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## Interview with JIM McCARTY (The Yardbirds) – 3 January 2014

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January 21st 2014 sees The Yardbirds play their first date of an exhaustive 2014 tour which celebrates 50 years of their existence and the British Blues Invasion that changed the course of rock history.

The band initially split in '68, but their influence endured and nearly a quarter of a century later they were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. The Yardbirds also played host to three of the guitar giants of their generation, Clapton, Beck and Page and they have been variously described as the precursors of Heavy Metal and Psychedelic rock.

A year after reforming in the mid 90's they added former Dr. Feelgood guitarist Gypsy Mayo to the ranks. He appeared on the all star 'Birdland' album which confirmed their successful come back. Voted into Rolling Stone magazine's 'Hundred Greatest Artists' list, The Yardbirds now feature their young guitar protégé Ben King as they continue to cement their place in rock and roll history.

Pete Feenstra talks to founder member, drummer, song writer and solo artist Jim McCarty about the band's past, present and future.

The Yardbirds started in 1963 and Giorgio Gomelski signed you to EMI in February 1964 for the

**'5 Live Yardbirds' album, so I guess there's a double celebration really?**

Yes, I know amazing isn't it? Time has really just flown by, its amazing.

**You are about to undertake a massive UK theatre tour (with The Zombies, The Animals & Friends, Chris Farlowe, Spencer Davis & Maggie Bell), but first you have a special show at the Boom Boom Club in Sutton on 21st January. Do you still enjoy playing clubs as well as theatres etc?**

Yeah, I think it's good to have the combination of both. I like the idea of a tour because there are some nice venues, and good concert halls, especially in Birmingham (The Symphony Hall) and Manchester (Bridgewater Hall) . I like playing to a big crowd as a well, but you get a great atmosphere in the clubs, and we were really brought up on that, it started with that kind of atmosphere at The Crawdaddy in Richmond.

It was the same on the American tour, we played a mix of clubs, theatres, and festivals and usually a tour would take up a mixture of all of those. For instance we played B.B. King's club in New York quite a lot, which is a great venue with a good atmosphere.

**How is Chris Dreja now that he's come off the road?**

Well he's OK, he's sort of surviving. He can get around and survive in a quiet way, but he really can't play any more. I think it was the 2011 tour was when he really did get ill and had two strokes. It was quite a long tour and he couldn't carry on. So at first we thought about carrying on as a 4 piece, but then thought it would be good to have Top Topham back who was the original guitar player.

**It seems like case of unfinished business for him, as he left as early as a 16 year old in October '63?**

Ha-ha, (laughs), yes it is and the great thing is that he was ready to come back and he makes it a bit more authentic than just me and four young guys.

**You also have brought in Andy Mitchell on vocals and harp and David Smale on bass. Was the plan to make the band substantially younger?**

I think so. I think our current guitarist Ben went to rock college, or what they now call the Contemporary Music Academy in Guildford. He knew the bass player and we then fell upon Andy Mitchell and thought at that time, instead of a bass playing vocalist, we'd have the same configuration we had with the Keith Relph line-up.

**You are promoting a new CD/DVD – 'Making Tracks' on Wienerworld, which celebrates your 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and was recorded on tour in the USA. Was it the plan at the outset to mark the occasion with a live album?**

It was yes, we had an old fan called Bruce Macomber who said he really wanted to make a DVD of the band. He was a big fan and he said he'd got the team, and could raise the money but we kept saying no.

Then we tried a one off and that didn't quite work, but then he came on the 2011 US tour with us and filmed about 5 gigs. He took the best of those and edited them down and made the DVD called 'Making Tracks', and the subsequent album 'Making Tracks' was the best of the audio tapes.

**How does the album differ from the 'Live at B.B. King Blues Club' CD?**

Well the line-up was different, and we had a different lead singer and harp player back then. Now we've got Ben King on guitar who is a young guy who is very very good and a guy called Andy (Mitchell) on vocal and harp, who is a great front man and Dave Smale on bass. And they are all pretty young compared to me (laughs).

