, who covered lead vocals/bass and harmonica/backing vocals/rhythm guitar respectively, and completing the line up were Ray Cook on drums and a fine lead guitarist named Mike Jopp. "John was a great rhythm and harp player who sang backing vocals and harmonies," says Jopp. "Paul played bass and sang the majority of our set. The Lucas brothers themselves came from a big family in Chiswick, though we actually rehearsed in a big house in Kilburn. That was through another of the Lucas family's connections." Already established as a strong live draw, The Tridents were wholly indicative of the type of blues/R&B act then making waves throughout London and the South East. "John and Paul were blues mad," says Mike, "so we were playing a lot of Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Bo Diddley and Little Walter covers, with two sets a night at venues like Eel Pie. It was a unique, great place to play... tons of people, very laid back, just a bloody big hall with a beer counter in the middle and a tiny dressing room at the back."

Both the Lucas brothers and Jopp were well aware of Jeff's reputation well before he actually joined the band. "When I first heard Beck [with The Nightshift? - check], I just thought 'What the fuck was that?'" Jopp confirms. "There was this guy with a Telecaster and a Binson Echorec and the notes were just flying everywhere. Nobody at that point was doing anything like it. He was incredibly flash - I mean in terms of his technique - and doing things that we and the audience had just not heard before. Jeff was playing right at the top of the neck, off the fingerboard near the pick-up. He'd press the strings down at the top, detune them, just making these unbelievable noises."

Regrettably, when Beck made his interest in joining The Tridents clear, it was Jopp's position that was in jeopardy. "I was happy with The Tridents but Jeff really wanted to get into a much better band, so he made it quite clear to them he'd like to join. And frankly, the guys called me up and said 'Look, Jeff wants to join'. Well, I just said 'OK, you've got to have him because he's incredible'. He was just so head and shoulders above everyone else. I was a little upset, of course, but also relaxed because Jeff was clearly in a league of his own. I actually saw them play the 100 Club after he joined, and he was incredibly nice to me, both before and after joining the band, actually." For Beck, taking on lead guitar duties with The Tridents not only allowed him access to bigger audiences and better wages, but also provided the opportunity to influence the sound and direction of the group in a way he had not enjoyed before. "I was screaming to be recognised," he said,

"and I finally found this little R&B band which I thought was great. I [could help] build them up and play good, authentic blues."

In subsequent years, Beck's tenure with The Tridents has assumed almost mythic proportions, the tales surrounding him akin to turning water into wine, or at least, six strings into "liquid gold". If such reports are to be believed - and there is no reason to doubt them - then Beck's playing has seldom been wilder, less restrained or experimental. Certainly, 'Nursery Rhyme', a live track recorded by The Tridents at Eel Pie Island in 1964 and later released on 1991's 3CD collection *Beckology*, goes some way to prove that he was not so much pushing the limits of technology and technique of the time, but smashing them into little pieces. Armed with a white Fender Telecaster and Vox AC30 'Top Boost' (the sunburst Strat had fallen prey to a bad re-spray, faulty re-wiring job and then been sold on to buy a Ford Zephyr), Beck's work on 'Nursery Rhyme' borders on genius - albeit of the maddest variety: trills, dissonance, double stops, overbends, hammer-ons, pull-offs and picking above the nut and around the pick-ups all present and correct over a resolutely dragged Bo Diddley beat. "You could do anything over a Bo Diddley beat," he later reasoned. In 1964, this must have sounded not unlike the arrival of the four horsemen of the Apocalypse: "Jeff was just uniquely talented," said an admiring Mike Jopp. "He had this stunning technique and an incredible touch. He was the most gifted guitarist I'd ever heard or seen."

