

the **ToneQuest** Report™

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Albert Lee

Faultless Fretwork at the Speed of Sound

Any mention of legendary Telecaster players must include one of the most talented and enigmatic guitarists of our time—Albert Lee. Growing up in London during the 1950's, Albert first played guitar in an assortment of skiffle bands like so many British musicians of the time and he quickly graduated to amplified rock & roll, tirelessly honing his skills in the night-clubs in Hamburg, Germany along with a few other British musicians including John, Paul, George and Ringo...

played guitar in the time and he his skills in the night-musicians of note,

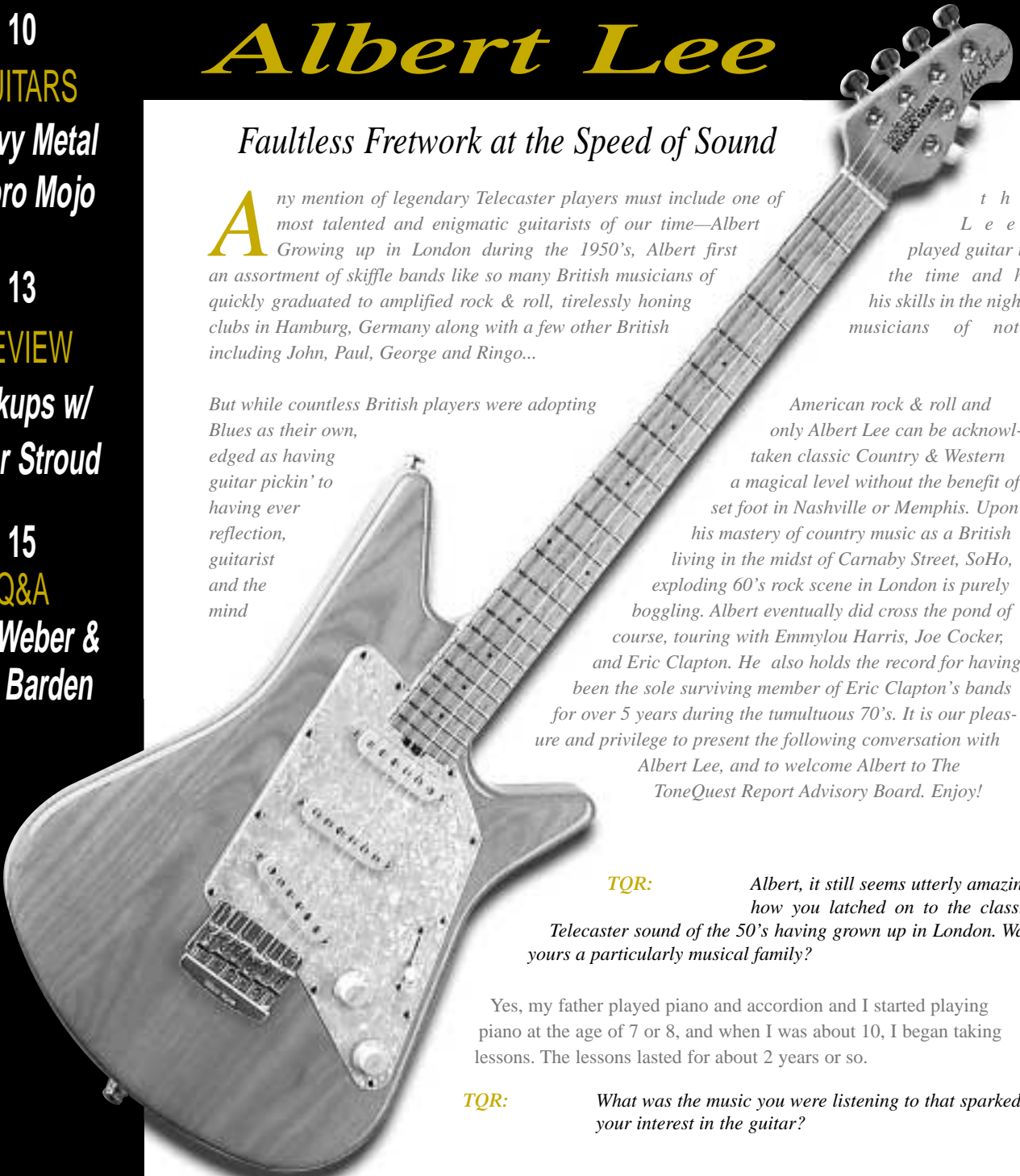
But while countless British players were adopting Blues as their own, edged as having guitar pickin' to having ever reflection, guitarist and the mind