**Since your reformation in the 90's, the historic role of the band seems to have been brought into sharper focus, is that why you've enjoyed something of a renaissance in the last 20 years?**

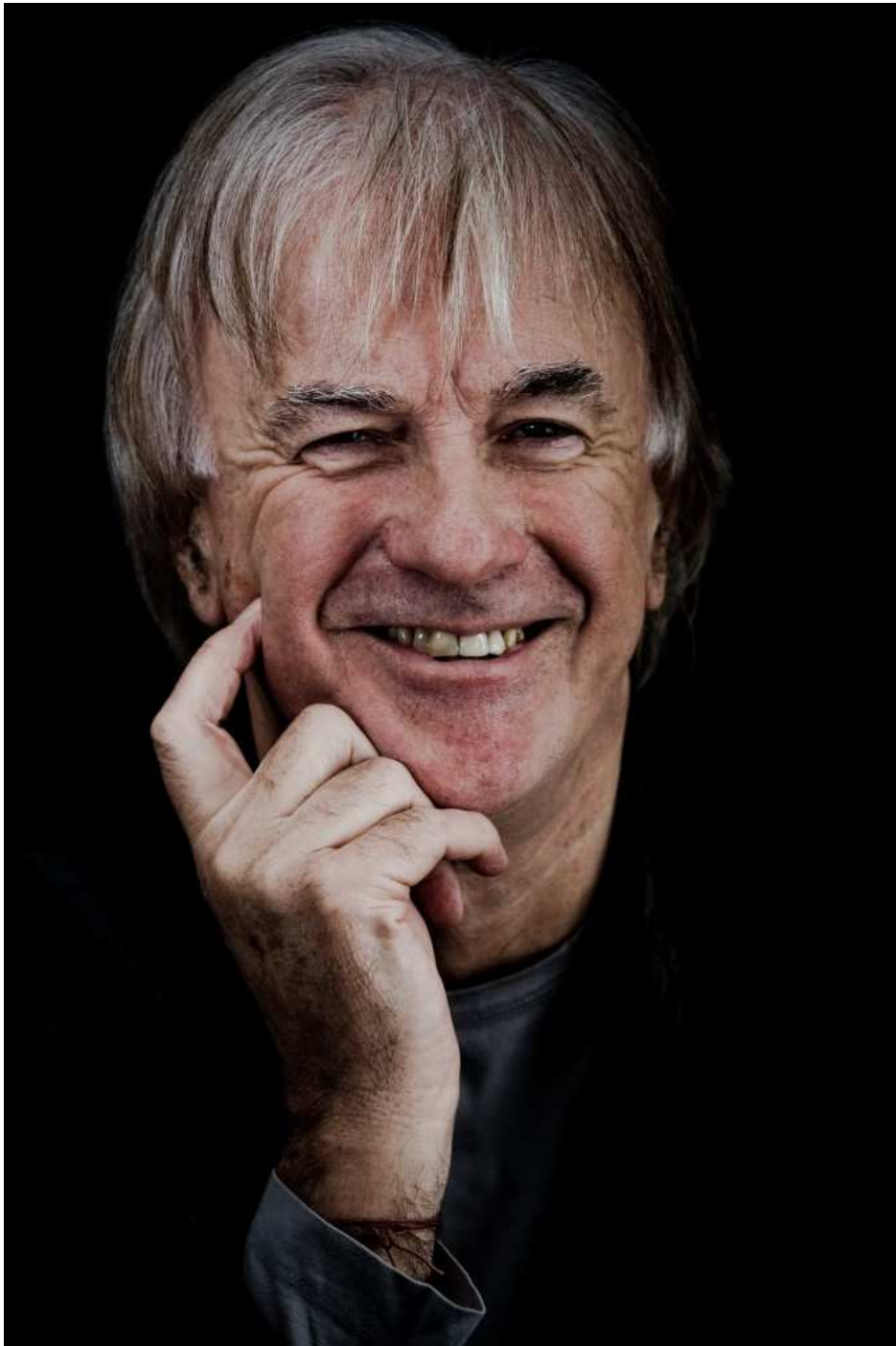
Yes I think so, we've had a lot of support from people like Steve Vai, Alice Cooper, and Steven Tyler, people who have made it quite big now, and who were originally fans of ours, and they sort of spread the word, especially in the last 10 years or so. And also the fact that we were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame helped establish us as an on going band.

