

MAGAZINE SECONDS

SECONDS #38, 1996 • interview by George Petros

ALVIN LEE



His music ought to be playing in the lobby of the Rock & Roll Hall Of Fame. He is ALVIN LEE, formerly of TEN YEARS AFTER, later of TEN YEARS LATER, presently Alvin Lee again, someday to be enshrined. Ten Years After came as close to being “underground” as a band could get in the late Sixties. They were raw and scruffily flower-powered. Despite their down-the-road sound, they aspired to virtuosity and speedy delivery. It was a time when LPs were more important than songs (thanks to the FM revolution) and the Blues were new to the White market. Ten Years After, who cranked out jams for hours on end, were perfect for the emerging expansion of styles and attention spans. They gained substantial recognition due to the curiosity and sophistication of the day’s audience. Lee’s unique guitar playing demanded frequent mention in the press alongside contemporaries Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, and Jimmy Page.

You’ve heard Lee do his thing as Ten Years After’s big hit “I’d Love To Change The World” echoes Muzak-like over the drone of our planet; his soaring post-Psychedelic riffs served as prototypes for many later mainstream Metal stylings. And you’ve heard TYA’s Woodstock workout of “I’m Goin’ Home” in which Lee lays down some of the fastest Blues in history. But what else do you know?

“Ten Years After was never a very happy band.”

SECONDS: *What aspect of your work do you recognize in music today? You're particularly noted for playing fast.*

LEE: The original “Captain Speedfingers,” yeah. That was something that just happened. I never tried to play fast. If anything, I tried to slow it down a bit. With the adrenaline of live gigs, it just came out that way. I never acknowledged that “Fastest Guitarist In The West” because it is isn't true.

Django Reinhart was before us and played much faster than anybody I've ever heard. A lot of Jazz players like Barney Kessel and John McLaughlin play much faster than me. I'll play light and shade, I'll play things slowly and then hit you with some rocket riffs. It's nothing I set out to do — it's quite the opposite; I always tried to hold it back a bit.

SECONDS: *What other qualities of your guitar playing would you like to be remembered for?*

LEE: I just play by feel, “from the hip,” as they say these days. I'm not musically trained. I never really know what I'm playing. I've developed a style where my fingers will do what my brain says but I don't get in the middle of that. It's one of those things where I grit my teeth, dig in, and just play. It's an automatic thing — I forget where I'm going. I don't play scales — in my mind, scales are a waste of time. You learn to play a major scale but you can't use it! It doesn't sound nice. What's the point of learning to play something that doesn't sound nice? So I make up my own scales. I make scales that I wanna hear. I don't think about my playing too much. I don't sit down and practice this

lick or that lick, I just play.

SECONDS: *I hear the word Rockabilly in connection with you —*

LEE: Yeah, I was a big fan of Scotty Moore. I met Scotty in Nashville. I had to say to him, “That second solo in ‘Hound Dog’ — how did you play that?” He said, “It was a mistake.” That's what I like about Blues and Rock & Roll — sometimes the mistakes are the great bits. You make a mistake and it sounds good. That often happens when

I'm playing live. I told Scotty a lot of us guitarists were trying to work out how he played this second solo to “Hound Dog,” and it's a total mystery even to him.

SECONDS: *What do you regard as your classic stuff?*

LEE: “I'm Going Home,” “Love Like A Man,” “Good Morning Little Schoolgirl,” “Slow Blues in C.” I've just started doing “I Hear You Calling” again.

SECONDS: *How was Ten Years After different from other Blues Rock bands of that time?*

LEE: Ten Years After was never a very happy band. It was a constant war, which made the style what it was. I was playing rocket riffs, the bass player was playing rocket riffs, the drummer was playing a constant solo, and a lot of times it was very frustrating. I wanted to hear a backbeat, but the band was so busy — every time I'd take a solo, everyone else would take a solo at the same time.

SECONDS: *But you had the final word, right?*

LEE: Yeah, to a point. I've never told a musician what to play. It's far too corporate. If you want a happy musician,



ALVIN LEE

if you want a contribution from the guy, he's got to be playing what he likes.