American rock & roll and only Albert Lee can be acknowledged classic Country & Western a magical level without the benefit of set foot in Nashville or Memphis. Upon his mastery of country music as a British living in the midst of Carnaby Street, SoHo, exploding 60's rock scene in London is purely boggling. Albert eventually did cross the pond of course, touring with Emmylou Harris, Joe Cocker, and Eric Clapton. He also holds the record for having been the sole surviving member of Eric Clapton's bands for over 5 years during the tumultuous 70's. It is our pleasure and privilege to present the following conversation with Albert Lee, and to welcome Albert to The ToneQuest Report Advisory Board. Enjoy!

TQR: *Albert, it still seems utterly amazing how you latched on to the classic Telecaster sound of the 50's having grown up in London. Was yours a particularly musical family?*

Yes, my father played piano and accordion and I started playing piano at the age of 7 or 8, and when I was about 10, I began taking lessons. The lessons lasted for about 2 years or so.

TQR: *What was the music you were listening to that sparked your interest in the guitar?*



Well, at that time there were a lot of skiffle bands playing in and around London—I guess it was about 1955-56, so these skiffle bands were my first exposure to music of the sort that I began playing on the guitar. I actually played my first electric guitar through an old radio. A friend of mine had one of those steam radios or what ever you call them with tubes in the back of it and a gramophone input, and we'd plug straight into that. It was magical, really, first amplifying the guitar. But you know, we'd watch television and see guys with full amplifiers—mostly English amps like Selmer—I've forgotten the names of some of them. There were a few around then in the 50's, but not many.

TQR: *And you quickly formed your first band after having begun playing the guitar?*



Our little skiffle group quickly developed into a rock & roll band and we talked one of our guitar players into buying a standup bass. After a year or so I bought a guitar called a Grasio. You may have seen pictures of George Harrison playing one in '59—nearly everybody had one in England because it was really the next step up for us in England at the time. I don't know where they were built—perhaps Eastern Europe or Italy, but they were like cheap copies of Fenders, with a solid body, 3 pickups and a tremolo, and they had maple necks and 3 tuning pegs on each side rather than 6 in a row. At that time the only Stratocaster I had ever seen was on a Buddy Holly album cover where you could see the guitar but not the headstock. Anyway, I bought this thing for 85£, which was a lot of money then, and Fenders started coming over to England a year later. At that time there was still an embargo on a lot of imports and they were really strict about how much stuff came over. It wasn't until 1960 that the embargo was lifted and all of a sudden this music store in London had the entire line of Gibsons hanging up there, from the Super 400 on down. So at the store where the year before I had bought my Grasio, that guy was importing Fenders that sold for about a third more than I had paid for this cheap copy. I quickly realized that I needed the real thing, because by 1960 I did my first tour at 16 with a couple of guys I'd been working with. We had one Selmer amplifier with a single 12" speaker that was about 18W-20W and we would run the bass and guitar through it together.

TQR: *What was the name of that band?*

Oh, I think we were called *The Cruisers*—we had a singer that called himself Johnny Lane, so it was *Johnny Lane and The Cruisers* for a brief period, then we ended up being a backing trio for a well-known agent and manager at the time named Larry Parnes. He had an entire group of singers that

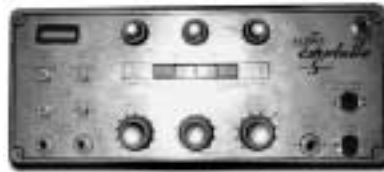
he would give names to—we worked with a singer named Dicky Pride, and another guy called Vince Eager. They all had these weird names, and the only guy that survived through all that was Georgie Fame—you may have heard of him. He got his name from Larry Parnes as well. Larry was in the rag trade and he was gay too, so he loved having this stable of rock stars around.

TQR: *This was all happening in London?*

Yeah, and I was so fortunate really, growing up in London, because I've never been much of a pushy guy, and if I'd been farther out I don't know if I would have found my way into this center of all the music that was going on.