**Did you reform before you were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame or did that happen afterwards?**

No that happened afterwards. We were inducted in 1992 and the band reformed about 1995/6.

**There seems to be much more interest now than when Box of Frogs cut a couple of albums in the 80's?**

I think we probably did have some interest at that time too, but we were sort of hiding behind that name, also the Box of Frogs band didn't tour. The album did help establish an interest, but it would have been good for us to tour then and build up a bigger following out of that. That might have helped make it a going concern.



**At this point I mistakenly asked Jim about the fact the band hadn't really had a front man since the days of Jeff Beck – (meaning Beck's wild stage shows) – as Keith Relf was of course was the front man.**

Er you mean Keith Relf? Keith was the front man, singer and harp player, and I think we decided at that time to get another front man of the same type who could get the crowd going. Er yeah, John (Idan) of course was playing bass as well as singing.

**We should of course mention another guitarist the late Gypie Mayo, who appeared on the all star 'Birdland' album. He was very much part of your historic continuity wasn't he?**

Yes, he was a great guitar player and he really followed the style of Jeff Beck, he was much more spontaneous and a much more off the wall as a player. And on the 'Birdland' album he played some great stuff, some great solos on some of the songs, and they were really tricky, original and you really didn't know what to expect. He was a bit like Jeff yeah, he was a great player.

**Did you feel any great pressure going into the studio as The Yardbirds after 35 years?**

A little bit, but of course studios have come on a lot in that time, and it's so easy to get a good sound. We also had a lot of good support and a lot of good people around and we were on Steve Vai's label. We also recorded in Hollywood which was fun and yeah we enjoyed that, there was a bit of pressure but it was good.

**Going back to your own influences, your song writing has always had a psychedelic, almost mystical edge, with songs like 'Dream Within A Dream' and 'Crying'Out For Love'. Where does that come from?**

I'd been writing for a while and I was fortunate to have some of my songs on the 'Birdland' album and they worked out really well. I thought what the band did with the songs was also great.

**Was 'Still I'm Sad' co-written with Paul Samwell – Smith, the first song you wrote for The Yardbirds?**

I'd written some others, but I couldn't really play an instrument in those days, so it wasn't until after the Yardbirds that I taught myself to play acoustic guitar and piano and such. But yes, it probably was the first Yardbirds song I wrote.

**Going back to the early days, when you too took over as the house band at The Crawdaddy Club in Richmond from The Rolling Stones, were you generally welcomed by the crowd there?**

I think we were. We were lucky because people didn't know what to expect. The thing is that when Giorgio – who took us on – first saw us, we were so different to the Stones, we had something about us but we weren't the same sort of band, so I think people quite liked that you know?

**Was your original Chicago blues repertoire a shared musical influence in the band?**

Oh yes, we all loved that music when we first heard it coming over to England as a sort of underground music. The Stones were also playing that sort of music too, but we consciously decided not to do any of the songs The Stones did. We never did a Stones song back when we first started.

**You toured with Sonny Boy Williamson, was he as hard to deal with as people have said?**

Well he was funny Sonny Boy. He was a really old blues man, but he was very nice to us. He was a bit like your old uncle you know (ha-ha). He was good fun, we just toured the UK with him, he was a real character.

**Your big break as a band came when you covered Graham Gouldman's 'For Your Love'. Did the connection come about at the Beatles Xmas show in Hammersmith 1964?**

Yes, but we didn't actually meet him there, the song came from a publisher who was at the show that night in Hammersmith. He had a demo of the song of 'For Your Love', and he was trying to sell it around. He was from the old Tin Pan Alley. He saw us playing and thought it would suit us so he took it to Giorgio our manager and we decided to record it.