Of course, a key component to this audio madness was Beck's use (and ritual) abuse of the Binson Echorec, a device which he began experimenting with during 1962 when it first arrived on the UK market. Originally designed with drums in mind, the Binson was an expensive proposition, its £140 price tag making it then more costly than a Vox AC30 amp. But for Jeff, the Binson's ability to provide up to 12 echo settings, plate/room reverbs and valve compression meant he had personal access to the same sonic palette his hero Les Paul drew from during the forties and fifties. "The crowds didn't always want straight blues," he later said. "They wanted sci-fi noises as well and that was all right with me." In addition to his use of the Binson, Beck was also a dab hand with a Klempt Echolette, which allowed him to programme alternate delays of an eighth, quarter and half second's duration, and even create rudimentary loops. Unfortunately the device was prone to temperature changes, meaning that "the tape would snap halfway through the first number and all my tricks were gone". Stung by criticisms that he was wholly dependent on such effects to create his sound, Jeff reportedly played part of one gig with a Spanish acoustic fed through a vocal mike to prove his doubters wrong.

Beck's penchant for "abstract harmonic manipulation" or as one critic more simply put it, "sonic mangling", did The Tridents no harm at all, with the band regularly drawing upwards of 800 people at Eel Pie Island, while also playing to 'House Full' signs at London's 100 Club, Studio 51 and Windsor's Ricky Tick. The group even shared Eel Pie's highest ever attendance record when they supported

Leroy Fuller to an audience of 1,500 in mid-1964. "Eel Pie was an elite club," Beck later told journalist Gene Santoro. "People wanted you to emulate their idols. That's when I really started to kick some butt. I remember detuning the low E and A strings and just whining the hell out of them, making ridiculous noises and everyone went berserk. There wasn't an ounce of musical sense to it, but they loved it because it was different." Beck was not exaggerating either the elite nature of Eel Pie's core attendance or their desire for new sensations. Peopled by roll-necked Beatniks, moustachioed jazzers, pill-popping R&B heads and later, a sharp-suited Mod contingent that included future Who guitarist Pete Townshend and singer Roger Daltrey, who remembered being "stupefied" by Jeff's antics with The Tridents, Eel Pie was a cult all its own. "I didn't know what impact I was having on the music scene," Arthur Chisnall later admitted. "You've got to remember that my job was to create a world for people and I created that world. The people who were originally there were 300 art-school people and they remade themselves until, bang, you had The Who and so many others."

One element of Beck's fearsome bag of tricks that has led to much subsequent debate among music critics was his use of 'Controlled Feedback' - and more specifically - whether he was the first British guitarist to exploit it on a concert stage. In simple terms, feedback is a 'loop' created when an electric guitar's pick-ups capture sound from the amplifier's speaker and then regenerate the signal through said amp, providing an eerie, high-frequency whistle which can be further manipulated into drones, or in the right hands, even tunes. There is some evidence to suggest that blues players such as Johnny 'Guitar' Watson, Guitar Slim and the wonderful Albert Collins were toying with the effect as early as the fifties. But it remains unlikely that their experiments were as bold or musical as Beck's, who according to some witnesses, was setting up a feedback-delay loop via his Binson echo unit with one guitar, while playing along with the results using another. "It's like a cycle of sound that builds up in the pick-ups that you can even play tunes with and I've been experimenting with [it] since 1960," he later confirmed. However, attributing the discovery of controlled feedback to Beck alone remains something of a sticky wicket, with Pete Townshend and The Kinks' Dave Davies also staking a claim to its screechy throne. "To tell the truth, Dave Davies, Jeff and me have got a tacit agreement that we'll all squabble until the day we die that we invented it," said Townshend. "I think possibly the truth is that it was happening in a lot of places at once. As the [volume] level went up, as people started to use bigger amps, and [some of us] were still using semi-acoustic instruments, it started to happen quite naturally."

One of the few people able to enter into such a debate with any real authority was Jimmy Page, though his loyalties - then as now - would probably have been with Beck. After all, the two were practically relatives from the moment they met. "Jeff came round my house with a guitar and played James Burton's solo from

Ricky Nelson's 'My Babe'," Jimmy told *Guitar Player*. "We were immediately blood brothers." The only child of a personnel manager and doctor's secretary who lived in Epsom, Surrey - just six miles up the road from Wallington - Page was the same age as Jeff and from a similar social background. But they also shared another, far more important interest. "We were both guitar freaks," laughed Beck. Tying down the exact date, or even year, when they became friends is no easy task. Despite the fact Jeff and Jimmy both recall their first meeting taking place during their early teens, this seems unlikely. Instead, all reasonable evidence points to the fact that their paths probably didn't cross until they were at least 16 or even 17 years old.