TQR: *And were you still playing the Grasio?*

I continued to play the Grasio for about another year, but in the meantime things had changed dramatically because we were now seeing all of this great American stuff coming over. A friend of mine went to buy a guitar, and he was going to get a Burns, if you're familiar with those. I told him, "Oh, I



don't think you want one of those," and I talked him into getting a Les Paul Junior which I was able to borrow now

and again. I also owned a Klemm Echolette tape echo unit—everybody had to have one of those once they appeared on the scene. That was another magical thing to happen. It had 2 speeds and you could instantly get that great rockabilly echo, you know. All of a sudden I had this great sound. It was a terrific leap ahead for me.

TQR: *Were you trying to get a particular sound at that time?*

I was just trying to get the sound of Scotty Moore and all of the records that I had been listening to. I certainly wasn't into distortion as such at that time, but I did realize that I had to get myself a real guitar in 1961, so there I was in London at the same store looking at the Gibsons, trying to decide which one I wanted and which one I could afford, and I had my heart set on an ES175 with a Bigsby. I don't know why, but that was the one I wanted. I was doing a day job at the time so I'd go out to the store on Saturdays and ogle them all. Well, this guy heard me playing in the store and he asked me if I was in a band, and I said "No, not really." "We have a band and we need a guitar player," he said, "but you won't need a guitar, because we already have one." So I went over to his house nearby and he opens up this case and there's a brand new black '58 Les Paul Custom with a Bigsby. I said, "Well sure, I'll join your band, then," (laughs) and he let me

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take it home not knowing who I was or where I lived, just with the promise that I'd take it home and show up for rehearsal the next day. So I inherited this fantastic guitar. In the beginning, you see, all the money from the gigs was used to pay for the instruments. We'd split the money up and I'd use all of mine to pay for my guitar.

So here I was in the center of London working at a little place called the *Two Eyes Coffee Bar* that had been at the center of the music scene in London for about 5 years. Cliff Richard was discovered there, along with a fellow named Tommy Steele, who was one of the first English rockers to do big tours and theaters. I was playing there 3 or 4 nights a week and playing gigs outside of town on the weekends and I realized then that I was really doing this for a living in late 1961 at the age of 17. Incidentally, Jimmy Page was around at the same time, and we used to go over to each other's houses and listen to James Burton records. He loved the sound of my Les Paul and my Supro amp so much that he went out and bought the same rig. He ended up with a smaller Supro, but he had the same Les Paul Custom.

TQR: *That's an interesting revelation, because Jimmy Page's Supro is renowned for having been used on Led Zeppelin I and later in many of his more spectacular solos (along with a Telecaster)—particularly on "Since I've Been Lovin' You" and "Stairway to Heaven."*

Well, he got the idea from me. I played on a demo at a place called Regent Sound around the corner from *The Two Eyes*—the Stones later cut "Not Fadeaway" there—very basic 2-track stuff. Anyway, we did something like 12 songs in 3 hours, and Jimmy actually ordered a copy of the demo because he loved the sound of my guitar so much. I read recently in a magazine that Jimmy still has that Supro amp, while I left mine in Germany after someone had poured beer in it. I ended up with a German band over there, and they had a 2x10 piggyback Bassman that I really wanted, so I wound up coming back with that.

TQR: *At this point you're playing rock & roll covers...*

Oh, yeah, we were playing rock & roll, and in late 1962 I went to Hamburg. There were a lot of Liverpool bands there including the Beatles, of course, and everybody was talking about them being their favorite, you know. I never saw them there, but I was in the middle of all that.

TQR: *What hours were you playing then, Albert?*

We played 7 hours a night and 9 hours on Sunday with Mondays off.

TQR: *What a great way to hone your tone...*

Oh, yeah. I often tell this story because it's such a great loss—kids don't get the chance to do that now.

TQR: *One set if you're lucky, today.*

Right. And you know, all of these great bands that came out of Britain in the 60's had been to Germany playing 6 hours a night.

TQR: *You were no doubt unconscious as a player when you returned from that scene.*

Well, you'd go over there in an OK band and come back with a really good one. We'd learn material locally and what we didn't know we'd make up because the crowd in Germany couldn't understand us anyway.

TQR: *So after Germany your chops are sharp and...*

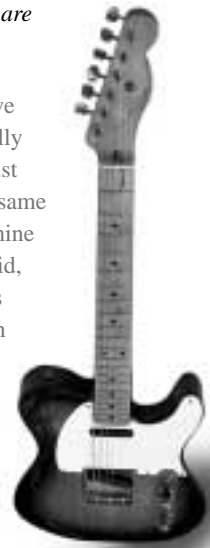
I played with a guy named Chris Farlowe for 4 years—he had a really good gravelly voice and he's still out there doing it. Just before that, though, I went back to that same music store in London and a friend of mine was working there as a salesman. He said, "Look what we just got in—it's a James Burton guitar!" So I plugged this Tele in and thought, "Wow! This sounds fantastic!" It sounded so different from my Gibson, and all of a sudden the sounds I'd always loved from James Burton—all of them were possible.