**Was it the case that you all agreed to cover 'For Your Love', except for Eric Clapton?**

Yeah it was ha-ha. We all agreed but Eric wanted like a blues song, and he thought we were going too far from the blues with that one.



**What was it like playing with the Beatles?**

Oh it was great they were just fun.....such characters, they were always messing about. In fact they used to mess around on stage as well (laughs), because people were screaming their heads off and so they didn't care, because they didn't get heard, so they were all messing around ha-ha, it was funny.

**The 'Having A Rave Up' album has been called: 'The Bridge between beat groups and psychedelia'. Is that what you felt at the time?**

Ah, well no, we were playing our version of the old blues songs – the 12 bar stuff – and we decided we wanted to make them a little bit different. And we put all our different ideas into the pot and tried to get them to sound original and what came was something quite strange probably in the day. A lot of people assumed we were a psychedelic band and taking drugs and things, but of course we weren't. We were quite surprised about that, but that was the basis of our sound, just making these old group songs into something else.

**Was Jeff Beck's experimental guitar sounds the reason you embraced psychedelia?**

Well when he came in, it was the kind of sound we were aiming at. It started because he had all the pedals and fuzz box and all the gadgets to make those weird and wonderful sounds and he was very good at it. He wasn't

really a straight blues player like Eric was. He liked to play all sorts of different styles.

**Was the later line-up with both Beck and Page always doomed to failure?**

There was an awful lot going on. There was a lot of talent in the band and there wasn't very much space. There was also a lot of egos as well you know, a lot of competition, particularly between those two, and they were competing against each other. Sometimes it really worked well, but most of the time it was pretty hairy I would say.

**When you left the band in '68 to pursue more of a folk music direction, were you just not into the Jimmy Page's rock-blues direction?**

I think we wanted a change. We'd been playing that stuff for a long time, night after night on the road, and Keith and I started to listen to other material and lots of different eclectic stuff and we quite liked it and wanted to do something a bit broader. There was always two sides in the band anyway – the 'Smokestack Lightnin'' side and there was the 'Still I'm Sad' side – so there was also that mystical side of things going on too.

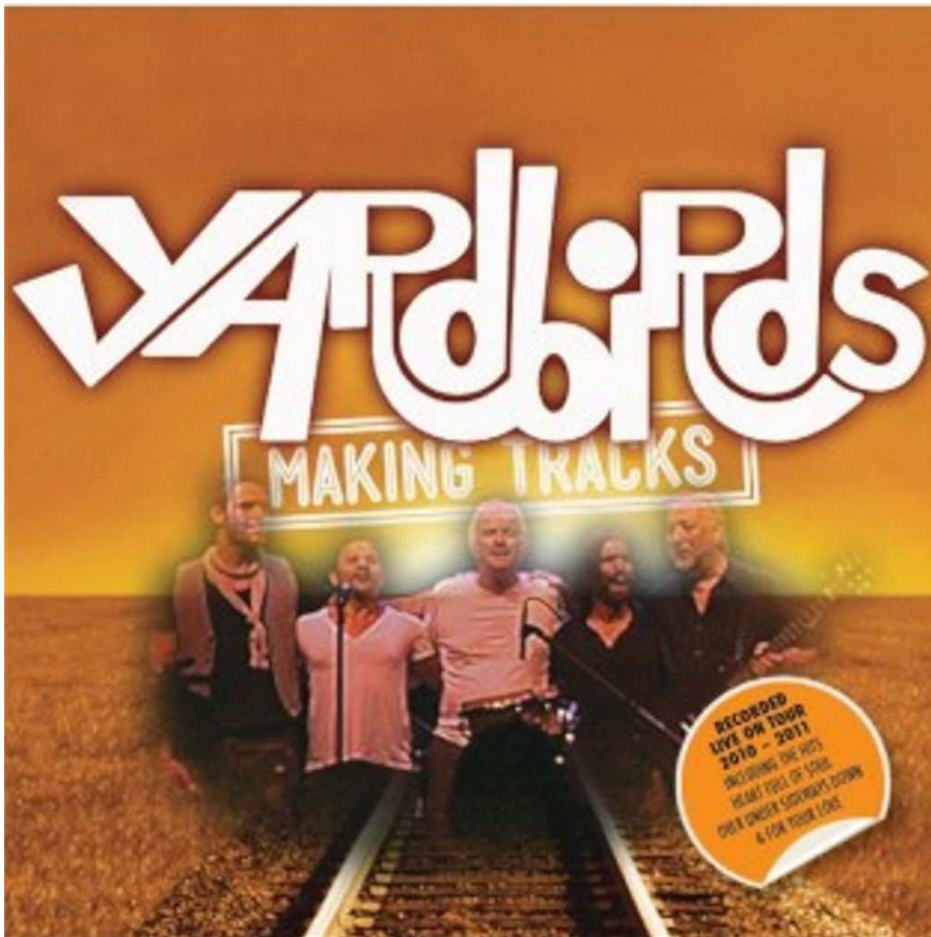
**Some of your own songs seemed to explore a mystical and almost psychedelic? I'm thinking of songs like 'Dream With A Dream' and 'Crying Out For Love'.**