However, the exact circumstances of their introduction remain in little doubt. "Well, my sister Annetta was at the same college as Jimmy," said Beck. "And though we had a fight at the time, she just couldn't resist telling me there was another nerd with a guitar at college. I had to travel miles on a bus to see him, but the fact that he was as insane as me about guitars, well, it was worth it. Suffice to say, a strong friendship developed." The faculty in question was Sutton Art College, which Page began attending in 1962 as a fine arts student. "I lived in Epsom, Jeff in Wallington, two towns not far apart," Jimmy later recalled. "Anyway, people sort of knew I was playing guitar... and I was friendly with a record collector [Barry Matthews], who knew Jeff's sister. She was a little older than Jeff, who in turn was just a little [younger] than me. But the thought was 'Maybe we should get these two guys together'. So we met up. We had homemade guitars and regular guitars at that point and just played." To ensure all went well, Annetta accompanied her younger brother to Page's parents' house. "She knew where he lived and we both went over on the bus to Epsom," Jeff said. "Jim was there and he sang us a Buddy Holly song. His mum made us a cup of tea."

As the two traded guitar licks - Page precisely tracing Scotty Moore's jumpy solo from Presley's 'Baby, Let's Play House', Beck responding with a blast or two from Vincent's 'Race With The Devil' before they both settled into James Burton's break on Ricky Nelson's 'It's Late' - Jeff became aware Jimmy was no neophyte when it came to six strings. "Christ, he was much more advanced than me, he knew all Buddy Holly's stuff. He was an only child you see, and his mum bought him all the goodies!" In fact, Page was already something of a star before meeting Beck. An early convert to Lonnie Donegan's skiffle movement, Page had appeared on BBC 1's *Huw Wheldon Show* in 1957, performing 'Mama Don't Want To Skiffle Anymore' and 'Cottonfield' with a bunch of like-minded amateur enthusiasts. When 13-year-old James was asked by the host whether he played any other guitar styles, he confirmed, "Yes, Spanish and dance," before adding that he wanted to pursue "biological research" after leaving school. Given later evidence, he certainly achieved his ambition on a practical, if not scientific level...



By age 16, Page had quit education in favour of a full-time career in music, soon taking up the post of lead guitarist with local rockers Neil Christian & The Crusaders, whom Beck saw in person while on a visit to nearby Richmond. "Jimmy was playing with Neil Christian," he confirmed. "I went to see them in 1961 or 1962... a lunchtime gig at The Boathouse in Kew Bridge. I saw this human beanpole with a Gretsch [Country Gentleman] four times bigger than he was." In the end, Page's time with Christian was relatively brief, the teenager falling prey to repeated bouts of glandular fever which eventually forced him to hand in his cards with the band and return to academia. "[I was] travelling around all the time in a bus. I did that for two years after I left school, to the point where I was starting to get really good [money], but I was getting ill," Page said in 1975. "So I went back to art college. And that was a total change in direction. As dedicated as I was to playing the guitar, I knew doing it that way was doing me in forever. Every two months I had glandular fever. So for the next 18 months I was... getting my strength up. But I was still playing."

Thanks to Annetta Beck's timely introduction Jeff and Jimmy were soon visiting each others' homes on a regular basis endlessly exchanging guitar riffs and ideas while their parents provided tea and biscuits. As ever, Beck championed the more extreme advocates of the art, turning Page onto the new pleasures of pedal steel player Alvino Rey, jazz great Barney Kessell and his beloved Cliff Gallup. That said, Jimmy's taste was no less eclectic, the young guitarist already familiar with the wild overbends of Buddy Guy, the economical beauty of Howlin Wolf's Hubert Sumlin and even the lush Indian sitar stylings of Ravi Shankar, of whom Page was an extremely early and vocal supporter. All such ideas and influences, from Elmore James' shivering slide on 'Dust My Broom' to Les Paul's near unplayable intro to 'How High The Moon' were poured over, assimilated and catalogued for possible future use. For the most part, however, the duo fixated on their shared love of rock'n'roll. "In our area, there weren't many guitarists... we were really the only two," Jimmy later confirmed. "I mean, we just used to go mad. We were over-keen on guitars and records and used to get little pictures of all the old rock'n'roll stars. You know, just being kids really."