TQR: *Well, it clearly rocked your world, Albert...*

It really did. It was pretty beaten up—it was one of the first Teles with a rosewood fingerboard. So I had these 2 guitars, and a guy talked me into selling the Les Paul because I thought I wanted a Super 400, which was a total mistake for the direction my playing was going, of course.

TQR: *May we assume that you're still playing the piggyback Bassman at this point?*

I was, but a bass player came into the club I was working in one night and said that he had really been looking for one of those piggyback Bassman amps.



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He had one of the old tweed Bassman amps, and he asked me if I'd like one of those. Well, I had never even *seen* one because they were embargoed in the 50's—we didn't have tweed amps then at all. So all of a sudden I was playing a Tele with a 4x10 Bassman.

TQR: *Well, now you were in the groove.*

Nowadays, yeah, but *nobody* was playing a Tele for lead guitar back then in England. Everybody else was using Strats, 335's and 330's, and that was about the time that Eric started



playing a Les Paul. It was a setup that nobody else had—you just didn't play a Tele for lead guitar—it was the *cheap model*. Of course I soon realized that 2 of my favorite guitar players in the entire world, Jimmy Bryant and James Burton were playing Telecasters.

But speaking of tone—I had traded the Super 400 for an SG Custom that I didn't particularly care for either. I tried to get a better sound out of the neck pickup of my Tele by taking the cover off and I eventually broke the winding on it. So I played this guitar for a couple of months with just the back pickup, and I thought, "Well, I know what I'll do—I'll take the middle pickup out of this SG and put it on the Tele." For a long time I thought I was one of the first guys to do that and it was pretty cool, you know? Around '65 or '66 I did a tour over in England with the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and I met Mike Bloomfield. He looked at my Tele and said, "Wow, what a great idea—I've never thought about putting a humbucker on a Tele before." I hadn't really seen anybody do that until later, when people used to mess around more with guitars in the 60's.

TQR: *Did you put that humbucker in yourself?*

Oh yeah, I just got a chisel and a hammer and put it in myself. I used to do that a lot back in the 60's and 70's, chopping around guitars. Recently I was at one of those vintage guitar shows and I saw an old Tele that belonged to the guy that used to play on the Tonight Show and it had an old humbucker in it, so it was nice to see that someone had done it before me.

TQR: *How long did you stay with that?*

Until the early 70's when I came to the States with *Head, Hands and Feet*. I was really craving a maple neck Tele, but you couldn't find them anywhere in England because they just didn't make it over. So I bought a '53 in Los Angeles for

\$450, and I bought an Echoplex, a tweed Fender Deluxe, a Mutron, and a Dave Evans B-bender body that I put together myself. He used to make the body and you'd put the neck and pickups on it.

TQR: *When you bought the tweed Deluxe, did you continue to use the Bassman?*

Yes, well I had 2 then—I bought one that I was told belonged to Eddie Cochran. I don't know whether that was BS or not, but I still have them both.

TQR: *You actually still have them both? You're to be congratulated for that! You must be somewhat mechanically inclined—did you ever get into what was going on inside your amps? Did you experiment with different tubes and speakers much?*

No, I didn't, and to this day I don't know as much about amplifiers as I probably should, but there was a friend of mine who knew about amps and I recall taking one of my Bassman amps to him for one reason or another and he said, "Oh, we need to get rid of that rectifier valve and replace it with a silicon rectifier—it's gonna make it sound better, you know." Of course I realize now that was a mistake, but it's easily rectifiable, excuse the pun.

TQR: *What volume were you playing your tweed Bassman amps at in those days?*

As loud as I needed, I suppose at about "7", because at that time we weren't really using any effects. Throughout the 60's most of the English players I knew weren't using effects—we'd sold our tape echoes. I wish I hadn't, actually, but because the way music was going at the time, people weren't using them. I worked with Jerry Reed in the late 60's on a radio broadcast and he said, "Hey, have you got an Echoplex?" I said, "No, what's that?" "Tape echo," he said. "Well I used to have one of those in the early 60's and I got a bit fed up with it." "Oh, you've got to have one," he said, "Everyone in Nashville is using them and you can do some really neat things with it." So that was one of the first things I bought during my first visit to Los Angeles.