Yeah yeah, that is something I like and there were different versions of those songs, but I think that was my style and I like to think there was a fairly deep sort of spiritual side to it.

I think that sound just makes it a bit different from the regular bluesy stuff, but it can be difficult to combine the two and get those factions together (laughs).

**It's Amazing to think that this portion of your career is already 4 times longer than the original band?**

Yes that's amazing isn't it. That's incredible. I think that must be because things are much more comfortable now and it must be a lot easier now than it was, you know touring around the States in a Ford transit bus all the time, which was very hard.



**Do You think your current upsurge of interest in the States is a pay off for all the touring you did all those years ago?**

Ha-ha, well its certainly coming back isn't. It's very nice that people really still like us and we still have a following. There's a younger following now and it getting wider and wider. it is really a pay back, but never knew at the time that it was going to happen all these years later.

**The Boom Boom date is the 21<sup>st</sup> of January, when does the whole tour start?**

I think it's very close to that, ah, 23<sup>rd</sup> January and its 30 dates!

**That's certainly enough dates...**

It's enough for a 70 year old ha-ha.

**Interview © January 2014 Pete Feenstra**

[Album review](#)

**The Yardbirds 2014 Tour dates**

**Jan 21 Sutton, Boom Boom Club/Sutton Utd FC 50th anniversary**

**The Ultimate Rhythm and Blues Tour**

**Jan 23 Aylesbury, The Waterside**

**Jan 24 Stevenage, Concert Hall**

**Jan 25 Great British Rock & Blues Festival**



**Jan 26 Southsea, Kings Theatre**  
**Jan 29 Bristol, Colston Hall**  
**Jan 30 Swansea, Grand Theatre**  
**Jan 31 Cardiff, St.David's Hall**  
**Feb 1 Oxford, New Theatre**  
**Feb 2 Ispwich, Regent Theatre**  
**Feb 5 Tunbridge Wells, Assmebly Hall**  
**Feb 6 Chatham, Central Theatre**  
**Feb 7 Northampton, The Derngate**  
**Feb 8 Canterbury, Marlowe Theatre**  
**Feb 9 Southend, Cliffs Pavilion**  
**Feb 13 Perth, Concert Hall**  
**Feb 14 Glasgow, Royal Concert Hall**  
**Feb 15 Aberdeen, Music Hall**  
**Feb 19 Manchester, Bridgewater Hall**  
**Feb 20 Salisbury, The City Hall**  
**Feb 21 Plymouth, Plymouth Pavillion**  
**Feb 22 Poole, The Lighthouse**  
**Feb 23 Nottingham, Theatre Royal Concert Hall**  
**Feb 25 Birmingham, Symphony Hall**  
**Feb 26 Llandudno, Venue Cymru**  
**Mar 1 Philharmonic, Liverpool**  
**Mar 2 Blackpool, Opera House**  
**Mar 4 Gatehead, The Sage**  
**Mar 7 De Montford Hall, Leicester**



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