By 1964, Beck and Page were still proverbial peas in a pod, but now inhabiting extremely different worlds. While Jeff was the undoubted attraction within The Tridents' ranks, his guitar prowess justly celebrated each week in venues across the South East, Page's career had taken a new and interesting turn, leading him into the heart of London's session scene. While still at art college, Jimmy had begun jamming with Cyril Davies and Alexis Korner, joining The All Stars and Blues Incorporated on stage at the Marquee whenever he could. Inevitably he was spotted, with John Gibb of Brian Howard & The Silhouettes asking him to play on a several singles for Columbia Records. As was often the case with such things, Jimmy was offered further sessions, leading to regular work with Decca Records

where he contributed guitar to (former) Shadow Jet Harris and Tony Meehan's No.1 single 'Diamonds'. As Page was still fragile from his brush with glandular fever, landing a role as a well-paid studio musician where he could continue to play - but in the luxury of a controlled environment - seemed to offer the best of both worlds. Crucially, it also gave Jeff Beck a potentially lucrative contact at the heart of the British record industry.

In his own generous way, Page had already tried to help jumpstart Beck's professional career as far back as the autumn of 1962, when he suggested Jeff replace him as lead guitarist in Neil Christian & The Crusaders. Unfortunately, Beck's audition did not go well, with Christian reportedly listening to the teenager for only a few moments before offering him the bus fare home. However, two years later and things were markedly different, with Page's championing of his friend's talents carrying more weight within the musical community. Hence, Jeff began to pick up the odd session here and there when Jimmy was unavailable for work. Though details and dates of these studio appointments remain sketchy, Jeff did contribute spirited guitar breaks to Mancunian harmony act Fitz & Startz's single 'I'm Not Running Away'/'So Sweet', Johnny Howard's irritating 'Rinky Dink'/'Java', the former of which became Radio Caroline's theme tune for a time, and Phil Ryan & The Crescents' 'Mary, Don't You Weep'/'Yes I Will'.

Jeff's most memorable session during 1964 was surely alongside Screaming Lord Sutch on the oddball but entertaining 'Dracula's Daughter'/'Come Back Baby'. A genuine English eccentric who later formed the Official Monster Raving Loony Party and stood for election as an MP on several occasions, David 'Lord' Sutch's horror-themed stage show and wild theatrics had certainly served him well enough as a concert attraction. Indeed, his ever-evolving backing band, The Savages, offered a veritable finishing school for several notable musicians, including Deep Purple's Ritchie Blackmore, and Jimmy Page appeared briefly alongside 'The Good Lord', helping out occasionally on guitar from January to May 1964. But thus far, Sutch had no luck in translating his live successes to the singles chart. Alas, Beck's presence on 'Dracula's Daughter' did not change that, though the mock-screams and slides he provided on the guitar track were a genuine hoot, perfectly adding to the cod-humour of the overall song. "Lips are blue, eyes are red, a laugh like gurgling water," sang Sutch, "but I can't resist that passionate kiss, I'm in love with Dracula's Daughter..."

A man who knew Beck and Page as they both began making their mark on the stage and in the studio was Roger Mayer. Then working as an acoustic engineer for the Admiralty department on various research projects, Mayer was also obsessed with the sound of rock'n'roll and spent much of his spare time trying to work out how those noises were made. "Well, The Ventures had just done a record called '2,000lb Bee' and it had this 'fuzz' sound," he says. "Soon, one or two of the music stores in London's Charing Cross Road had the new Maestro Fuzz Box, and that's

when I first became aware of the possibilities of heavy, transistorised distortion. Obviously, there had been American records before that had [got that sound] by turning the amplifier up, but this was genuinely new."