SECONDS: *Yet you were together a long time.*

LEE: It was enjoyable, but I moved toward solo projects because I wanted to move on and try other things. The first solo album I did was *On The Road To Freedom* — which was a little statement in itself — was basically Country music. It was a whole different feel. I had Ian Wallace playing simple drums and Boz Burrell from Bad Company, one of my favorite bass players. After playing with Ten Years After, where everything was a racket and solos, suddenly I was playing with Ian and Boz. I'd start a Rock & Roll song, and instead of them coming in crashing like I was used to, they'd come in with a neat half-time feel. To me, that was great. I've always experimented with music. I hate the kind of person who sits down and says, "What the people wanna hear, I'll play that." That's too contrived. I've gone astray a few times, I must admit. Record companies want you to record something that's popular so it can get on the radio — I tried it a few times and it never works. The radio stations say, "This isn't Alvin Lee. We want the real Alvin Lee." I stick to my guns and it's more rewarding. If you do have some success and it's from your heart, it's much more rewarding.

SECONDS: *Ten Years After albums were very referential to Psychedelia but they were also Blues albums.*

LEE: That was part of that Sixties feel. On the second Ten Years After album, the live album, *Undead*, we just played in a club and recorded it. I heard it a



few days later and thought, "This is the best the band's ever played. Where do I go from here?" I was quite worried, I thought I'd peaked. I didn't know what else to do. The way my mind went then

was, "I've done that, so let's experiment in other regions." The Psychedelic era was on us and I was playing around with mind expansion as much as anyone else, and I guess it just came out in the music. I always tried to not get tied down by any particular bag.

SECONDS: *Was the drug scene an integral part of the music?*

LEE: Not integral, but inspirational in a way.

SECONDS: *An intoxication ritual is a great motivator for music.*

LEE: It is and it isn't. Inspiration is hard to get, and anywhere you can get it, you get it. I've never been into heavy drugs at all. I was a pot smoker, I took LSD — I found LSD quite inspirational.

SECONDS: *Did you do it when playing live on stage?*

LEE: I have, in the bad old days. Once at the Fillmore West, as I walked onstage, the chemicals took over. I hit a test note on my guitar and I heard it hit the back of the wall and hit everybody's head on the way back and bounce up. Most of what I remember about this gig is what people told me afterwards. I know I played "Slow Blues In C" and then said, "Now I'd like to do 'Slow Blues In C'," and played it again. All the fans were giving me strange looks. There was one point where I was playing this solo, finished the solo and thought, "What song is this?" I came back playing another song. I got away with it — nobody wanted their money back. Things

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like that happened at the Fillmore West.

SECONDS: *Do you consider cocaine one of the heavy drugs?*

LEE: I don't consider it heavy; I consider it a waste of time and money.

SECONDS: *Did you see its effect on people around you?*

LEE: Yeah. I was a late starter on that, too. I used to say, “How stupid putting white powder up your nose.” Eventually, I started doing it, too. That led to three-day jam sessions out of which nothing ever came. There was a time where I thought, “I don't see the way out of this,” and suddenly I got fed up with the stupid lifestyle and just stopped. I'm healthy, happy, and I've got something in the bank now, which I never did when I was into that stuff.

SECONDS: *But you did have the opportunity to play Woodstock —*

LEE: That just came about in the middle of a tour. I didn't recognize it as anything different until I got there.

SECONDS: *It was a real demarcation point in your career.*

LEE: In retrospect, yes, but it was the movie that did that. The band was playing Fillmore West, Fillmore East, Kinetic Playground, Boston Tea Party — the underground. We'd play to a

thousand people at the most. They'd be up front, sweat dripping down the walls. Some of the best gigs I've ever done. We played Woodstock — great experience — but for a year we carried on playing clubs. It wasn't till the movie came out — that silver screen

larger-than-life feeling — and suddenly we were playing baseball stadiums and hockey arenas. You'd think playing to 20,000 people in arenas is making it, but it was horrible — I hated it. Having played clubs all my life, I found myself

in hockey arenas where you'd finish the number and the sound continued on for thirty seconds — huge barriers, so you couldn't see the audience — and in those days, they didn't have security guys; they had real cops with guns and cotton wool in their ears. I was playing to the back of coppers' heads and thinking, “What am I doing this for?” People were shouting for “Goin' Home” through every number and I got very disenchanted with that.