TQR: *Albert, when did you fully make the turn out of rock & roll and into country?*

Throughout the 60's I was buying country records in addition to rock & roll, and I got into Buck Owens around 1964. They were using Teles, and I just loved that sound.

TQR: *You must have been furiously practicing all of those country licks in your spare time—who were your biggest influences at that time?*

Yeah, I was practicing a lot. Any number of country players

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influenced me—James Burton, Jimmy Bryant. Actually, I heard Jimmy Bryant once on the radio in the early 60's and it wasn't until 7 or 8 years later that I bought the record he did with Speedy West. But that one tune I heard on the radio, *Arkansas Traveler*, stuck in my mind, and I thought, "That's the way I want to play guitar." It was years later that I finally got a copy of it.

TQR: *So you could say that hearing that record was an epiphany for you...*

Oh, absolutely, yeah. And throughout the 60's I was hearing various people—I met up with the Everly Brothers and their guitar player Don Peek turned me onto some guys like Howard Roberts and BB King, so I started looking for records from those guys. I started to really run the gamut from jazz to R&B and country, mixing it all together. **To**

Part 2: *Albert on Tone, Being the Longest Surviving Clapton Sideman, and Gear.*

Buddy Whittington

Interview Part 2

TQR: *Lets swing to strings, Buddy.*

D'Addarios—XL115's .011—.049 and I use them on nearly everything I play. My buddy Greg Romano keeps me stocked up with strings.

TQR: *And what guitars are you currently playing?*

The only thing I take out on the road is a '63 Strat, and it's kind of an ongoing project. It probably has more new parts on it than old ones these days. It's an old mongrel, really, but it keeps working for me.

TQR: *Mongrel in regard to what, specifically?*

My pal Barney Roach introduced me to a great luthier, Scott Lentz in San Diego, who made these necks for me. His son came down to see us play and he noticed that I had a reissue neck on my Strat that I'd gotten from Fender. The truss rod had started acting up so I went ahead and took Scott up on his offer. He made 2 of the most beautiful necks by hand with a rosewood veneer fingerboard rather than a slab, and the necks are huge – they remind me of table legs, they're so big. I have Dunlop 6105 jumbo frets on them and I played around with my action a little bit when I got them. Scott told me that

when I received them they would play really easy with a lot less effort than usual, and they did, but I needed to raise the action so I could get more sustain out of them, plus I play a little slide too. This is the *only* guitar that I take out on the road.

TQR: *Does your Strat have the original pickups in it?*

The front and the back are original, but one day while I was playing the middle pickup died and instead of getting it rewound—Mr. Van Zandt here in Dallas used to do a great job rewinding but he's since passed away—I replaced it with a Duncan SSL 1 and as it turned out, it was a reverse-wound, reverse polarity pickup. It really made such a difference in reducing hum that I left it in.

TQR: *What was it about this Strat in particular that led you to choose it as your sole guitar for the road?*

Well, first of all, if I have to worry about a guitar too much, I don't want it, because I have to *play* them—I can't do this holy grail vintage business. But as far as the '63 goes, it just has all of the little things that make it a good road guitar, plus it's so much quieter since I put in that reverse-wound Duncan in the middle position. And I really like the neck Scott made, too. I can experiment more with this guitar without worrying too much about it.

TQR: *Did you ask for a compound radius on the necks he made for you?*

No, I just told him that I wanted a big neck. But I believe it is a compound radius because it bends real easy and doesn't fret out anywhere. He said he uses a '55 or a '56 Strat for a template.

Editor's note: At this point Buddy plugs his "mongrel Strat" into a Dr. Z MAZ 38 combo and begins to noodle through some jazz riffs before leaning into some torrid rock and blues licks, sending the amp into overdrive merely by altering his pick attack. We continued to chat while he played.

TQR: *You know what's amazing about a Stratocaster is how it can even be made to sound like a big jazz box in the right hands.*

Yep. I've always had trouble getting a good sound out of the back (bridge) pickup of a Stratocaster, or even a Telecaster for that matter, unless it's just one of those "good" guitars. And it's the hand thing, too. We played with the *Thunderbirds* recently and Kid Ramos has a Telecaster that he plays on the back pickup and it just sounds wonderful—just *Wow*. But I can't seem to get it with the bridge pickup on most guitars.

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