By then of course, Mayer had made the acquaintance of two guitarists who were conducting their own rudimentary investigations into distortion. "I grew up near Epsom and Jimmy and Jeff were always playing in local bands at youth clubs and elsewhere. This was 1962, 1963. Back then, Jeff was really good, very rock'n'roll in his playing. In fact, he was the most American sounding rock 'n' roll guitar player around at that point. Pagey had a slightly more blues influenced thing going on. He had that technique down already. Anyway, we'd all be around at Jimmy's house listening to various records by Freddie King and other blues guys, and there'd always be a focus on these guitar players from the American scene. For Pagey, he'd be listening to James Burton from Ricky Nelson's band while Jeff was more into rockabilly. He was always a little more rockabilly sounding."

According to Mayer, another later Beck trademark was also fully in evidence. "Jeff would show up at gigs or around my house with his hands covered in paint and grease because he'd been working on cars. I used to say he was the best guitar-playing car mechanic I'd ever heard. It was always difficult to know with Beck which he loved better: cars or guitars. At that time I also knew a lot of people from the Cooper car company, who produced Formula One racers, so there was always a lot to talk about."

As discussions deepened, Page approached Mayer about the possibility of turning his knowledge of acoustics to the business of guitar effects. "Jimmy came to me when he got hold of the Maestro fuzz and said, 'It's good, but it doesn't have enough sustain... it's a bit staccato.' I said, 'Well, I'm sure we can improve on that...' That conversation spurred me on to design my first fuzz box." Borrowing some of his configurations from the Maestro unit, Mayer concocted one of his very own for Page. "There had to be similarities, of course, because there were only three terminals to work from, but I managed to build one that had much more sustain." The 'Mayer Mk1' was probably first used on PJ Proby's 1964 singles, 'Hold Me' and 'Together'. "Well, there's some dispute about whether it's on 'Hold Me'," said Roger, "but Pagey told me it was my device. Anyway it was definitely there when PJ recorded 'Together'. \*

After Mayer's initial success with building a fuzz box, both Beck and Page were near constant visitors to his house: "Jeff and Jimmy were always after new

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\* Page subsequently used the Mayer fuzz on several other singles, including releases by Carter Lewis And The Southerners **and the Who B-side 'Bald Headed Woman'**, while Beck's earliest, frankly astounding experiments with such a device can be heard propping up Screaming Lord Sutch's 'Come Back Baby'.

sounds. I'd have a go at making some Treble Boosters, and they were after those. They'd come by the house on Sunday morning just to try them out." For Mayer, the guitarists' devotion to their cause was total. "Absolutely. If I remember right, Jeff even played at his own wedding! But he was one of the very finest out there. No question. Jeff was innovative as a teenager and that was just going to grow. We were young, we were all having fun and pursuing something that had its roots in the blues and rockabilly. But I think we also knew even then that we were creating something very British and something very new. Everyone had a slightly different agenda, but yes, I think we all knew we were on to something. And we were right." As time came to show, Roger Mayer's contribution to "something very new" was in its own way as important as any solo Jeff or Jimmy ever cut to disc.

Given such circumstances, it seems unusual that Beck and Page did not work together more frequently during 1963/4. Yet, as history shows, despite a number of home recordings made in the Page family's front room - which are unlikely ever to see light of day - the pair were captured only once on tape at the time, albeit with pleasing results. The jam in question took place soon after Christmas 1964 with Jimmy in the producer's chair and two former members of the Cyril Davies' All Stars, Cliff Barton and Carlo Little, providing support on bass and drums respectively (Cyril Davies had sadly died in January 1964). Augmenting the line-up was a fine pianist named Nicky Hopkins, then recovering from a lengthy spell in hospital, but already making his own way towards becoming a brief, though important player in Jeff's overall story.

By all accounts, five tracks were recorded on the day, though only two strongly featured Jeff and Jimmy on guitar. In the case of 'Chuckles', it was all about "the boogie", as Beck shot straight out of the traps with a fierce, blues-inflected solo over a shuffling backbeat. 'Steelin', on the other hand, was a much more sedate affair, again allowing Jeff to show off his increasing mastery of slide, the trebly tone employed deeply redolent of Earl Hooker and Fred Roulette's work on 'Anna Lee' and 'New Sweet Black Angel'. Even allowing for the fact that Beck and Page were keen to carve out their own separate identities, this tantalising glimpse of what might be achieved by pooling their resources surely planted the seed for future, if sometimes stormy, collaborations.