SECONDS: *If you didn't enjoy playing the arenas, who was making you do it? Management and record companies?*

LEE: Pretty much. I wanted to do it at first. You think that's what you want; you have to actually get it to find out it isn't what you want. I'd walk onstage with everybody screaming and shouting — it didn't seem like I had to do anything. With everything I did, they weren't really listening. Nobody was picking on it. I'd play a rotten show, everybody'd come back afterwards and say it was great. I'd play a good show, everybody'd say it was great. I don't think anybody really knew. Generally, I wasn't getting any feedback. It's a very unreal situation. My heroes are Blues musicians and I was becoming



a Pop Star, which I didn't want. A lot of people will say Woodstock made Ten Years After, but in fact it was the beginning of the end. To me, it was a big trap. I was constantly plagued by media obligations; it was ridiculous. I was

ALVIN LEE

doing twenty interviews a day and by the time it came time for the gig, I didn't know where I was. I actually made the decision to de-escalate — I stopped it. The managers, the record companies, the agents, all said, "Alvin, you can make millions of dollars." I said, "What's the point of having millions if I'm crazy?" I didn't want what was happening to me. I stepped out of it and there's no regrets. I'm playing a club tonight and that's what I love doing. I'm glad I'm not playing Madison Square Garden.

SECONDS: *Tell us about A Space In Time.*

LEE: *A Space In Time* was me making a break. After the Woodstock movie, I had no time to write. I was writing songs in the taxi on the way to the studio. The band would say, "What do you got?" and I'd make a song up right there. It worked; it was natural. I still write like that nowadays, but at the time I thought it ought to be harder than that. I wanted to struggle, I wanted to sit up all night writing. So I said, "I want six months off to write songs." That was the first time I heard "But Alvin, you could make a million dollars in the next six months." Nobody could understand I didn't want that.

SECONDS: *How was the band politics concerning money?*

LEE: Everybody was a bit burned out with these auditoriums, I wasn't the only one. The other guys quite liked making lots of money, whereas I thought it was distasteful, I didn't think I deserved it. I wanted to be proud of the music I made. "I'd Love To Change The World" was one of the songs on *A Space In Time* I was really happy with.



SECONDS: *It seems you've managed your fame and money pretty well.*

LEE: Yeah, by the skin of my teeth.

SECONDS: *You've probably had former millionaires looking to borrow ten bucks from you.*

LEE: It happens, sure. If you want security, there's no security in the world.

If you've got a million pounds, somebody can steal it from you. The only security I've ever found as a musician is that I can sing for my supper. I can do a gig and make money to live.

SECONDS: *Did you have contemporaries that lost their resources and looked to you with resentment?*

LEE: Most of those guys didn't care. They were so far out on a limb, they didn't realize what they had, and when they lost it, they didn't realize it either.

You make the best of what you've got, don't you? It's not so much the guys that made millions and lost millions, it's the guys that made millions and never got it. There's lots of that, guys that had hit records and never saw a penny because of their crooked manager. I was lucky, I had a manager who used to say he was ninety percent straight, so I figured I got ninety percent of the money coming to me.

SECONDS: *How about your subsequent band, Ten Years Later?*

LEE: The name in itself was an anniversary — it was ten years after Ten Years After. There was a time around '73 when I didn't have any interest in the band anymore and the manager said, "You could have any musicians you want. Just keep the trade name." To me, that was very distasteful. I wanted to leave that and start again.

“Record companies say they want you to record something that’s popular so it can get played on the radio — I tried it a few times and it never works.”

SECONDS: *I get the idea that you just considered yourself a guitarist in a group called Ten Years After and were bothered that people fixated on you.*

LEE: It was never intended to be that way. It was a communal group, but obviously the singer and lead guitarist will be in the spotlight. I was getting bad vibes from the rest of the band. They were miffed that I was becoming the frontman. That started the rift — they wanted to do interviews, too. So the manager would say, “Chick Churchill’s gonna do the interview instead of Alvin Lee,” and the people’d say, “We don’t want him, we want Alvin,” and the resentment built.

SECONDS: *If you experience a huge resurgence of popularity and someone calls you up saying, “Alvin, we want you to play Madison Square Garden,” what will you say?*

LEE: I’d probably do it. I’ve learned a lot of lessons. Now I’ve got control, I know what I’m doing. In those days, I didn’t know what I was doing. I was lost and the drug haze didn’t help. When you get to my age, you learn to make things easier for yourself. When you’re twenty-three, you seem to be intent on making things hard for yourself — “How many drugs can I take and still play?” I’d give playing Madison Square Garden a whirl, I’d try and put over my music the way