An impromptu affair, the tracks were never meant to be released. But when Page signed an in-house production deal with Immediate Records in 1965 the company claimed the tapes as their own, eventually putting them out as part of an 'All-Stars' compilation LP, *Blues Anytime*, in 1968. (The songs continue to find their way onto various collections even now, though all parties have repeatedly disowned them.)

For Jeff, this slow, but sure move into a brave new world of talented friends, sporadic session work and guest appearances must have given him some confidence. Still only 20 years old, he had already disengaged himself from family

expectations, the confines of art school and a potential career "designing cornflake packets" in exchange for a life of spitting guitars, fledgling distortion boxes and the occasional standing ovation. Yet, there were also problems that refused to go away. While The Tridents could sometimes command a salary of £8 each per night - very good money for 1964 - their gigging schedule remained sporadic and such sums proved the exception rather than the rule: "More like up and down the motorway for three quid," Beck later recalled. And unlike Page, whose growing appointment book would soon generate enough money for him to buy a plush boathouse, the lack of steady concert engagements meant Beck was still reliant on spray-painting cars for a regular income. This often meant a full day's work at the garage before embarking on a mad sprint across London to make it on time for 'curtain up'. A thrilling enough ride, perhaps, but surely less than ideal for either Beck's health or marriage.

Away from continuing money problems and potential exhaustion, there were other concerns. The Tridents were a good, sometimes great band, a fact evidenced by the sheer numbers that turned out to see them. There was also no doubting that Jeff had become something of a local hero, his ability to torment a musical scale, or twist it into bold, new shapes marking him as one of the most innovative and gifted guitarists on the circuit. But unlike The Rolling Stones, who had left the clubs for a far broader stage, The Tridents were still trapped on the South East circuit, their ambition stymied by the lack of a record deal or strongly connected management. In short, getting the boat out of the Thames Delta and into international waters just wasn't happening quickly enough for Beck's liking. "They were lighting times," he said, "everything was changing hour by hour, minute by minute and if you didn't watch out, you'd get stuck." Having watched the Stones go through their paces regularly in Twickenham, jamming with their bassist Bill Wyman in May 1964 and even persuading Ian Stewart to sit in with The Tridents onstage, Jeff must have felt as if he was waving goodbye from the dock as the proverbial ship set sail.

And then there was The Beatles. From the moment they had arrived on the music scene in October 1962 with their first single, 'Love Me Do', The Beatles had simply changed everything. Mop-topped, loveable and utter rascals to a man, the Liverpool quartet not only boasted quirky charm and winning smiles, but also killer melodies in abundance - their songs and image heralding a new golden age of pop. More, they seemed to have timed their entrance into popular culture with almost preternatural clarity, the group's natural optimism and boundless energy reflecting Great Britain's rise from post-war indolence to re-invigorated world power. If America had exported rock'n'roll and 'The Teenager' to UK shores at a time when it was desperately needed, then The Beatles, their deliciously evil alter-egos The Rolling Stones and a dozen other home-grown bands were now ready to return the

favour. The 'Swinging Sixties' were just around the corner and it was going to be a global affair.

During his early adolescence, Beck's aspirations had been simple enough: "I just wanted to be at the front of the stage, watching Jerry Lee Lewis, or seeing my reflection in Little Richard's boot." But things had grown more complex by the end of 1964. Now a gigging musician and occasional sessioneer, there was little doubting either the depth of his talent or sweep of his ambition. In fact, though he didn't know it - or more probably, wouldn't even conscience the idea - Beck was possibly the most gifted guitarist on British soil, "a six-string freak of nature" whose technique and passion for the instrument made him potentially extraordinary. Yet, the world was getting bigger and the opportunities endless as a result. If he didn't act quickly, he might find himself left behind.

The next 20 months would be an extraordinarily creative spell for Beck, his sneakered feet dragging themselves across a battlefield of shattered instruments, smashed amplifiers and crumpled bed sheets, with each step taken bringing him ever closer to his final destination as a legitimate 'guitar god'. For precisely these reasons, it's worth investigating The Yardbirds' story in some detail.